

Tips for Public Service Communicators

Here is a great set of tips from the St. Louis (Missouri) Metro ARES/RACES Group, with the permission and courtesy of EC Steve Wooten, KC0QMU, and AEC for Operations Gary Hoffman, KB0H.

- **Things to avoid saying on the air, Number 1**

"Okay, I'll do it. But it's not actually my job. The guy who's supposed to do that is always away from the table doing something else." The other operator doesn't want to hear any of that and it ties up the frequency. Make a note of your complaints in your log and bring them up at the debriefing, but keep them off the air. -- *Gary Ross Hoffman, KB0H*

- **The value of tactical call signs**

Tactical call signs such as "Shelter 5", "Net Control", and "EOC" are descriptive and give immediate information. They can be very useful during planned events and during emergencies. Do not, however, forget to include your FCC call sign at ten minutes intervals and at the end of each contact.

- **Never alter a message**

Do not alter a message, even to correct a typographical error. What you think is right may actually be wrong. Moreover, any change you make might subtly alter the meaning of the message. Send or write it exactly as you receive it.

- **Do not use VOX**

VOX stands for voice activated transmitter. VOX devices are handy gadgets, but should not be used in an emergency setting. Ambient noise might activate the transmitter and tie up the frequency. Also, you do not want your casual comments to go out over the air.

- **You are your own safety officer**

When setting up or operating a station of any size, the very first thing on your mind should be, is it safe? Am I going to irradiate anyone with RF energy? Could my battery spill acid? Can it fall on anyone's foot? Have I created an electrical hazard? Could anyone trip over my feedline or get poked in the eye by my antenna? The safety of your station is your responsibility. Make sure that it cannot harm you or anyone else. -- *KB0H*

- **Every piece of equipment can break, including you**

We all have limits. Don't overtax yourself during a deployment. Watch for signs of fatigue, stress, adverse reactions to the environment and so forth. Stop and take a break if you need one. It is better to have a silent radio than a fresh casualty. -- *KB0H*

- **Listen to the Net Controller's instructions**

One of the most common mistakes on regular nets is that operators assume that they know what the Net Controller is going to say. They miss the Net Controller's instructions and wind up giving inappropriate responses. This can be calamitous in an emergency situation. One way to develop the habit of paying attention is to write down the key elements of what the Net Controller is saying. You might be surprised to find that it's not always the same thing. -- *KB0H*

- **Keep it brief**

Air time is precious, especially when there are numerous operators on the same

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frequency. Refrain from over-explaining things, engaging in personal greetings and chats, and anything else that might prevent important traffic from getting through. -- *KBOH*

- **Are you following procedures?**

Operating procedures are developed from many hours of examining what went wrong during disasters. Familiarize yourself with the procedures and practice them in exercises. Arriving at a disaster scene and trying to freestyle it will only cause problems. -- *KBOH*

- **Check the transceiver for overheating**

Digital modes are great for sending forms, long lists, images and so forth. They also use a lot more duty cycles of your transceiver than ordinary voice communications. Check to make sure that your rig is not overheating. Reduce the transmit power level if your unit feels hot. -- *KBOH*

- **Have fuses handy**

Much of your equipment has one or more fuses. Check each item, make a list of the fuses you might need, then put together a small fuse kit. Be sure to replace any fuses you wind up using. -- *KBOH*

- **Yes, you are ready to participate**

Caution is good, but don't let it prevent you from participating and volunteering. Everyone makes mistakes on their first try, or first dozen tries, and everyone survives them. You will find that most other hams will be sympathetic and supportive of your efforts. -- *KBOH*

- **Don't avoid the exercises**

It's a mistake to ignore an exercise because you are already familiar with what it is about. There are always surprises, new elements, and things that you've forgotten. Your presence will also help those participants who are less familiar with the exercise's concepts. -- *KBOH*

- **Keep learning**

Everything is dynamic, including emergency communications. Procedures and techniques that were standard ten years ago are out of date today. Never sit back and feel that you've learned everything you'll need to know. -- *KBOH*

- **You brought your radio to the emergency, but will you be able to power it?**

Antenna connectors are fairly generic, but what about power connections? ARES groups around the country use Anderson Powerpoles as the standard power connector on their equipment.

- **Push THEN Talk**

Pause for a second after keying up your transmitter. It may be slower to react than you realize. -- *John Weis, N0UFB*

- **Maintain a fire extinguisher near your battery charging station**

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This applies primarily to larger batteries, but every battery is a chemical device and you will be pumping energy into it. Having a fire extinguisher handy is a reasonable precaution. -- *Jim Conley, N00BG*

- **Mark your equipment**

Be sure that every piece of your equipment is marked with at least your name and call sign. After the emergency, you'll want any property you left behind to find its way back to you.

- **It's going to be noisy, so have a set of headphones**

It's always a good idea to have a set of headphones around, but it may be an absolute necessity in an emergency. You may be placed in an area where other operators are working on different bands, you may be out in the open, or you may even be in the middle of a noisy shelter. A headset should be a vital part your equipment. You can't communicate if you can't hear.

- **Outdoors isn't indoors**

Even in an urban or suburban setting, working outdoors isn't like working indoors. You may have taken your equipment into consideration, but don't forget yourself. Think about your allergies, the sun, heat, cold, bugs and everything else that might affect you. Treat your outside deployment or exercise as if it were a camping trip and prepare for it accordingly. -- *KBOH*

- **Think about next time**

During every deployment or exercise, think about the next time. You will always find that something is missing, broken, doesn't work as expected, wasn't planned for and so forth. Keep a mental record, or better still a written one of everything that is wrong. Be sure to look it over carefully after the event so you will be better prepared next time. -- *KBOH*

- **Eat**

Do not skip meals just because things are busy. You may not think that you need to eat anything, but volunteers have suddenly fainted without feeling any early symptoms that something was wrong. At the very least, consume an energy bar or a quick snack. -- *KBOH*

- **Is no one responding on the secondary frequency?**

If you have a transceiver capable of handling two frequencies simultaneously and no one is responding on that second channel, the problem may be as simple as the volume has been turned down. -- *KBOH*

See the complete list of excellent tips on the [St. Louis Metro ARES/RACES](#) website.