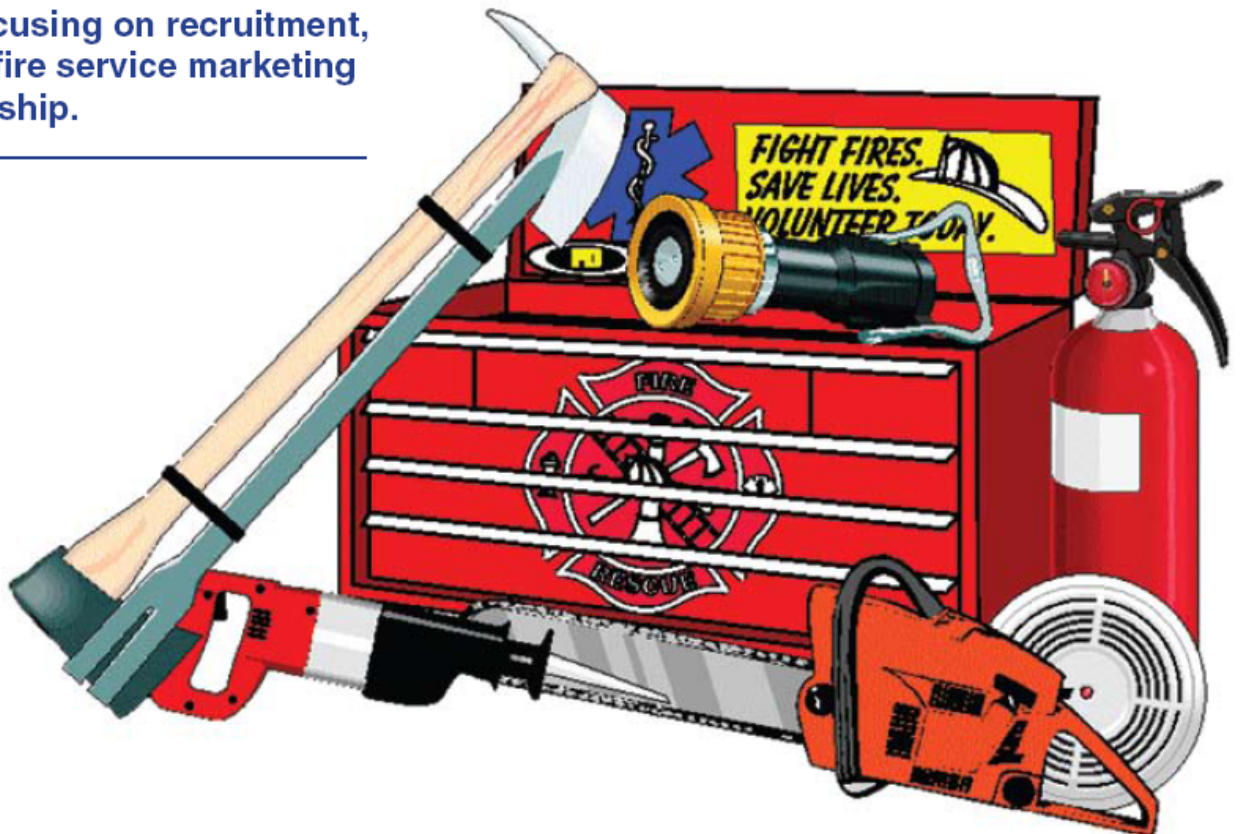


RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION TOOLKIT:

Re-Enlist.

This article is one in a series of toolkits focusing on recruitment, retention, fire service marketing and leadership.



Re-Enlist.

I don't know if it's the fact that my father served in the US Army in two wars, my self-inflicted guilt for not serving in the military, or simply my love for country; but over the past several years I've experienced a growing appreciation for – *OK, almost an infatuation with* – our US Military and the men and women who serve in it.

My logical side admires these ordinary people who perform extraordinary missions in defense of our freedom.

My creative side is in love with the marketing machine that is the US Military.

Communicating their core values of honor, duty and service is greatly enhanced with compelling images of our military men and women actively engaged in serving – surrounded by sights and sounds of heavy weaponry, technological superiority; flying, driving and floating armored apparatus and the blood, sweat and tears of real soldiers.

I subscribe to the National Guard's monthly magazine "GX: The Guard Experience." For me, it's like getting a new text book on recruiting and marketing every 30 days. Filled with gritty images of both valor and compassion, GX brings the story of Guardsmen right to your mailbox or desktop.

Reading GX while on a flight from Buffalo to Houston TX last week, I took great interest in an article titled: "Re-enlisting Abroad" which tells the story of Guardsmen who have honorably completed their required tour-of-duty only to re-commit themselves to continuing their service while still actively serving overseas.

