

Sirens to sounds: Emergency services and harnessing the power of TikTok

Emergency services staff or social media stars? In today's world, you can be both, as TikTok carves out a new space for police, firefighters, and paramedics to reach a young, new audience, writes **Amy Leete**

It is hard to deny that TikTok, with over one billion monthly active users, has become a daily part of life for many young people across the world. It's an app that's no stranger to controversy. Several countries, including France, the Netherlands, and Norway, have recently banned the use of TikTok on government-issued devices, citing concerns over the app's privacy and security.

A social media application, the premise is simple: you are presented with a never-ending list of entertaining videos to scroll through. Anywhere from 15 seconds to 10 minutes long, TikTok's powerful algorithm is able to determine what kind of videos you like based on the time you spend watching, as well as your comments and likes. From funny cat videos to restaurant reviews and home-repair tips, almost every hobby and interest is represented. Dance challenges form a large part of TikTok's appeal (readers with children may find this a useful explanation for their strange behaviour). Certain songs, dances, and video formats rise in popularity, and content creators make their own versions. TikTok has led to the emergence of a new category of videos: infotainment, where genuinely useful information is presented in an engaging, entertaining, and often comedic way.

You may wonder how such a platform would hold any value for emergency services. Life-or-death situations are not amusing, and the issues affecting emergency service personnel, such as their psychosocial well-being, are serious. Above all, emergency service organisations (ESOs) have historically been conservative and cautious in allowing





staff to create their own accounts, citing risks to reputation and patient safety. Yet, as approximately 60 per cent of the world's population is now active on social media, even ESOs themselves have established online presences to share relevant, useful, and accurate information on public safety. Twitter and Facebook are now populated with ESO-run accounts, detailing what to do in an emergency, how to stay

Ivector | Adobe Stock

safe in adverse weather conditions, and more. But TikTok is a new frontier, with a new, young audience hungry for trendy, comedic content. This time around, both ESOs and emergency service staff are seizing the opportunity quickly with huge amounts of success.

The accounts @politivest and @politiorvest (Norway's West and South-West Policing Districts) are examples of one of TikTok's greatest emergency service triumphs. With a combined follower count of almost 1.5 million and 16 million likes on their videos, they are undeniably superstars of the platform. I spoke to Rune Fimreite (Police Superintendent, Vest Politidistrikt) and Kaare Andre Ødegaard (Police Superintendent, Sør-Vest Politidistrikt) about their motivations, reasons, and results.

"Our motivation was to expand our social media presence and connect to a younger audience," Rune notes. "It was just a test – nothing very serious, but we had a hugely positive response and a genuine connection with youth."

Part of @politivest and @politiorvest's appeal is their ability to jump on existing TikTok trends and join in with an emergency service focus. Dance challenges in full uniform, playing Britney Spears songs in police vans, and the ever-popular presence of Norway's most endearing police dogs have made their accounts globally adored. A *We Will Rock You* collaboration video of Norwegian police, firefighters, paramedics, the army, air rescue, coastguard, and nurses gained 26 million views.

But besides just having fun, there is a real reason to have a TikTok account. Kaare Andre says: "It's about breaking down barriers with the public, showing them a face, and that even the police have good and bad days – we're human. There are certainly negative perceptions of the police that exist, and our TikTok accounts help to resolve this. The public should and could feel safe around us."

For Rune, the effect isn't limited to Norway: "We are reaching worldwide and helping affect worldwide public perception of police forces – our videos have reached America and even Iraq, for example."

It isn't just the police or ESOs themselves finding success on the platform. Individual emergency service staff are also contributing to growing positive perceptions and finding their own benefits from TikTok. Jason Patton of @firedepartmentchronicles is a Florida-based firefighter, paramedic, and comedian with 2.1 million followers and over 61 million likes. Having perfected the infotainment genre, Jason shares vital information, such as how to perform CPR, what to do with kitchen fires, and a day in the life of a firefighter. His content is peppered with his natural gift for humour.

"Creating content that is able to disperse information in a lighthearted way allows people to digest information and actually learn," Jason notes. "It can help in high-stress situations in the future – so that when you are faced with life-or-death situations, you feel prepared." For example, Jason's video on how to use an AED combats myths and misinformation but also explains, step by step, the method of using an AED effectively. Some of the 1.1 million viewers of this video will have been organically shown this training without looking for it – a boost for public safety. "You're incredibly knowledgeable AND hilarious!" says a comment on the video. "I love how you're able to explain things a lot of us don't know. I'm a new fan!" TikTok's format for being able to save videos lends itself to this method. "Our videos are saved on a feed, so people can go back and have

a closer look at our good advice," according to Rune.

