

Public Perception of Open-Water Lifeguards

What We Can Do to Improve our Image

Through the years, open-water lifeguards have been challenged by the media, politicians, and members of the public about various aspects of the profession, especially salaries and benefits. As professionals, lifeguards are often disheartened, upset, and even angered by these attacks. These emotions are understandable, because we are passionate about our work. But, as we consider how to address certain misconceptions and thereby reduce the frequency and intensity of such attacks, we must acknowledge that we may be partially to blame for these verbal assaults. Specifically, we may be contributing to the problem by our failure to proactively and systematically educate and communicate with people outside the profession who are often constrained by simple misunderstandings or a basic lack of knowledge about lifeguarding. Only by determining what contributes to a negative public perception of our work and then taking full responsibility to proactively address these issues will we help lifesaving gain respect as a profession.

The purpose of this paper is to: explain how we may be contributing to the problem (internal constraints); describe legitimate issues and identify the misconceptions of those outside the profession (external constraints); and offer specific suggestions and clear-cut strategies for dealing with each one of these constraints.

I. Internal Constraints: How We Contribute to the Problem

The primary reason for negative perceptions of the lifeguarding profession appears to be a lack of understanding: the public, the media, and the policymakers do not always know what open-water lifeguards actually do or how a department functions. A typical organizational structure will have a cost-effective ratio of full-time to part-time staff. Among their job responsibilities are the training and supervision of fellow lifeguards and, of course, quick and able responses to public need. As statistics about both the number of lives saved by lifeguards and the consequences of not staffing beaches clearly indicate, lifeguards play a key role in maintaining public safety.

As already mentioned, the public's lack of understanding of issues like these is, in part, a result of us lifeguards not proactively educating these various stakeholders in an aggressive, professional, and systematic way. Of course some individuals will never be convinced that lifeguarding is truly a profession or is necessary for public safety, but these individuals are in the minority. Therefore communicating with the majority of people—who are indeed rational and thoughtful—will go a long way toward improving the public's perception of the lifesaving profession. What follows is an outline of both internal and external constraints that keep people from having an accurate understanding of lifesaving. This analysis will provide a more thorough understanding of the roots of the problem and therefore help us develop effective strategies to address it.

As noted above, the greatest way we lifeguards contribute to our negative image is our failure to communicate accurately what we do during our workdays. We don't educate the public about all that the profession of lifesaving requires and entails. One reason for this failure is that we tend to be immersed in our profession—in keeping our skills sharp, maintaining our training standards, and staying fit and able to perform the job's duties. Furthermore, since we know our jobs inside and out, backward and forward,

we easily forget that average citizens do not understand the demands of lifesaving. Also impairing communication is the fact that, in general, lifeguards do not brag about what they do.

Listed here are some of the key areas where we as lifeguards could better communicate and educate the public about our work. Included are suggested strategies for dealing with each specific issue.

Internal Issue #1: Failure to communicate what lifeguards do throughout the year.

In Southern California, lifesaving is a year-round profession that offers tremendous benefits to the public. However, the average citizen tends to think that lifeguards are only needed in the summer, so the question “What do lifeguards do in the winter?” arises. An even more serious question sometimes follows: “Why do we need lifeguards in the winter?” These legitimate questions need to be answered so that policymakers can make informed decisions that a now-informed public will support.

Potential Strategies

Providing answers to these two questions is simply not enough. Our goal should be to prevent these questions from even being asked through our proactive education of stakeholders. Implementing some proactive strategies may head off these questions.

- Create a formal, year-around press release campaign: draft season-specific press releases for summer, fall, winter, and spring with each one addressing the issues unique to that time of year. In addition to educating the public about seasonal hazards, these press releases can also include details about what lifeguards are doing to mitigate those hazards.
- Ensure that local government decision-makers are well aware of the hundreds of hours of training lifeguards do during the off-season to prepare for the busy summer months. Emphasize the need for both early preparation for the season and keeping skills sharp during the season.
- Make policymakers very aware of the need for full-time, professional lifeguards who have been trained to respond to emergencies on the beach and in the ocean with only limited staff on hand, limited backup, etc. Emphasize that these full-time, year-round guards need to be experts in a variety of disciplines in a different way than part-time staff members do.

