

## Strategies for Communicating about Fire

National FLN meeting, Rockport TX

November 11, 2010

### ***Take-Home Points***

#### Blane Heumann – We’re all in it together; why we need to communicate about fire

- It’s a risk to conservation at-large if we spend money and don’t get the results we are after.
- Connections to people and relationships make or break our conservation accomplishments.
- Social media = trying to transform communications monologues into dialogues. People today don’t want one-way communication.

#### Doc Kokol – One Message, Many Voices

- Underlying goal – develop consistent message throughout the entire Southeast for use by state agencies.
- Campaign is based on social marketing research and tools – using commercial marketing technique for social science messages.
- Framing our message using images of fire is problematic. If fire is in the graphic, it is perceived as negative no matter what the text says.
- Fire is related to risk and how much people trust the government and land managers.
- Benefits are related to ***saving forests***; people have a visceral, emotional connection to pristine, healthy forests. So, **forest care should be our marketed product, that’s how we should sell prescribed fire.**
- Traditional messages don’t work – people misread intent of fire messages; fire practitioners talk differently; we talk for ourselves.
- Terms ***prescribed fire*** and ***controlled burning*** are equally confusing to the public.
- In marketing, offer the public something they want, don’t try to convince them they want what you’re offering.
- Marketing theory of engagement: *Interrupt* their detached browsing > encourage them to *interact* > *engage* them
- “Take a forest break” on website <http://visitmyforest.com> offers messages about prescribed fire, but not a hard sell. Draws website visitors to another site called <http://GoodFires.org>, which contains a more hard sell message about prescribed fire and an opportunity to interact in the future.

#### Social media panel discussion

Clay Carrington (TNC TX Chapter)

- Facebook and Twitter for TX chapter has two purposes - raise awareness, and drive people to the TX TNC web site

- If FB were a country, it would be the third largest country in the world
- Is going to build a prescribed fire blog for the chapter
- If you're going to use FB and Twitter, have a strategy; use language the public understands
- Social media is customizable, can get out of it whatever you want
- Most important thing about social media is to post regularly – multiple times per week, or you'll lose people
- Have consistent “voice” among posts so it sounds consistent; may just post photos

Debbie Crane (TNC NC Chapter)

- Manages Facebook page for NC TNC Chapter
- FB allows people doing the work in the field to become “reporters”
- Show photos of what the chapter is working toward (outcomes), not flames
- Has been a completely positive experience
- Leverage all sources available to get people to “friend” a Facebook page

Kris Ericksen – (USFS Public Information Officer - Alaska)

- Don't get hung up on the tools, it's a platform, just another delivery method
- Exposure on social media is going to happen whether you officially engage or not; if you don't get your message out, someone else will
- People want a two-way discussion
- Be ready and have a strategy if you need to use social media to respond to an unexpected event; be ready to maintain it if you start it
- If don't want to offer social media, at least listen/read (e.g., through RSS feeds) because you'll hear concerns directly from people, without a filter
- On incidents, a non-federal agency person might be the first to start a FB page
- Everyone working on a project needs to be thinking about what can be put out on social media for news, not just the communication person – can put out short bits of information frequently. On a wildfire incident, even short bits of information are helpful to members of an affected community.
- How-to Manual for setting up Facebook/Twitter/Youtube:  
<http://Fireground.com> >Incident Social Media >How-to Manual, and Protocols

Rich Gray – Texas Forest Service – Success Story - Communicating with non-fire public about fire

Fear motivators not helpful (e.g., smoke and flames); people don't want to believe they are truly at risk.

Tried to inform public about WUI issues and get them to act by reducing risk around their homes

- Gave them a lot of science (fire behavior) information – didn't help
- Wildlife habitat messages somewhat better received
- Fuels messages not understood by public
- Tried giving statistics on wildfire locations and home loss – didn't help

FIRECAP – non-fire partnership operating from 1998 to present ([www.firecap.org](http://www.firecap.org)) - Fire Citizen Advisory Panel.

- Grass-roots community movement made a difference; initially did defensible space demonstrations, met with citizens directly; this showed success.
- Encouraged by initial success, became 501C3 organization.
- Sponsored larger events, such as Fall Fire Fest, to introduce public to volunteer fire force and teach about fire behavior; worked with children to start fire education early.
- Developed CWPP for with Fire Department in Bastrop County – used in development plans in county and make decisions on new home developments.
- Used by TX Forest Service to communicate with citizens about smoke, fire.
- Now funded by counties as prevention/communication group, represent citizen viewpoint to county commissioners.
- Built new relationships with universities on why structures are lost in the interface, and to design needed computer software for incidents.
- Measure of success – fire practitioners were able to give information to non-fire people, then they could repackage the information and give it out to their peers and have it understood.

Al Henkel – NBC News, Ft. Worth TX – How to get your message into traditional media

- News must be *interesting, relevant, timely*; must be upcoming news, not something that already happened.
- Fire is interesting to *watch* – pictures are compelling.
- Reporters will try to give a balanced version of the story, will seek out opposing opinions; don't be offended by this, and don't try to sway the story.
- Perception is everything – how do you use perception to drive the message? *Start telling the truth right away, even if it's not what people want to hear.*
- Need to start educating reporters early – pre-treat reporters just like you pre-treat the burn unit – call reporters early and provide with information, video, or take them to unit in advance.
- Give feedback to editors about how reporters do – good or bad; also give feedback to reporter – tell him/her it was “accurate” (not good or bad) and offer another story. If inaccurate information is printed/broadcast, call the reporter and editor on it; if really inaccurate, go up the chain and complain about it all the way to the station owner.
- Important advice – be honest! Tell the truth all at once, don't dribble it out a little at a time – generates more bad news over time.
- Be prepared for managing the media when a disaster happens.
- Make sure PIOs are educated about fire so that they can give the media accurate information.
- Media stories sell heroes and villains – firefighters are heroes and fire is a villain. Keep in mind that is the way media tells the story and the way the public internalizes it.
- Good idea to set media goals for fire program - #'s of stories in print, video, etc.

Wendy – sum up

- We have a number of tools in our toolbox. Use the right one(s) for your situation.
- Public outreach strategies should be integrated (e.g., Facebook page driving traffic to website).
- Words we use make a difference, and the people who deliver those words do, too.
- It's up to all of us – the more of us delivering messages, the faster we will have an impact.