



Tech Zone

PR Meets VR: Reaching the Community in the Quarantine Age

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By Clinton Crafton

All photos by author

A cornerstone of any good fire department is its interaction and integration with the community it serves. For years we have reached out to the youth in our communities, with incredible success, both to teach the lessons of fire safety and to create an early exposure and comfort with the fire department. Some departments have the luxury of a fire safety facility or “survive alive” house. Others have made great use of grants and donations to purchase safety trailers. However, for the great many fire departments, there simply aren’t enough dollars to cover all the needs and those expensive options remain out of reach. Now consider the COVID-19 crisis and our current limitations on public interaction. For some agencies it’s become almost impossible to reach out to the youth in their service area.

How the Cosumnes Fire Department Incorporates Virtual Reality into Its Fire Academy Training

Virtual Reality Activity at FDIC International 2017 Raises \$25,000 for Terry Farrell Firefighters Fund

Positive Public Perception in the Fire Service

Enter the emerging technology of virtual reality (VR). A loose definition of VR is a fully immersive audio/video presentation using 360° videos delivered in the contained environment of a wearable headset. Often VR includes game controllers, but it doesn't need to for our purposes. With an investment of under \$800, any department can easily jump into this technology with amazing results and success. Our agency has tried an array of recording devices and found the GoPro Max to be a fantastic device to capture 4K 360° video in a variety of situations. Editing can be done on free software and then delivered to the community on stand-alone headsets, such as the Oculus Go or Oculus Quest. Google Cardboard offers an even simpler solution using folded cardboard goggles to view content on any smartphone at home.



(1) Some of the cameras and devices used for VR content delivery.

One of the most interesting features of this program delivery is the vast amount of content options available. Our agency has delivered online station tours, apparatus tours, immersive firefighting experiences, and multiple public safety announcements. We are currently working with a local autism school to develop autism spectrum disorder-specific content, such as a typical EMS encounter and ride to the hospital, providing a controlled experience for kids with a higher likelihood of EMS interactions. One of our biggest projects was just recently finished: a first-person view of the perils of distracted driving. This project required many different partners for logistics but only one camera to film. It includes the car-ride leading up to a head-on collision, extrication, medevac, and a closing message at the ER. The amount of content to be delivered is only limited by the imagination.



(2) A look at the 360 film on distracted driving.

We're certainly not the first agency to take advantage of this technology. Many other departments are making great use of 360 video and immersive content. With COVID-19 limiting public interaction, now is a great time to move station and apparatus tours online, as well as creating local public education campaigns for schools and day cares that may be off limits this fall.

A quick search will reveal many different 360 cameras, several VR headsets, and tons of accessories. Purchases should be centered around the end goal for content, but new ideas pop up constantly in filming. In fact, we have learned (the hard way) how to best capture interior live fire training videos in full 360, using a camera that cost only \$400. Now the manufacturer has limits on what the camera “should” be exposed to, but you may be shocked to see what we’ve successfully put these cameras through.

Perhaps we can’t currently get out to the community like we once did, but we can send the message out to them online, via [Google Cardboard](#), or by loaning headsets out to schools and groups. Immersive 360 content is often breath-taking for the first-time viewer; it’s like seeing a picture of the Grand Canyon, you just can’t understand it until you’re there! For more information, to share ideas, or if you have questions, feel free to pop over to our homepage at [wfdfire.org](#). And for a really great station tour, be watching for our videos when our newest station opens this winter!

Welcome to the Virtual Tours Page of the WFD. If you can't make a trip to the firehouse to see the station or the rigs, we want to bring them to you. We will be updating this page often, so be sure to check back in once in a while.

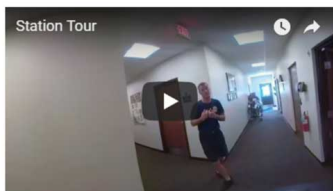
VIRTUAL EXPERIENCES

Enjoy a 360 degree view of the daily activities of our firefighters. This video is best viewed in a VR headset or Google Cardboard. However, you can pan around on the YouTube version with your mouse.

PLEASE NOTE:
On mobile devices the videos work only in the YouTube app. If viewed on YouTube in a web browser, you will see a stereoscopic view, which just isn't any fun at all.



VIRTUAL STATION TOURS



APPARATUS WALK AROUND



INTERIOR 360 VIEWS



(3) There are many potential offerings of immersive content for the public.

Clinton Crafton is the deputy chief of Operations with the Whitestown Fire Department, on the northwest side of Indianapolis, Indiana. With 27 years in the fire service, Clinton

has served in all roles from firefighter through deputy chief. Along the way, Clinton has found a strong interest in technical rescue, leadership psychology, and technology in the fire service.

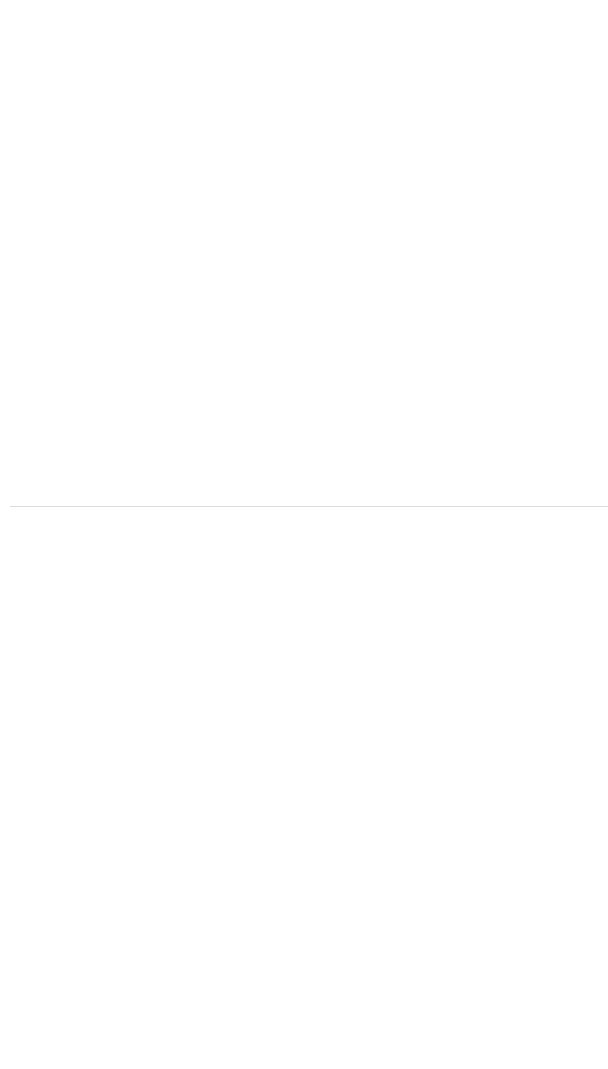
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