Internal Issue #2: Failure to educate stakeholders about the structure of lifeguard departments, including the cost-effective practice of hiring seasonal lifeguards as the bulk of the workforce during the summer months

Use of part-time employees to supplement a core full-time staff is an extremely cost-effective practice not done in most other public safety professions. Typically, a majority of a lifeguard agency’s workforce is seasonal and does not receive benefits. These part-time employees are vital to the public’s safety, and these young men and women deserve credit for the outstanding job they do. These part-time seasonal employees, however, do not hire, train, or supervise themselves. Those responsibilities fall to the core full-time and year-round workers, as do these essential tasks:

- The recruitment, hiring, and training of part and full time replacement employees
- The full-time professional supervision and management of operations and personnel

- Professional and highly trained responses to a variety of incidents, including law enforcement, medical, and near- and offshore water-related emergencies

Potential Strategies

Internal Issue #2 can be addressed in conjunction with Issue #1: the strategies apply to both. Bottom line, only by educating the public and local policymakers about the importance of the vital structure of a year-round lifeguard department will they be able to make informed decisions.

Internal Issue #3: Failure to educate stakeholders about the role lifeguards play in public safety

Lifeguards fill a void in public safety, one that cannot be met by police and fire personnel. After all, police officers and firefighters do not always have ready access to beach and ocean incidents, resulting in delayed, if not life-threateningly slow, responses. Firefighters may not be up to speed on law enforcement issues that arise, and police officers may not have the medical expertise to address beach and ocean emergencies. Most important, neither police officers nor firefighters have acquired the highly specialized skills and training needed to perform open-water rescues.

Potential Strategies

Highlighting major emergencies that require specialized training, specific to the beach and open water, will inform the public and policymakers about the void left by police and fire. Some ways to do this include:

- Conduct off-season drills and invite the press to attend.
- Write articles for your local agency newsletter highlighting off-season training, real-life rescues, or emergencies either prevented or handled. These articles will keep local officials well informed.
- Nominate lifeguards, local citizens, and even public officials for as many awards as possible and present those awards at local city council or board meetings. Be sure the recipients attend and then help them tell the story. Such personal stories appeal to the emotions and make a much greater impact than mere facts and figures.

Internal Issue #4: A partial failure to report the number of lives saved, injuries prevented, and crises avoided thanks to the presence and activity of lifeguards, information that would suggest the consequences of not having lifeguards

Lifeguards do a good job communicating statistics about ocean rescues, beach attendance, and related emergency responses. Consider regularly reporting on the number of children taught water safety skills through school outreach programs, the summertime Junior Lifeguards program, and accounts of what the lifeguards are doing to educate the public about ocean safety could also be reported regularly. When the public, the media, and the policymakers gain a better understanding of what we do, their critical attacks might be reduced, if not entirely eliminated. Therefore, it is the responsibility and obligation of lifeguards to help ensure that these stakeholders fully grasp how important lifesaving is to their community.

Potential Strategies

Carefully consider the value of including in your statistics the cost of accidental deaths (the latest figures are always available through the Center for Disease Control). Then, based on the number of department rescues and prevents, calculate the estimated savings (be conservative!) to the county, state, and/or nation that such lifeguard service means. This information should be used sparingly and sensitively because money is *not* the major issue: heartbreak and the loss of life are much more important. This type of statistical information is better used in budget requests and other internal communications.

