

Emergency Communication Etiquette

On-Air Training
Idaho Bishops' Storehouse
June 8, 2016

I hope it is not inappropriate for me to take a moment and express publically my appreciation to all those operators that participated in the Teton Dam Marathon last weekend. I believe the radio operations were hugely successful. We averaged about 72 transmissions an hour and made nearly 2000 entries in the log. So thank you.

Introduction

In case you hadn't heard, the Storehouse is organizing an emergency communication exercise that will take place in about 11 days. I wanted to spend tonight reviewing some best-practices for emergency communication. For some of you, this may be old news. I hope it serves as a good reminder. To others, much of this will be new and I hope it will help you feel more at ease and boost your confidence during the exercise.

An emergency communicator must do his or her part to get every message to its intended recipient, quickly, accurately, and with a minimum of fuss. A number of factors can affect your ability to do this, including your own operating skills, the communication method used, a variety of noise problems, the skills of the receiving party, the cooperation of others, and adequate resources.

Life-and-death communications are not part of our daily experience. Most of what we say and do each day does not have the potential to severely impact the lives and property of hundreds or thousands of people. In an emergency, any given message can have huge and often unintended consequences. An unclear message, or one that is modified, delayed, mis-delivered or never delivered at all can have disastrous results.

Listening

Listening is at least 50% of communication. Discipline yourself to focus on your job and "tune out" distractions. If your attention drifts at the wrong time, you could miss a critical message.

Sometimes the job of listening is complicated by noise. You might be operating from a noisy location, the signal might be weak or other stations may be causing interference. In each of these cases, it helps to have headphones to minimize local noise and help you concentrate on the radio signal. Any veteran of a major emergency situation will tell you, headphones are one of the "must have" items in emergency communication operations.

Microphone Techniques

Even something as simple as using your microphone correctly can make a big difference in intelligibility. For optimum performance, hold the mic close to your cheek, and just off to the side of your mouth. Talk

across, rather than into, the microphone. This will reduce breath noises and “popping” sounds that can mask your speech.

Speak in a normal, clear, calm voice. Raising your voice or shouting can result in over-modulation and distortion, and will not increase volume at the receiving end. Speak at a normal pace—rushing your words can result in slurred and unintelligible speech. Pronounce words carefully, making sure to enunciate each syllable and sound. Radios should be adjusted so that a normal voice within 2 inches of the mic element will produce full modulation. If your microphone gain is set so high that you can achieve full modulation with the mic in your lap, it will also pick up extraneous background noise that can mask or garble your voice.

When using a repeater, be sure to leave a little extra time between pressing the push-to-talk switch and speaking. A variety of delays can occur within a system, including CTCSS decode time, and transmitter rise time. It also gives time for some handhelds to come out of the “power-saver” mode. Leaving extra time is necessary on any system of linked repeaters to allow time for all the links to begin transmitting. Momentary delay in speaking after keying up will ensure that your entire message is transmitted, avoiding time-wasting repeats for missed words.

Lastly, pause a little longer than usual between transmissions any time there is a possibility that other stations may have emergency traffic to pass. A count of “one, one thousand” is usually sufficient.

Brevity & Clarity

Each communication should consist of only the information necessary to get the message across clearly and accurately. Extraneous information can distract the recipient and lead to misinterpretation and confusion. If you are the message’s author and can leave a word out without changing the meaning of a message, leave it out. If the description of an item will not add to the understanding of the subject of the message, leave it out. Avoid using contractions within your messages. Words like “don’t” and “isn’t” are easily confused. If someone else has drafted the message, work with the author to make it more concise.

Make your transmissions sound crisp and professional, like the police and fire radio dispatchers and the air traffic controllers. Do not editorialize, or engage in chitchat. An emergency net is no place for “Hi Larry, long time no hear”, “Hey, you know that rig you were telling me about last month....” or any other non-essential conversation.

Be sure to say exactly what you mean. Use specific words to ensure that your precise meaning is conveyed. Do not say, “That place we were talking about,” when “Madison High School” is what you mean. Using non-specific language can lead to misunderstandings and confusion.