As positive perception increases, so does public awareness of how to stay safe. "The Norwegian police model is to prevent crime before it happens," says Kaare Andre, noting that this is: "Why we're on TikTok, trying to prevent crime."

For Jason, there are a lot of public misconceptions about emergency services: "A lot of people believe when you call us, we choose the calls we take, for example; my videos dispel these myths and help responders through a more informed public."

As an individual on the front line, Jason also uses his platform to highlight issues and adverse effects of the job. "I've found that being able to create content and talk about the things I've seen has been really therapeutic for me and others."

Kayla Corredera-Wells of @princessofpages shares this sentiment. A paramedic and EMS educator herself, her 'video moments as a paramedic that permanently altered my brain chemistry' highlight the effect of

Creating content that is able to disperse information in a lighthearted way allows people to digest information and actually learn

traumatic calls on emergency service staff, with over eight million views and 11,000 comments. Citing particularly difficult jobs that will stay with her for the rest of her life, Kayla's video reminds viewers that emergency service staff are equally human – and grieve too. "I was really surprised when it blew up," Kayla says, "but it raised important conversations. Most people I've met don't really understand my job and are almost shell-shocked when I tell them what paramedics go through daily. I thought it would be cool to show the public what we actually do."

Both Jason and Kayla, they reach not only a public audience, but other emergency service workers as well. "I was surprised that my video raised a conversation about pay and benefits for emergency service workers – and with a global reach, we shared experiences and got to know the working conditions for staff in other countries. Our work is traumatising – suicides are rising – and TikTok allows us to talk about it," Kayla says.

Jason, too, is no stranger to issues that affect emergency service staff. He's featured in videos on identifying cancer risks for firefighters and often talks about his own mental health on his account. Emergency service staff have reached out to Jason about the positive effect of his videos. "When I first started, a firefighter reached out to me after a really bad multiple-fatality road traffic collision. He was sitting with his crew after the incident, and one of my videos came up on his feed. It helped him laugh and remove some of the stickiness from the situation he'd just endured. I've had countless responders reach out about mental health issues, feeling that they can after I've talked about my own mental health," he explains.

Now, Kayla is using the platform to raise awareness and educate TikTok's young audience on how they can become emergency service staff themselves. With staff shortages and retention an issue across the world, Kayla is finding an eager audience on TikTok. "A lot of people asked about getting into the profession – as an EMS



educator, this really motivated me! I didn't realise people wanted to talk about emergency services on TikTok. As I go to high schools and education centres to raise awareness of emergency services, I now have a good idea of the questions people want to know an answer to but might be too scared to ask," she says.

As TikTok grows beyond a passing trend and into a social media giant likely to stick around for a long time, so does the way it is used, benefitting emergency service accounts even more. For many of the 'Gen Z' generation – those born between the mid-to-late 1990s and the early 2010s – TikTok is now their new search engine. Younger generations prefer their content in video format rather than reading walls of text on websites. Whether it's a restaurant recommendation or ideas for holiday trips, TikTok is becoming an easy source of information and advice. There is no doubt that this extends to public safety. Typing in AED on TikTok's search option reveals countless videos, including tips from the emergency room on using an AED, how to use an AED on a drowning person, and how to perform CPR effectively. Under emergency services, videos of a day in the life of a firefighter and heroic rescues from burning buildings and people swept out to sea are available. The content is overwhelmingly positive, thanks in part to the work of the creators interviewed in this article.

As for the future of social media and emergency services, despite the varying locations, sectors, and

But aside from the fun, there is a genuine reason for establishing a TikTok presence. It's about breaking down barriers showing a face

experiences, Rune, Kaare Andre, Jason, and Kayla share an intense pride in their work and a genuine appreciation for the role of public safety. Direct access to the public has never been easier for emergency services, and their enthusiasm is infectious. Although unconventional, it may be viral songs, funny dance challenges, and new video trends that show the humans behind emergency services.

"It was an overwhelmingly positive experience, going viral. It really motivates me," Kayla says. "We need to follow trends and continue to be where the people are. The public is welcoming us to take a daily part in their lives through social media," notes Kaare Andre.

Jason sums it up perfectly: "Knowing I can reach a much broader and wider audience than I could alone personally gives me purpose in life – and having purpose keeps you going in your life and in your job." **C-RJ**

Author



AMY LEETE is the Communications and Press Manager for EENA, eena.org