



# RELATIONSHIP BUSINESS

How harnessing sociability can forge the connections that power public safety communications.

By Mary Binford

It all began when I offered a cheerful “good morning” at APCO International headquarters in Daytona, Florida. Common though it may seem, this greeting is not always customary in the emergency communications center, and it led to a powerful realization: the essence of our work as public safety telecommunicators is deeply rooted in relationships. The insight inspired this article and a wonderful friendship with the person on the receiving end of the greeting. In the fast-paced world of 9-1-1 services where every second counts, the importance of building and maintaining professional relationships cannot be overstated. These connections become the backbone of our success and career growth as we navigate the complexities of our roles.

## THE HEART OF 9-1-1: PEOPLE AND RELATIONSHIPS

In emergency communications, people are the business. Each call we answer is not just a transaction; it's a human connection. Our ability to communicate effectively, empathize and build rapport is vital. From the moment we greet callers, we establish the tone for the interaction. A simple "I have help on the way," can transform a stressful situation into a more manageable experience.

It's also important to remember not to take what callers say personally and to be aware of our tone. Think back to times when you had a bad customer service experience — not because of what was said but because of how it was said. Tone really matters. If you don't believe me, just ask your significant other how crucial tone can be in a conversation.

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS MATTER

Whether we're dealing with callers, coworkers or external stakeholders, first impressions lay the groundwork for future interactions. It's essential to approach each encounter with professionalism, warmth and respect. This not only boosts our credibility but also builds trust — an invaluable currency in emergency services.

I learned this lesson the hard way right after I was promoted to manager. Frustrated with some contractual language in a meeting with a vendor, I let my emotions get the better of me. I left feeling like the "big boss," thinking I made my point, but I wasn't considering the long-term consequences. Years later, I ran into that same vendor again. I didn't recognize him, but he remembered me. Rebuilding that trust took time and consistent effort. Thankfully, we've since become friends. He genuinely cares about helping telecommunicators and making their jobs easier. We can even joke about our first encounter now, thanks to my memorable approach back then. I'm grateful I learned quickly from that experience; words matter and how we deliver them makes all the difference.

### COWORKERS: YOUR LOW-COST, HIGH-IMPACT INVESTMENT

One of the most important relationships in our careers is with our coworkers. In a field where teamwork is essential, investing in these relationships can yield significant rewards. A supportive team environment

enhances job satisfaction and fosters effective communication during critical moments. You are only as strong as your team.

Building strong bonds with colleagues allows for collaborative problem-solving, knowledge sharing and a shared sense of purpose. Understanding each other's strengths and weaknesses is crucial; it enables us to step in and support one another, especially on challenging days. Today's coworker might be tomorrow's interviewer, and maintaining positive relationships with former colleagues can open doors to new opportunities and bolster your professional reputation.

### VENDORS: UNSUNG HEROES OF 9-1-1

Vendors play a crucial but often underappreciated role in our industry. They provide the tools, technology and services that keep us running smoothly. When we build good relationships with them, it can enhance our interactions and improve the quality of service we receive. A good relationship with honest communication could also lead to innovative solutions that benefit everyone.

The director of a large emergency communication center (ECC) in Virginia once told me that a young entrepreneur cold-called to ask questions about challenges in the field. Initially skeptical, the director entertained the conversation. That young visionary now offers a solution to a significant problem they discussed during that call. I had the opportunity to bring them together at a conference, where they shared their experiences and confirmed the impact of their unexpected connection.

Vendors face challenges navigating complex systems and high expectations. By showing them appreciation and by understanding their struggles, we can create a partnership that benefits us both. This collaboration can lead to better support, customized solutions and a smoother overall experience. Moving beyond a purely transactional relationship allows vendors to become genuinely invested in us — not just as clients but as individuals.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF EXTERNAL RELATIONSHIPS

External relationships are just as important as our internal connections in the world of 9-1-1 communications. Engaging with community leaders, local organizations and elected officials can significantly boost our effectiveness and visibility. Many of the

guidelines we follow come from local, state and federal governing bodies. Sometimes we're fortunate — members of governing bodies might have experience in public safety or have consulted with experts; other times they might not, and that's where we come in.

We must lead initiatives that enhance their understanding of our work. Inviting 9-1-1 rule makers to sit in on calls and see our operations firsthand can make a big difference. The more people who understand 9-1-1, the more champions we have fighting alongside us rather than against us. By building these relationships, we can create a stronger support network and ensure that our voices are heard. Our jobs are often much more complex than they appear from the outside, and firsthand observation can correct misconceptions.

### BUILDING CONNECTIONS FOR SUCCESS: THE POWER OF RECOGNITION, COMMUNICATION AND APPRECIATION

A strong external network can significantly enhance your job opportunities and professional recognition. When you cultivate a reputation for being approachable and supportive, people will remember you. You never know when someone you treated well might find themselves in a position of authority or influence. Having advocates who can speak on your behalf can be a game-changer. Establishing relationships with local leaders and community organizations can support legislative efforts, ensuring that the needs of 9-1-1 telecommunicators are represented and understood.

At the heart of every successful relationship lies good communication. In our field, clarity, empathy and active listening are essential skills that elevate our interactions. By honing these skills, we not only enhance our immediate effectiveness but also contribute to a positive organizational culture.

Regularly expressing appreciation for those around you — colleagues, vendors or community members — fosters a culture of support and recognition. Acknowledging the hard work and contributions of others leads to stronger bonds and improved morale. This culture of appreciation benefits you in the present and paves the way for future opportunities, creating a network of support that extends far beyond your immediate circle.

