

Do's and Don't's for Public Service Communications

The ARRL has an excellent list of Do's and Don't's for public service event communications. Some of this advice is specific to the amateur radio service, but most of it applies to any public service communications. Some of the advice is really directed towards the person arranging the communications for the event, rather than the individual operators. If you are setting up the communications, keep these points in mind. If you are just one of the operators, you won't have as much control over how things are set up, but you can still bring up these issues in the planning stage.

The following is adapted from the ARRL's list of "Do's and Don't's For Public Event Communications" with a few added comments to highlight issues where there are differences between the Amateur Radio Service and other radio services we may use.

DO:

- Enjoy yourself! Public service is fun!
- Get a crystal clear understanding of the needs of the group you are serving.
- Prepare the night before. Make sure your radio's batteries are charged and you take spares if needed. Have a clipboard with paper and pencils, gas in the car, miscellaneous spare parts you might need, maps if available. Know where you are going and when you must be there.
- Arrive on time on the day of the event. If you are not familiar with the occasion allow extra time to get there. Checking the map the night before to plan your route will not guarantee that you turn correctly. If it's a large event, you may also find that some roads are closed. Even if you asked about road closings in advance, what you find on the way to the event may not be exactly what you were told, especially if the road is supposed to be closed later on in the day.
- Inform the event communications coordinator if you cannot make the event after agreeing to be there. The sooner this is relayed to the person in charge of communications at the event, the better.
- Introduce yourself to the person or people you will be working with at your station. Let them know who you are and why you are there. Stay at your post unless you are excused. Make sure both the NCS and the officials you are with know when you leave.
- Help the NCS keep track of who is where so he knows whom to call when asked to contact a person or checkpoint.

DON'T:

- Leave the frequency unless the NCS knows. If you must leave early, the more advance notice you give, the better.

DO:

- Maintain a courteous, professional image. You may be working with several agencies including police, fire, first aid squads, National Guard, etc. Extend every possible courtesy to members of these groups. Make sure they know who you are and what your communications capabilities are.
- Arrange for someone knowledgeable about the area to handle talk-in, or at least someone with a good map if no one else is available.
- Tell your operators exactly what their assignments are and remind them of the general guidelines for public service events. Assignments and changes in them should be made known to the entire group before the event begins or during its progress if the change occurs then.
- Have operators working in teams of at least two persons, if possible. Make sure that at least one member of each team is monitoring the radio at all times!
- Arrange for relief operators. Everybody needs lunch or coffee breaks.
- Use simplex if at all possible, with a repeater as back-up and for talk-in. Clear the function with the repeater group in writing, and well in advance.
- Obey instructions of the Net Control Station. The NCS is there to respond to general queries from the net or from other amateurs on the frequency. Even with only a few operators involved, he is necessary to smooth functioning. Address requests to transmit to him and obey his instructions just as traffic nets.
- Use tactical call signs. Checkpoint or unit numbers, or other special identifiers, are legal provided the station identification requirements are also fulfilled. Use standard operating procedure in all communications.

DON'T:

- Over identify! Amateur radio operators only need to identify with their callsign at ten-minute intervals during a series of transmissions. However, don't jump into the net every ten minutes just to identify. For example, if you only engage in a short exchange of transmissions every half-hour or so, you will fulfill the identification requirement if you ID at the end of each exchange. The 10-minute time applies to the amateur radio service, other services have different identification requirements. The interval for GMRS is 15 minutes. The same practices used in the amateur radio service will also meet the requirements in all the other services we are likely to use.

DO:

- Transmit as little as possible. Silence is golden! Avoid excessive use of callsigns (once every 10 minutes is all that is required). "Net Control, This is Checkpoint 1" conveys much more useful information.
- Memorize the main operations frequency and alternate frequencies.

DON'T:

- Apply first aid unless you are trained and certified to do so! Call for medical assistance; an ambulance or medical personnel will be dispatched to your location.
- Transport an ill or injured person in a private vehicle. This is the job of the medics and the police. An emergency vehicle is properly equipped and can get through traffic safely much faster than a private car.
- Offer more than you can deliver. You are not there to provide direct emergency assistance! You are there to communicate the need for such assistance to proper authorities.

DO:

- Resist the temptation to generate traffic just to be busy. Silence is golden when you cannot add to the real information being passed.
- Arrange for someone to be in charge as Net Control. Even small events can have messy communications without this. The group needs a leader.
- Arrange for your people well in advance, but check on them the week before to ensure that they are still available. If you can have extra people or stand-bys available, do so. Excuse people as soon as you can as long as their jobs are finished and all other positions still needed are covered.
- Thank your operators and share any feedback you get with them. Courtesy and thoughtfulness pay off.
- Keep your ARRL EC or DEC informed of what you are doing and who participates. He can help you arrange publicity. Public relations releases before and after the event can help us all get our message across that we are here with the ability to serve. He can also help get the operators. The same applies to informing your state REACT Council, your Regional Director, and the RI Publicity Committee. Don't forget to get some good pictures and write up a short article to appear in The REACTer.
- Identify vehicles as Communications Vehicles. Operators should be identified, too. A patch or team name tag is sufficient. Use baseball caps with a patch or logo. We all know this advice applies to REACT Teams and operators just as it does to amateur radio, but we still forget to do it. In addition to making sure that everyone has appropriate REACT identification clearly visible, also keep in mind your total appearance: vehicle, clothes, equipment, personal appearance. If you want to be treated like professionals, you have to look and act professional.
- Use the standard message form when necessary for official requests and messages.
- Make sure that the frequency is clear before making a call. The channel can get very busy during "tactical operations." This is especially critical if you are using CTCSS ("tone") squelch.

- When you complete an exchange with another station, use the prowords “clear” or “out” so other stations will know the frequency is now available to them. One method is to end with just your call. This fulfills all the FCC identification requirements and takes less time. Whatever procedure your Team uses, make sure everyone knows and uses the same procedure.
- Keep transmissions as short as possible. Resist the tendency to ragchew or ramble.
- Be professional. If you want to be treated as a peer and as a professional communicator, dress in a professional manner. Don't come to a meeting wearing a T-shirt and callsign cap, and carrying four radios on your belt. At the same time, don't try to look like a police officer (unless you happen to be one). Dress appropriately for the occasion.

DON'T:

- Handle routine business or commercial communications over Amateur Radio. This includes communications regarding dollar amounts of walkathon pledges, etc. The press and broadcast stations may quote or rebroadcast amateur signals, provided the signals rebroadcast do not contain references to the broadcast. This is primarily an Amateur Radio Service concern. And even on the Amateur Radio Service it isn't just “dollar amounts” that make the difference between allowable and prohibited communications. Be familiar with the rules for each service you use. This is especially important if you are using several services to cover the same event because some operators will be working more than one radio.

DO

- Always stop a second to be sure which mike you just grabbed. Don't give your ham call on GMRS or vice versa.