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Emergency WORLD™ Vice President Jay Dokter, CEO and founder Mark Sprenger and Sales Manager Doug Towne provide virtual training for emergency responders.

## Firehouse vet produces hot training materials

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By [Todd Neff](#)

If Mark Sprenger has his way, a lot of firefighting would be done on computer screens.

Not that streams of electrons can douse a real blaze. But many of the skills used to extinguish fires, handle hazardous materials spills, and even respond to terrorism come from knowledge packed into an emergency responder's memory far from the scene of an actual emergency.

Sprenger and the company he leads, Loveland's Emergency WORLD™, has been in the business of preparing emergency responders, primarily from fire departments but also including police departments and emergency medical technicians, since 1986. The company, with 35 employees has trained 5 million emergency responders working in 80,000 departments and agencies worldwide.

Much of this instruction has been delivered through videocassettes and textbooks. The company began offering certain courses on CD-ROM in 1995. But this year, Emergency WORLD has made the leap to the Internet, and it hopes to bring the emergency response community with it.

By the mid-1980s, Sprenger had been a firefighter in Fort Collins for a decade. He saw that most fire departments were located far from population centers, making it difficult to access required training for mandated certifications.

The 1984 Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal, India, where a methyl isocyanate gas leak killed some 3,800 and injured thousands more, had raised awareness of the first responder's need to understand hazardous materials (hazmat). He also recognized that often, knowledge at rural fire stations was, as he called it, "incestuous": "There is a loop of knowledge where older guys fed it to younger ones."

Sprenger and some Fort Collins firefighter colleagues founded what would become Emergency WORLD with the goal of bringing first-rate instruction from nationally renowned firefighting experts to the country's 30,000 fire departments, he said. In 1989, Sprenger and a number of colleagues left the department to develop and sell courses full time.

The company's offerings grew from firefighting strategy courses to infection control courses, to hazmat compliance courses, which have become central to the franchise.

Many of its courses fulfill Occupational Safety and Health Administration and National Fire Protection Association training required of first responders.

In 1995, the company began to develop hazmat training courseware to be delivered on CD-ROM. Emergency WORLD also created an aircraft rescue firefighter series for aircraft familiarization on 12 military and five civilian aircraft. These alerted firefighters to the location of things such as pressurized oxygen tanks and hydraulics.

This marked the first technological transition for the company. Emergency WORLD used focus groups and hundreds of hours of testing to come up with a look, feel and teaching approach now standard throughout its computer-based offerings. The look is "steel, clean — kind of a macho, industrial-strength image," said Jay Dokter, chief operating officer.

CD-ROMs loaded some software onto local hard drives that tracked a learner's progress and tallied results on quizzes and, at the end of the session, final exams with titles such as "Hazmania." The CD-ROMs use photos combined with text and embedded video to boost retention. Designed for firefighters who've spent more time tapping into fire hydrants than on keyboards, the interface is simple, with just a handful of big buttons.

Joanne Stone, Gunnison City Emergency Services coordinator, said her volunteer hazmat team uses Emergency WORLD's courses. "It's something we can review as we need to in our leisure time," she said. Don Fleck, a captain in the Salem, Ore., fire department and adjunct hazmat instructor at Chemeketa Community College in Salem, said the courses let him focus class time on hands-on exercises.

Its hazmat courses also have led the company's second technological transition. The move to the Internet combines CD-ROM-based training and Internet-based student progress tracking. It was, nonetheless, a major shift for what has been a video and multimedia production company.

In 1998, the company developed an Internet-based learning management system that tracked the progress of those taking CD-ROM-based training. It was a result of Sprenger's firehouse experiences. "I had 11 fire stations and three different shifts of guys," he said. "How would I know what was going on at Station Seven across town? There needed to be a way to track progress and accountability."

There was also a liability issue: Fire officials needed to centrally verify and document the completion of training courses.

Early this year, Emergency WORLD had embedded Internet-based tracking systems into hazmat and confined-space rescue courses as well as a new "Emergency Response to Terrorism" course.

Jim Harmon, assistant chief at the West Palm Beach Fire Department in Florida, said a central server stores all student information, so firefighters moving between stations can continue where they left off in the training and department leaders can track progress.

Sprenger is already looking ahead: "These are almost forbidden terms, but I believe there is still some incredible power in the concept of a portal," he said. Such a portal would use Emergency WORLD as a platform to send information on an incident to all emergency responders in Colorado. "That's where we're heading."