## EXPANDING YOUR NETWORK

Taking the initiative to expand your network can open doors to new opportunities and valuable insights. Attending industry events, joining professional organizations and participating in community activities can help you build relationships beyond your immediate work environment. These connections provide essential resources, mentorship and support as you navigate your career.

I recently returned from a state conference, where the opening session emphasized the importance of making new connections and stepping outside your comfort zone. Meeting new people can be as simple as striking up a conversation during breaks, participating in workshops or joining social events.

During a social event, I struck up a conversation with someone who had attended my class earlier that day. She surprised me with a handwritten thank-you note, expressing how much she enjoyed my session. I was overwhelmed by her gesture, and we soon found ourselves chatting about how she was enjoying the conference and were inspired to collaborate on a “Networking 101” session for the next conference. This will help her level

up her networking skills and keep the good work going.

Casual settings like sharing a table during lunch or joining a group discussion can lead to networking opportunities. Taking that first step to engage with someone new can lead to meaningful connections that benefit your career in unexpected ways.

## CONCLUSION: INVESTING IN RELATIONSHIPS FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE

As we reflect on our journey as telecommunications — from our early days to where we are today — it’s clear that relationships form the backbone of our success. By prioritizing connections with coworkers, vendors and external stakeholders, we can enhance our effectiveness, open up career advancement opportunities and create a positive work environment.

Writing this article took longer than expected, partly due to a former coworker’s sarcastic remark about my networking efforts. In a demeaning tone, they used to say, “I bet Mary knows someone” during meetings when we were trying to resolve issues. This made me realize some might think I

was building relationships solely to climb the ladder or gain influence. But honestly, haters gonna hate, right? The truth is, I genuinely enjoy getting to know people and want to help whenever I can. It’s crucial to tune out the naysayers and silence that inner voice second-guessing you. Let them think what they want; focus on your own path rather than others’ perceptions.

Next time you’re in the office, remember that a simple “good morning” can lead to meaningful interactions that shape your career. Investing in these relationships pays off in ways that go beyond the workplace, creating a supportive network that benefits not just you, but the entire 9-1-1 community.

Building and maintaining relationships isn’t just a nice bonus; it’s essential in our field. Let’s commit to nurturing these connections, as they are the true heartbeat of 9-1-1 communications. ●

*Mary Binford, CPE, is the 9-1-1 State Coordinator for Virginia with over 20 years of experience in public safety. She started her career under the headset, has a strong background in emergency services and has volunteered and worked as a medic.*

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## CDE EXAM #73786

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What inspired the author to write the article?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. A challenging situation with a vendor</li> <li>b. A seemingly ordinary chat at APCO International headquarters</li> <li>c. A moment of reflection during a personal crisis</li> <li>d. A random encounter at a national APCO conference</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Why is tone important in emergency communications?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. It can improve the technical accuracy of the conversation</li> <li>b. It can affect how the caller feels in a stressful situation</li> <li>c. It ensures the telecommunicator sounds professional</li> <li>d. It helps speed up the resolution of the call</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. What is one key lesson the author learned after a difficult interaction with a vendor?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Always speak quickly to avoid misunderstandings</li> <li>b. The initial impression cannot be changed later</li> <li>c. Words matter, and how you deliver them can affect future relationships</li> <li>d. Avoid emotional conversations with vendors</li> </ol> </li> <li>4. How does the author describe the role of coworkers in the 9-1-1 industry?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. As a support system for personal development</li> <li>b. As low-cost, high-impact investments for team success</li> <li>c. As barriers to career advancement</li> <li>d. As resources for technical troubleshooting only</li> </ol> </li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. What is the benefit of building strong relationships with vendors in the 9-1-1 industry?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Vendors will increase prices for services and tools</li> <li>b. Vendors will be more likely to offer tailored solutions and better support</li> <li>c. Vendors will not train employees in technical skills</li> <li>d. Vendors can resolve issues without involving 9-1-1 staff</li> </ol> </li> <li>6. Why are external relationships important for 9-1-1 telecommunicators?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. They help manage public perceptions of the 9-1-1 service</li> <li>b. They ensure that telecommunicators always have the latest technology</li> <li>c. They enable 9-1-1 telecommunicators to influence political decisions</li> <li>d. They increase understanding of the work 9-1-1 telecommunicators do</li> </ol> </li> <li>7. How can regular communication and appreciation improve workplace relationships in 9-1-1 services?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. By reducing the need for management oversight</li> <li>b. By fostering a culture of respect and collaboration</li> <li>c. By ensuring that only positive feedback is given</li> <li>d. By focusing solely on technical achievements</li> </ol> </li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. What opportunity did the author find at a state conference?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. A chance to teach a class on emergency call management</li> <li>b. An opportunity to collaborate on a "Networking 101" session</li> <li>c. A platform to introduce new technology for 9-1-1 services</li> <li>d. A chance to meet political leaders for new legislation</li> </ol> </li> <li>9. How does the author view networking within the 9-1-1 community?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. As a means to climb the professional ladder quickly</li> <li>b. As a way to gain influence and power over colleagues</li> <li>c. As an important way to build meaningful, supportive relationships</li> <li>d. As a distraction from day-to-day responsibilities</li> </ol> </li> <li>10. What is the article's final message about relationships in 9-1-1 communications?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Technical proficiency is more important than relationships</li> <li>b. Building relationships are optional for career success</li> <li>c. Relationships are crucial for both personal and professional growth</li> <li>d. Relationships are only important within the 9-1-1 team</li> </ol> </li> </ol> |
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