

CD-ROM, 'Net Combined to Train Firefighters

By Erin Hottenstein
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Loveland - Imagine you're one of the volunteer firefighters in Drake, Red Feather Lakes or Cornish. You needed to learn some First Aid and have some training on house fires, grass fires and forest fires. You did that.

Then Sept. 11 hit. Now, you're wondering how long it will be before you need to know how to respond to terrorism or a chemical-weapons attack.

Fire Rescue World LLC of Loveland has been creating and selling firefighter and emergency-responder training courses for 17 years.

The company may now be in an ideal position to answer the call for more training, especially with the introduction this fall of combination CD-ROM and Internet courses.

Seventy percent of firefighters in the United States are volunteers, and there hasn't been much money available for training up until lately, said Jay Dokter, chief operating officer at Fire Rescue World LLC.

Even though the training budget often had been the first item cut, 32 states require 200 hours or more annually of training or refresher courses. The challenge has been how to deliver that training in an effective and cost-efficient way.

At first, Fire Rescue World developed video and textbook training. Then in 1995 the company started producing CD-ROMs. They focused on dealing with hazardous materials and how to save people if a plane crashed.

But some challenges remained. If a fire station had only one computer, it was hard to get everyone on it. Also, everyone had to be at a computer that the instructor could access to monitor progress and test scores.

However, Fire Rescue World knew it was onto something, because government studies showed an increase of 35 percent to 50 percent in students' knowledge retention, Dokter said. The video, audio, games and exercises helped students learn.

"It's more fun," he said. "It holds their interest."

Not only that, added Marketing Manager Krista Gilmer, but training time also decreased by 50 percent, because students could test out of what they had already mastered.

John Welsch used the CD-ROMs when he headed up training for hazardous-materials teams in Phoenix.

"They liked it," he said. "They liked the fact it was self-paced. The CD-ROMs allow you to stay in your comfort zone. It pushes you, but, at the same time, it doesn't smother you."

Welsch relocated a couple of hours north of Phoenix, and is now assistant chief at the Camp Verde Fire Department. Getting certified as a HAZMAT technician takes 200 training hours, he said. Using the CD-ROMs would cut by 40 hours the amount of time that firefighters would be out of service. He's trying to get the CD-ROMs not only for his local department, but also for a statewide pilot project.

While the CD-ROMs are a valuable tool, Fire Rescue World believes it has solved some problems with a combination CD-ROM and Internet course. Any student who has a computer with a CD-ROM and modem can use it. The data heavy course materials are contained on the CD-ROM, so they don't clog even the simplest modem. But the Internet connection allows the instructor to monitor progress from a different location, because course work and test scores are securely logged on the Internet.

The company launched its first combination course in October and has added three more, Gilmer said. The courses are sold to agencies and cost \$29 to \$189 per student.

"It's a paradigm shift for how to train," Dokter said. "Every agency has training officers, and they get out the video and text. This is different."

Because it is a new technology, sales started out slow, Gilmer said. "But once they see the depth and how complete it is, light bulbs go on," she said. "People are very excited about it."

"I'm pretty impressed with it," said Ken Farmer, director of distance learning with the North Carolina Community College System.

The courses are written according to national standards and would help the state certify firefighters and emergency responders, he said.

Farmer's office is field testing the new product. If successful and funded, it could be available at 58 community colleges in North Carolina sometime in 2002.

"It meets one of our needs - delivering education to people out in the field," he said. "The system is creative and has a lot of applications."