

A Guest's Glance Street Smart Haz Mat

by Michael Callan



In my book, Street Smart Haz Mat I have a principal I always discuss. "Information is important but information management is critical to survival". PEAC has great information, but its strength is that it manages it so well. The reason is PEAC is street smart! Street smart is a great concept. You can only achieve street smarts from a blend of education and experience. PEAC has that unique blend. The education came from WRI and the experience from the engineers working with responders.

I can tell you, we weren't street smart 30 years ago when I joined the fire department. Wallingford was a heavy industrialized Connecticut town and had lots of chemicals. No hazardous materials, they hadn't been invented yet only chemicals. When it came to chemical information we joked about the cigar box in the front of the fire truck with the officer. In the box was a set of binoculars, a pair of sneakers and a dime (phone calls were a dime back then!) The procedure was simple. Look at the spill through the binoculars run to a phone and call someone you knew. There was no CHEMTREC. CHEMTREC as we know it was a year away from being created. Our informational data sources were a one page, two sided MSDS, some nationally published Chemcards, the precursor to the DOT Emergency Response Guide Book and your close friendship with any chemist you met at the last chemical fire to which you responded.

The next year, 1972 was a banner year for responders. We got our first ERG and the CMA Chemical Manufacturers Association started the Chemical Transportation Emergency Center CHEMTREC, 1-800-424-9300. It still wasn't easy, but it was a whole lot better than what we had had-fingers, tongues and toes! There were flaws, for example the early DOT ERG's had only a few chemicals listed. The evacuation distances for a tank car involved in a fire was 750 feet. (The next edition was 1250 feet. I've always wondered what happened to increase the distance?)

From 1972 to the mid eighties, there was a proliferation of documents and information resources: NFPA, NIOSH, ACGIH, Coast Guard. Everyone had a manual of information. The one general fault with all the information documents is that they had a bias. NFPA for the most part focused on their client base in the early years. Their info was extremely flammable oriented. ACGIH and NIOSH were heavy toxic. Coast Guard was water spill response and on it went. One thing was always for sure: the MSDS was getting bigger, some even were getting bigger than one page. The horror! But unfortunately you had to read five pages of "dead rat" stories before you got to the emergency response information hidden in some secluded section towards the end of the MSDS.

Then two major events catapulted the haz mat information systems into the next dimension - Bhopal and computers. Bhopal spawned community right to know information to Fire Departments throughout the US and computers "made it easier". Easier? Yeah! The first MSDS computer program I saw took 24 minutes to pull up the MSDS. By that time I

could've ordered the rookie to run down the road to the next chemical plant and get the MSDS, run back and I would still have had 3 minutes to wait for the computer.

The first and still successful computer management of information was CAMEO in the late 80's early 90's. They combined all the information into a searchable database. This was good. Why? Because Cameo was the beginnings of being street smart. Emergency responders were being listened to and in some cases even beginning to program or assist the programmers.

Since CAMEO didn't control what went into the information there were still some problems. Up until this point all the information databases were being driven by the chemists, scientists, engineers, organizations and even lawyers in some cases. No one had really asked the people who were using the information. What do you want? WRI did just that as they began the PEAC project. I was always amazed as all responders and reviewers saw the prototype of PEAC. Their statements were almost the same. "This is great, but it would be better if it could do this." "Can you make this thing get this information for me?". What PEAC's essence is in my mind goes back to Street Smart Haz Mat - Information is important but PEAC manages that information better than any thing else I have seen.

One factor of PEAC is how it interfaces from database to database. Twenty years ago I would've had to have 10 books on the hood of my captain's car to get all the same information. God forbid it was a windy day and the pages kept changing.

PEAC can start you with the DOT ERG, and then you can move to product specific info in a few clicks. You can then interface back to DOT for evacuation distances. In addition, PEAC even offers more on evacuation distances and clouds. They actually include real time, real chemical dispersion patterns. Try to get that information on a fire department training ground. Responders can pull up chemical protective clothing data, compatibility information and even respiratory protection recommendations. This fluid information transfer is what makes it so valuable. It mimics the way we think in the field. It is electronically street smart.

Most instructors who use PEAC will inevitably do an exercise where one group of students will have a load of books and the other group has the PEAC. The PEAC group always gathers the information faster. It's not better information than the books; flash point is still flash point. PEAC manages the information better. As I walk the floors of a conference or stop by the PEAC booth to chat, I smile to myself when I hear a student or a conference attendee saying how much easier getting the information is with PEAC. My first reactions to these statements are two fold. The old timer in me wants to say "Kid, you don't know how easy, let me tell you about the old days. I can still remember incidents where it took us two days to identify the product." But the instructor in me just thinks - you don't know how much hard work over the years went into this project to make it so easy!