

Aviation Unit Marketing Survival 101

By Officer Bryan Smith, Gainesville (FL) Police Department Joint Aviation Unit

I'm a cop and a pilot. It should be that simple. My job is law enforcement flying; it's more than a full time occupation, but I don't mind because I not only enjoy it, I also feel it is an important and rewarding profession. I am not the least bit interested in business and certainly didn't sign up for this job because I want to be a marketing manager. They are fine jobs, just not my bag. I have a feeling many of you feel the same way. In the end, however, we all love our jobs more than we dislike doing some of the less desirable work needed to stay in the air.

Marketing is key to the survival of an aviation unit. To stay in business, we have to put considerable effort into educating the people we work with and for what an aviation unit is, has done and can do for them.

This last year has been considerably more difficult for many aviation units to maintain funding, producing an alarming rate of unit closures. Now is a good time for all of us to refresh our marketing strategies so we're not the next agency that scraps its aviation program.

Some time ago, I contacted Nathan Matuska, director of strategic marketing for a major tech company, for hints on how to refresh marketing efforts for our aviation unit. After talking with him, other successful aviation units and those that have been closed down, the components of a successful plan quickly become clear. So far, this effort has been extremely successful for our unit. In four years, we managed to go from item number one on the chief's possible budget cut items to not even showing up on the list.

There are two parts to any marketing plan: internal and external. Internal marketing includes the people who work in your organization. External marketing involves efforts directed towards those your organization works for, such as the community, local government and other agencies associated with public safety.

Internal Factors

Most goals in an air unit's internal marketing plan can be met by training. By teaching your department members about how to work better with the aviation unit, you will increase the amount of product your unit produces and improve your image in the department. Our business is varied but for the most part involves helping the folks on the ground do their jobs better and safer – aviation is another tool for them to use.

Hours of training are devoted to weapons, vehicles, computers, etc. Airborne support is one of the most complex tools available to a public safety officer, yet, minimal training is usually given. Without training, it is impossible to have a good working relationship with those that have never even been in the aircraft. Most people get their knowledge on airborne law enforcement from Hollywood. Unless you address these misconceptions, you will be working with people who believe the helicopter is equipped with a magic people-finder.

Many will also confess that they thought you could only help with car chases and missing person searches (of course, calling you only six hours after the call comes in). Clear these issues up, and air-to-ground coordination improves dramatically. Suddenly you stop being a "noisy waste of money" on scene and become a resource helping officers deliver results.

Training will also give the opportunity to educate the troops on how the aviation unit is run and what limitations you may have (weather, funding, equipment capabilities, etc.). They need to be told, by the unit, why the crews cannot be in the air 24/7, or why fog is considered lethal to a VFR aircraft. Agency members will not have the time, desire or resources to seek out this information themselves. If you do not tell them, they will fill in the blanks on their own with information from TV, vocal naysayers in the department or pure, uninformed assumption.

The avenues for providing this training information are many and will vary from agency to agency. "Roll call" or "in service" training blocks are excellent for getting information to as many people as possible. Having agency members actually come out for a ride in the aircraft is one of the best training methods available. Getting involved in new employee orientation is very effective in training folks correctly from the very beginning. If you cannot get scheduled for training, offer a CD or web-based presentation that can be made available to agency members.

Make sure to include everyone involved in the process of working with your unit, from administrative staff to the communications center. Dispatchers who do not know how to work with an aviation asset are a huge obstacle to getting our work done. Whatever methods are available to the unit, they must be taken advantage of. One training session is not enough; the training must be reinforced annually at a minimum.

If the unit is not producing results, it will look bad and the budget will suffer, and rightfully so. Aviation crews must train and train, reevaluate tactics, and train some more. A well-trained TFO with average equipment on an old helicopter will

win more support than an unskilled TFO in a new aircraft with new equipment. Most agency members will never even see the aircraft up close, let alone ride in it. The information the TFO gives over the radio is our end product, and the entire worth of the unit in the eyes of the agency is based on that product.