II. External Constraints: Misconceptions Held by the Public, the Media, and Policymakers

Some of the public's misconceptions (described below) are due, in part, to the failure of lifeguards as a group to effectively communicate with and educate the public about the importance of having a strong lifesaving department. Yet other factors also lead to misconceptions, poor perceptions, and inaccurate beliefs about lifeguards. Some of these misconceptions can be clarified and therefore eliminated through education, but unfortunately, some false ideas will always be around. Our goal, therefore, should be to do whatever we can to address the misconceptions and accurately shape those public perceptions we have some control over. Lifeguards, for instance, have total control over what the public sees when they go to the beach: does a lifeguard look capable and professional to the typical beachgoer? Other external constraints impacting the image of lifeguard are economic conditions that constrain public spending; general doubt that lifeguards are even needed at all; and each individual's past interactions with lifeguards. In order to develop strategies for dealing with these obstacles, a more thorough discussion of these issues follows.

External Issue #1: What the public sees when they come to the beach

Typical beachgoers tend to see a young man or woman sitting in a tower, apparently having a good time, enjoying the sun, and possibly meeting members of the opposite sex. In general, the beach-going public has no realistic idea of the true dangers present in an ocean environment; of the vigilance necessary for spotting potential trouble and preventing it; the training required to be prepared to respond to a variety of emergencies; or the stress the tower lifeguard experiences as crowds, waves, and/or violators of city/state ordinances increase. The public sees a lifeguard enjoying the same aspects of a vacation day at the beach that they themselves are enjoying. Some beachgoers are even thinking, "That lifeguard is getting paid to do what I'm paying a lot of money for." Thankfully, not everyone on the beach thinks this way, but it's a very understandable conclusion—and one that lifeguards should acknowledge and address.

Potential Strategies

Use newspaper articles and regular awards presentations to educate the public and local policymakers so they can begin to see the beach and water from a lifeguard's perspective. Talk about the stress that these men and women in the towers face, the nights of sleeplessness they experience as they over worry about the next day, and what it is like to sit in tower and be responsible for thousands of people's lives. Anytime you can do so, help the listener or reader step into the shoes (sandals!) of a tower lifeguard. Again, first-person, emotional stories have the greatest impact on the audience.

External Issue #2: Economic conditions and constraints faced by the public

How individuals are faring economically certainly has an impact on how they view lifeguard salaries and benefits. During times of high unemployment, job benefits being reduced, and a high cost of living, the public will not be inclined to support high salaries for men and women who sit on the beach—if that is all they know about lifeguarding. As we seek to improve the public’s perception of lifeguards, this lack of knowledge, mentioned in our discussion of earlier points, needs to be addressed, as do economic conditions.

Potential Strategies

National economics is an area over which we have little or no control. However, we can take certain actions to avoid exacerbating the problems everyone is facing:

- Acknowledge our understanding of the current economic situation and promote those efforts we are undertaking to reduce costs even while maintaining a high level of public service.
- Be willing to make concessions in an effort to assist with any budget deficits your organization is facing. You may want to ask that the reinstatement of funding cuts be considered once the economy turns around.
- Be respectful when requesting expansions to existing programs or additional equipment. In fact, only make requests when you have factual data indicating a genuine need.
- As noted earlier, promote the cost-effectiveness of employing part-time employees in summer months, yet never ease up on emphasizing the need for year-around professionals.

External Issue #3: Public perception regarding the need for lifeguards

Many members of the public believe that the local, state, and federal governments must provide fire and police protection, and one reason is that the “bad things” that police and fire respond to are brought on by external forces, and the public had no choice in the matter. However, some people believe that swimming at a beach is a voluntary recreational activity and that individuals swim at their own risk (i.e., “They chose to go swimming”). The logical conclusion is that lifeguards are not a necessary element of a city’s public safety program.

Potential Strategies

Public perception of the importance of lifeguards can be addressed indirectly in any discussion of the cost of accidental deaths to the nation as well as the economic factors involved in a drowning death or a debilitating injury (quadriplegia). Yet these financial costs pale in comparison to the immeasurable heartbreak and personal loss incurred in an ocean-related death or accident. All lives are equally important, and it is our obligation as lifeguards to protect every one of them.

