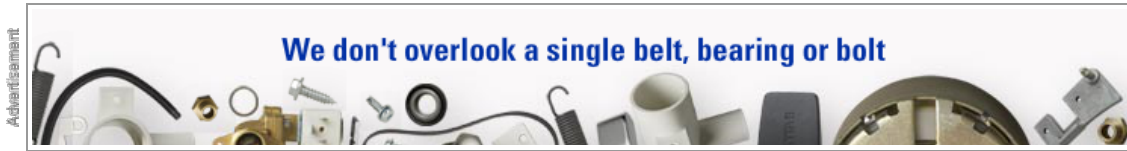




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A FIRE CHIEF BLOG



## When it comes to public image, perception is reality

by Lisa Allegretti in Mutual Aid

Feb. 28, 2013  
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How fire chiefs can cross the generational divide with social media

Gustav Flaubert once wrote that, “There is no truth. There is only perception.” For the fire service, perhaps that statement should read, “There is no trust. There is only perception.”

Obviously, trust does exist within the fire service. The public trusts you to respond to their calls; your firefighters trust each other with their lives; and your members — hopefully — trust you to lead the department. But how are you *perceived*? The two concepts are related, but they aren't the same.

Understanding difference between trust and perception is at the crux of the fire service's public-image problem, according to a [report released this week by the IAFC](#).

In general, the perception of government officials everywhere has deteriorated, and the fire department is increasingly seen as just another government agency guilty of government waste. Moreover, the fire service is often subject to competing perceptions (the heroics of saving a life vs. the “laziness” of lounging in front of the station or the “arrogance” of thinking your needs are greater than other agencies).

The problem arises when fire departments turn to fear-mongering to generate public support, touting gloom-and-doom scenarios rather than educating the community about their needs.

“With neither compassion nor education about the fire and emergency service system, it's easy for community members to feel bullied, angry and perhaps even betrayed,” the report states. “Suddenly, those who were meant to stand between them and danger can be perceived as presenting a danger to their financial — or even physical — wellbeing.

### What's Mutual Aid?

Mutual Aid is a blog of news and views from FIRE CHIEF staff and industry experts -- a virtual conversation about the issues important to you.

### Contributors

#### Janet Wilmoth



Janet Wilmoth grew up in a family of firefighters in a Chicago suburb. She first worked for FIRE CHIEF magazine in 1986 as an associate editor and also served as FIRE CHIEF's international...

#### Mary Rose Roberts



Mary Rose Roberts is a senior editor at Penton Media, with a focus on wireless technology, public safety and fire leadership for FIRE CHIEF, Urgent Communications and Wildfire magazines. She also...

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The IAFC report also cites lack of context, dwindling community involvement, an us-versus-them mentality that inhibits accountability and transparency, cultural changes within and outside of the fire service, and the “new social compact,” as contributors to the fire service’s public-image woes.

“Under the old social compact, the public — and many of us — have overlooked or made excuses for arrogant and unprofessional behavior,” the report states. “Whether we like it or not, the public is creating a new social compact, one in which its support is earned, not just by the services we provide but also by the behavior we engage in.”

So what can fire chiefs do to improve their departments’ image?

At the Labor-Management Initiative Conference last month, Steve Westermann — who chaired the IAFC task force behind the report — said that the fire service needs to sell itself as any marketer would sell any good. To do that, it must focus on the four Ps: product, price, place and promotion. Explain the public the depth of your services, what you need to provide those services, and how those services fit into the overall health of the community.

The report also recommends the following:

- **Assume cultural leadership.** Simply put, this means do as I say AND as I do. Demonstrate the behavior you want your members to emulate, work in facts instead of rumors, and increase your own engagement in the community.
- **Discuss your image.** Share the IAFC’s document with your members and challenge them to find solutions.
- **Review department policies.** Set standards for how members should dress and behave in public. That run to the grocery store might be the only interaction a citizen has with your firefighters. Did they represent the department in the way you would have liked?
- **Adopt best business practices.**
- **Train and listen to future leaders.** Instead of riling against generational differences, use what Gen-Yers and the Millennials have to say, particularly when it comes to the perks and pitfalls of social media.
- **Develop relationships with the media.** Do reporters only see you at a major fire or for the annual stories on fireworks and turkey-fryer safety? If that’s the case, you are missing a major opportunity.
- **Proactively demonstrate value to the community.**
- **Develop a social-media policy.**
- **Focus on labor-management.**
- **Listen.** Listen to your personnel, and pay attention to common questions or concerns. They may indicate a training void.

The IAFC report doesn’t make any startling revelations, but it does as a starting point for discussion. Perhaps it will help your perception become your truth.

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