The term "re-enlist" struck a chord as I tallied all of the parallels between the fire service and the military. It got me thinking about the future of the volunteer fire service and the challenges we're facing in getting people to join and stay within our ranks.

The values we share between these two great American institutions are a mirror image of each other, as are the attitudes and attributes of the people we're both hoping to enlist.

Enlist, recruit and attract are all familiar synonyms, but re-enlist – now that's a concept I hadn't thought of before in relation to the fire service.

Sure, there are people who transfer from volunteer fire department to department and some folks who leave our ranks for whatever reason, only to return at a later time in their life. I guess you could call that re-enlisting.



My father enlisted in a National Guard unit and served in the Pacific in WWII. When the Korean War broke out, he re-enlisted – despite starting a family at home. He earned two Purple Hearts and a Bronze Star.

But what if we didn't *volunteer* in the fire service and instead "enlisted." Everyone theoretically makes the same commitment when they raise their right hand and pledge to do what we do. But do we all do it with the same level of commitment and is our degree of dedication consistent throughout our years of service?

I'm sure we've all seen people come and go during our time in the volunteer fire service, and plenty more who signed up, only to become long-standing but non-contributing members of our organizations who, by the time the system catches up to them, they're submitting their request for life membership.

What if we didn't just volunteer once – but we had to re-enlist every five years or so? Would that change our attitudes and dedication to serve if we could be "voted off the island" if we didn't perform to the standards of our organizations?

Maybe we should make re-enlistment a formal process where you have to sign a letter of commitment and re-state your oath of service periodically. Perhaps it would give us a clearer indication of someone's true intentions instead of just letting them linger until we discharge them, or they discharge themselves.

On the other hand, we could make it a very positive experience where we turn it into a celebration of one's already demonstrated dedication to serving the fire service. We could make a ceremony out of it and, like I always strongly encourage, take advantage of the opportunity to acknowledge and bring recognition to the people making the real sacrifices – our spouses and our families.



The values we share between these two great American institutions are a mirror image of each other, as are the attitudes and attributes of the people we're hoping to enlist.

If you had to formally re-enlist in the fire service, would you re-up?

Would you do it willingly or half-heartedly? Are you in need of an attitude adjustment towards your service commitment?

Reinvigorated by the training I traveled to Texas for, I'm hereby re-enlisting myself in my profession: the fire service.

I had a great experience in an intensive week-long Advanced Unified Incident Command Course at TEEX, an extension of Texas A&M University, with 42 other emergency management professionals from Alaska to Florida, Boston to Los Angeles, and many points in between.

But they didn't just give me that great experience; I had to go there and earn it, just like everyone else in the class. Sure, I willingly enlisted in the course, but I got out of it what I put into it, and more.

The fire service has so much to offer – but it's not just for us to take freely without giving back. We have to work for it the way our predecessors did. And, we have to work to preserve it just as they did for us.

I was struck by another GX story that detailed the military history of Major General Gus Hargett, Adjutant General of the Tennessee National Guard, who retired in December-2009 after five decades of service.

When asked how he felt whenever he heard our National Anthem, the General answered:

“If you don’t get that little tingle down your spine, you ought to check your hole card. Because there is something un-American about a guy who doesn’t get that.”

We are surrounded by strong symbols and icons that represent the values of the fire service. And there are images and sounds – like the sight of a fire engine’s flashing lights or the wail of a siren – which should trigger an involuntary reaction within our “inner firefighter” whenever we see or hear them.



Perhaps we should be forced to occasionally re-evaluate our level of commitment, check our “hole-card” as the good General suggests, ensuring that our head and our heart are in the right place for serving our community and earning the public’s trust every day.

I’ve written before that the fire service is either in your blood or it’s not, and you can easily tell the difference between those who share the addiction and those who don’t.

If the fire service has drained out of your blood, maybe it’s time for you to get out of the fire service.

Otherwise, I think it’s time to re-enlist.

For a comprehensive offering of R&R resources, visit my blog at www.tigerschmittendorf.com. Click or call if you’re looking for ideas or want to volunteer your own. I’d love to hear your stories.

Let me know how I can help.

Until next time... “Stay safe. Train often.”



Tiger Schmittendorf is chairman of FASNY’s Recruitment and Retention Committee and serves the County of Erie Department of Emergency Services (Buffalo NY) as Deputy Fire Coordinator. He created a recruitment effort that doubled his own fire department’s membership and helped net 525+ new volunteers countywide. A frequent presenter on the subjects of leadership, incident management, safety, recruitment and retention, he is a Nationally Certified Fire Instructor and has been a firefighter since 1980. Visit his blog at www.tigerschmittendorf.com.