Direct your highly trained crew in the right place. A great fisherman still needs to fish in the right place at the right time. Stay current on crime trends and agency issues. Offer your services; don't wait for others to ask. On routine flights, look for work. Don't just wait to be dispatched to a call. Help with various calls and approach as many segments of the agency as possible (detectives, code enforcement, traffic and DUI units, etc.). Some of us forget how much a patrol officer appreciates unrequested backup on something as simple as a routine traffic stop. Try to call out over the radio when you are checking with units on a call or patrolling an area of interest for burglaries. People will better understand how much work you are doing in the air between calls and start asking for your assistance more often. The return for these efforts will be tenfold.

During your training session, try to include what Matuska refers to as a, "call to action." Ask attendees to get the information they receive to others who are unable to receive the training. Try to make them proponents of the program and spread the word. Equip them to address rumors and gossip and set things straight. Part time unit members are fantastic for helping with a call to action as they are working with other agency members on a regular basis.

Image & Perception

So far this sounds like a training issue and not marketing. Marketing is about selling your services or product. Furthermore, marketing works on human emotion, not always on reality. This is how businesses are able to get us to buy stuff we do not really need, sometimes even products or services we didn't even really want. If the troops cannot obtain or figure out how to use what you are selling, they will not be interested in spending any money on it. Your aviation unit may be well equipped and the aircrews well trained, and you may be producing results that are better than comparable units elsewhere, but if the perception of the unit is different because of misinformation, or lack of information, the unit will still suffer from a bad image.

So, we not only have to do a great job, but our customers have to feel like we are doing a good job. The image of your unit is what is taken into the agency budget meetings. Supervisors and administrative staff are typically not on the street working with you on calls day to day. They get their information on your performance from the line level personnel. Their job is to take care of those folks, so they can take care of the community. When they go into budget planning mode, this is the information they will work with.

Like all specialty units, aviation is always considered expendable. We may think our services are essential, but financial planners do not. The amount of time and money we have personally invested in the unit or our own training means nothing to anyone at the planning meeting. What they care about is funding, specifically what they can get with their funding. The money that is appropriated to specialty units is an investment. If we do not provide a return on that investment, they are obligated to send the money elsewhere. Often, the only information they have to make that decision is how much we are asking for, and what the perception is of our performance.

It is up to us to make sure that perception is positive. Training is the place to start. Officers that understand how we operate and how to work effectively with the services we offer will be happy to have the aircraft on-scene, and ask for it when it's not. The air unit will make the ground troops look good and keep supervisors off their back. Supervisors will be happy because their troops are happy, and their objectives are met. Agency leaders will be pleased because these results help keep the public and higher echelon supervisors or government leaders happy. When you are not available, everyone knows why, and there are no negative consequences for making safe no-go decisions. People start asking for the air unit more. The brass feel like they are getting their money's worth out of aviation and enjoy some good press thanks to you. Your position at the budget table has improved significantly.

On the other hand, poor marketing can have an equally powerful effect. Most of us are assigned to a little shack on the darkest corner of the airport behind a secured fence. Often, we report to and leave from the airport, never even coming close to the main station. Air unit members need to get a little face time with the rest of the agency.

In the public safety industry, the concept of fraternal brotherhood is very powerful. Frankly, if most of the agency has forgotten what you even look like, it will be much easier to cut your budget. This will be especially important if funding options come down to picking between several units. We have to stay in the agency's center stage. Training, information sharing, proactive response to issues or calls and staying in touch with agency members are a great place to start. If the unit or its members stay off radar, they will stay off the department agenda and budget plans.

The best way to fight uninformed emotional forces is to shut them down with cold, hard facts. Keep track of your unit statistics. Do not depend on anyone outside of the unit to do this for you. No matter what their intentions, non-aviation personnel will simply not know how to quantify your efforts in the sky. Keep track of the number and type of calls answered, arrests and missing person finds, and occasions your crews are first on scene for starters. Other numbers such as homeland security checks, directed patrols and self initiated calls will paint a great picture of work your unit is doing that may otherwise go completely unnoticed. Make the stats as brief and to the point as possible. If the reports are too complex or lengthy, most agency members will not have the time or desire necessary to properly study them. Prepare an "Executive Report" as a cover page to the regular report with a number of simple bulleted statements covering the major achievements of the unit.