External Issue #4: Past interactions with lifeguards

People’s previous experiences at the beach have a tremendous impact on their perception of lifeguards. If individuals have had a positive experience with professional, courteous, and capable lifeguards, they tend to support the profession. However, if their dealings with lifeguards have been less than positive—

if a lifeguard has come across as unprofessional, impolite, disrespectful, or, worse, negligent and untrained—these people’s support of a lifeguard department will understandably be minimal or even nonexistent, and any comments they make about lifeguards would be negative. Although nothing can be done about the past, improved training in customer service, professionalism, and lifeguard responses to public inquiries and situations could significantly minimize this problem in the future.

Potential Strategies

Every year lifeguards in the field make hundreds of thousands of contacts with members of the public, any one of whom could be a local politician or person of influence. Increased training in customer service and the maintenance of high standards for appearance, uniforms, and general demeanor will help ensure that every single lifeguard interaction with a member of the public is as professional and positive as possible. Establishing and enforcing negative consequences for lifeguards who fail to extend common courtesies and act professionally can also reinforce the importance of such department standards and show the public the value placed on courtesy and professionalism.

Summary

The information presented in this document is hardly comprehensive, but it does provide ideas and suggestions for improving the public’s perception of lifeguards. We will continue to face careful, if not critical, public scrutiny, especially in tough economic times, and our failure to communicate proactively about what lifeguards do will contribute to a negative attitude toward our branch of public safety. Speaking out and speaking positively about what a lifeguard department does and the tangible ways the community benefits from our presence will counter this negativity and, more important, provide the public and policy makers with more thorough and accurate information about the crucial role lifeguards play in public safety. Our job, therefore, is to communicate in a timely, consistent, positive, and thoughtful manner. Putting into practice a comprehensive public relations plan that addresses the issues outlined above and reaches all stakeholders (politicians, administration, and the public) can greatly improve perceptions about lifeguards. We cannot expect stakeholders to know all that a lifeguard is required to do in a typical day, week, or season or what needs to happen behind the scenes if we don’t communicate with them.

A comprehensive public relations plan should:

- Explain what lifeguards do in the summer, fall, winter and spring
- Emphasize the cost-effective use of part-time employees to support the absolutely essential full-time professionals
- Educate stakeholders about the role lifeguards play in the public safety matrix they comprise together with police and fire
- Communicate how many people are saved from death or injury through prevention and response. (The financial benefits of preserving life and limb may be mentioned when appropriate.)
- Help stakeholders see the beach and water from a lifeguard’s perspective. Be sure to mention the stress lifeguards are under, what they are responsible for, and how seriously they take their job. Help stakeholders “walk in the shoes of the lifeguard” through stories of rescues, prevention, or first aid told from the lifeguard’s viewpoint.

- Acknowledge current economic conditions and promote what your agency is doing to maintain a cost-effective public safety program. Show that you are part of the solution, not part of the problem.
- Promote the very real need for lifeguards in general and, at the same time, the intrinsic value of a human life whether or not the individual voluntarily put him or herself into danger.
- Increase customer service training, enforce and perhaps raise standards for appearance, and emphasize that professionalism is expected during every contact with the public.

Whatever shape your public relations campaign takes, know that a first-person account told in support of a specific issue is a powerful communication tool. Facts and figures are useful for budget reports, but studies show that most decisions have an often undervalued emotional component. Top performers in sales and marketing know this and appeal to emotions daily. Learn from them and follow their example as you work to support and advance this noble profession.

Remember, it is no longer enough to do an outstanding job; it is our obligation and responsibility to let the public and the policymakers know what we are doing to protect the public at our beaches. No one knows as well as professional lifeguards the extent of the dangers that are at the beach, so take the time and make the effort to share your knowledge and thereby help people appreciate the lifeguard department's contributions to public safety.

The time and energy you put into this effort will be rewarded—and, most important, lives will be saved.

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