Communicate one complete subject at a time. Mixing different subjects into one message can cause misunderstandings and confusion. If you are sending a list of additional food supplies needed, keep it separate from a message asking for more sand bags. Chances are that the two requests will have to be forwarded to different locations. If combined, one request may be lost.

Plain Language

As hams, we use a great deal of “jargon” (technical slang) and specialized terminology in our daily conversations. Most of us understand each other when we do, and on occasion when we do not understand each other, it usually makes little difference. In an emergency, however, the results can be much different. A misunderstood message could cost someone’s life.

Not everyone involved in an emergency communication situation will understand our slang and technical jargon. Even terms used by hams vary from one region to another, and non-hams or new hams will have no knowledge of most of our terminology. Hams assisting from another region might understand certain jargon very differently from local hams.

For these reasons, all messages and communications during an emergency should be in plain language. “Q” signals and similar jargon should be avoided. The one exception to this is the list of standard “pro-words” (often called “pro-signs”) used in Amateur traffic nets, such as “clear”, “say again all after” and so on. I’ll talk more about these in a minute.

Avoid words or phrases that carry strong emotions. Most emergency situations are emotionally charged already, and you do not need to add to the problem. For instance, instead of saying, “horrific damage and people torn to bits,” you might say “significant physical damage and serious personal injuries.” And please watch your speed of speech. It should be at a normal rate. Many times emergency operators get too excited and talk very fast, making it hard for receiving stations to understand.

Phonetics

Certain words in a message may not be immediately understood. This might be the case with an unusual place name, such as “Franconia” or an unusual last name, like “Smythe.” The best way to be sure it is understood correctly is to spell it. The trouble is, if you just spell the word using letters, it might still be misunderstood, since many letters sound alike at the other end of a radio circuit. “Z” and “C” are two good examples. For that reason, radio communicators often use “phonetics.” These are specific words that begin with the letter being sent. For instance, the unusual last name of “Smythe” might be spoken as “sierra mic yankee tango hotel echo”.

To reduce requests to repeat words, use phonetics anytime a word has an unusual or difficult spelling, or may be easily misunderstood. Do not spell common words unless the receiving station asks you to. In some cases, they may ask for the phonetic spelling of a common word to clear up confusion over what has been received. Standard practice is to first say the word, say “I spell,” and then spell the word phonetically. This lets the receiving station know you are about to spell the word he just heard

Several different phonetic alphabets are in common use, but amateur radio has adopted the ITU Phonetic Alphabet as the standard. Many hams like to make up their own phonetics, especially as a memory aid for call signs, and often with humorous results. ***This practice has no place in emergency communication.*** In poor conditions, unusual phonetic words might also be misunderstood. We need to be sure that what we say is always interpreted exactly as intended— this is why most professional communicators use standardized phonetics.

Pro-words

I am going to save this lengthy bit of information on pro-words for another time. But let me say this about the word “Roger”.

Roger indicates that a transmission has been received correctly and in full. “Roger” only means that the transmission was received and understood. It does not mean yes. That is what “affirmative” is for.

A Review of Habits to Avoid

- Thinking aloud on the air: “Ahhh, let me see. Hmm. Well, you know, if...”

We hear this all the time on the air. In casual conversations, no harm done. But on an emergency net, this is wasted air-time and, in poor conditions, may cause confusion on the other end.

- On-air arguments, criticism, or rambling commentaries
- Shouting into your microphone
- “Cute” phonetics
- Identifying every time you key or un-key the mic
- Using “10” codes, Q-signals on phone, or anything other than “plain language”
- Speaking without planning your message in advance
- Talking just to pass the time.

Rag-chewing or shooting breeze or casual on-air conversation is a great amateur radio pastime, but has no place on an emergency net or in emergency communication.

Conclusion

Okay. That was a lot. Did I miss anything important? Any comments or other suggestions?

Thank you for listening tonight. Again, the exercise is coming up on June 18, a week from Saturday. See you there. This is N7TMS, back to net control.