A good activity report will snuff out most common complaints about the unit. It will also give your financial planning staff something real to look at on top of unit perception and reputation. When they ask the question if your unit is providing a

reasonable return on the financial investment being put into it, they will have the answer in front of them in undisputable black and white.

External Marketing

With a great internal plan in place, we have to make sure external marketing efforts are just as complete. Recently, an agency head went to the local government board meeting to explain that if they went through with proposed budget plans, he would have to shut down the air unit. Despite the agency leaders having no desire to shut down the unit, the government leaders responded that shutting down the air unit was exactly the effect they had intended on. If the end customer, the community, is not receptive to airborne resources, those that serve them (and more importantly, are elected by them) will respond accordingly.

The public and government leaders need to know most of the same information you are giving to your agency members. Hold a few of those secret tactics cards close to the chest, but for the most part, pass on the same training. For all the reasons mentioned above, it will clear up most questions and complaints the citizens have. The average person has little knowledge of airborne law enforcement. Spend any time at a public demo with your aircraft and you will hear some of the wildest, most fantastic questions and statements about our operations and equipment.

Aviation haters are very vocal folks. They will write editorials, start petitions and pound on the local elected officials' doors. Send a public copy of your unit reports to these officials. Throw in a written summary of your operations, including noise abatement procedures and contact information should they have any questions about a particular flight. Oftentimes, the decision to invest in the aviation unit is in the hands of these same elected officials. They need to see what kind of a return the unit has been providing for that investment.

Communicating with these officials will open the channels of communication between your unit and those that listen to input from the community about the services you provide. Non-aviation type personnel between the aviation unit and these officials will not have the proper information needed to respond to these questions in your favor no matter what their intentions. Also take the time to help address any aviation related topic coming up in your community. If other operators are drumming up complaints, or the city is considering allowing a housing development to be built 1,000 feet from the end of the runway, do your best to address it. If there is an aircraft accident in your community, offer your services as an aviation professional to help local leaders respond to not only the incident, but also the media and public response to it. Be concerned about funding for other public safety agencies in your region. Any aviation related topic in your area would eventually affect your funding base; it just may not immediately be obvious.

Show that your purchasing plans are in response to public input, not in spite of it. For example, a new thermal imager will allow for higher patrol altitudes at night and thus less noise. Success with this aspect of your aviation marketing will be achieved when the unit stops being something government leaders have to defend and turns into something they can tout.

Methods of Marketing

Most methods of marketing directly to the public consist of crime watch meetings, citizen's academies and the all powerful "demo" or static display. Depending on the specific scenario, you may have anything from limited time and a partially attentive audience to a captive group and multimedia displays. Be prepared for all types of settings and use each opportunity to its fullest potential. Air shows are a fantastic avenue. Aviation is already being presented in a positive light, and those with poor opinions on our profession will be out of their element and in the minority for the day. At one airshow, you can meet and educate more people than at dozens of smaller community events.

Let the public know that we are not just out joyriding or circling their neighborhood for no reason at night. We are responsible for the equipment and funding put in our hands and use it only to do significant and positive work for the community. Inform the public of the work you have done, such as arrests made, fires fought, missing people found and agencies assisted.

How much does your agency public information officer (PIO) know about the air unit? When was the last time they had aviation training or flew in the aircraft? Do they know how to explain how you found that last bad guy or saved the subdivision from a wildfire? What do you think they'll say to the media after an aircraft incident when you are unable to talk to the reporters yourself? If you want to understand why the public has such a poor understanding of our profession, look at the last hundred news reports across the nation about airborne law enforcement events. We cannot do much about the general media, but we can train our PIO so they know what to say when we are not there to help.

We all know how much work it can be to keep an aviation unit funded, especially in difficult economic times. Still, as I talk to people around the region who have suffered from budget cuts or complete unit closures, I hear the same thing: marketing efforts had slipped to the wayside. Not marketing is still marketing; it just allows ignorance and misinformation to create the message being sent out. So, if marketing is going to happen with or without our help, we need to do everything possible to keep it on our own terms.