

Ride-Along Etiquette

By [Steve Prziborowski](#), Editorial Staff - Firehouse.Com Contributor



Posted: Fri, 12/05/2003 - 12:00am

Updated: Thu, 06/14/2007 - 10:36am

Getting the opportunity to ride along with a fire department, police department, or ambulance crew is an incredible privilege. You get the chance to gain an inside look at their internal operations as well as meet a great bunch of people that can help assist you in your pursuit of your dream career.

The impression you make when you participate in a ride along can help your chances or hurt your chances of getting a job with that agency. Many people do ride alongs for the fun and excitement of it, and don't have the desire to ever work with that agency

The easiest way arrange a ride along is to call the main administration number or find the government agency in the blue government pages in the phone book. If that doesn't work, then you can also go to their website. It should be noted that not every agency allows people to ride along on their field apparatus.

Once you find an agency that allows ride alongs, find out the parameters of their ride alongs. Some departments only allow you to be there for a certain time frame (daytime hours only). While other departments only allow you to do one ride along per year and some may have a dress code for you to abide by.

Many agencies do not allow ride alongs during the testing process, so if you want to do one, you better have prepared well in advance of the testing process. I guess they either don't want candidates to get an unfair advantage by doing one, or they don't want the crews to be burdened by having to have someone to baby sit.

As a ride along, you should always bear in mind that you are trying to earn the privilege of calling yourself a firefighter. When you become a probationary firefighter, you will have to be focusing all of your efforts on this while you are on duty. If this attitude is developed now, it will make your life easier throughout your career.

Now that you've been assigned to a unit to ride along with, here are some suggestions to make sure you get off on the right foot and leave them with a positive first impression:

Whenever you are personally asked to do a ride along with a crew, take them up on that offer. It is not uncommon to be visiting fire stations or meeting firefighters and have them extend an offer to you to come on down and do a ride along.

You are a guest in someone else's firehouse. You need to behave like a considerate guest - otherwise you will wear out your welcome very quickly!

Go on every response that you can. At 0300 hours, don't say "I'm tired" or "I've already been on that type of call." Once you're hired you can't be selective, so don't be selective now.

There is a camaraderie that exists when a company has been together awhile. Sometimes the bantering and joking gets rough. Get used to it! You'll have to earn your way into this group. Be careful and go slow or you'll create resentment.

Use discretion in your activities while in the firehouse. There is always more time to lift weights, lay in the recliner, play on the computer and talk on the phone. These actions describe your character to the other crew members.

Know your apparatus inventory. The chances are your company officer will use you as a gofer on your first runs. If you don't know where things are on the apparatus, you are worthless to the crew. Opening and closing every compartment on the emergency scene because you don't remember where something is stored is embarrassing and makes you look stupid!

Remember, the public is always watching you. Even though you probably have non-fire department related apparel on, you are still considered to be a

representative of that fire department (or other agency) - for the most part, the public doesn't know the difference.

Pay your station food fund before being asked. At the start of the shift, ask the crew how much your share will be for the day. They may not accept your money, but the offer was appropriate.

You should be the last person to sit down to eat, the last person to fill your plate, and the first person done eating. Always be the first person to start performing kitchen cleanup. Don't immediately jump up to do the dishes when you are done; many crews like to let their dinner settle and perform "team-bonding." Wait for a "cue" from the other firefighters to start cleaning up.

If you are not a great cook, don't volunteer to cook. Always have a few good meals that you can whip up with minimal prep time and minimal cost. Most firefighters want to keep lunch and dinner to \$10.00 or less per day. It is always better to have extra food than to run out! Don't plan on spending all day preparing for the night's meal unless you're a paid firefighter. If you're not cooking, volunteer to assist with dinner preparation and setting the table.

No matter what you are doing, keep a positive happy attitude while doing it. Remember, they don't have to have you there.

The phones are not for you. Stay away from them except when necessary. Most stations have an official business line and a second "private line" or "back line" that firefighters use for personal use. Don't answer it unless instructed to do so.

Be polite and respectful to everyone. It is a small world and you never know when and where you might interact with that person in your future.

Address all company officers and chief officers by rank. They earned it; you should respect it.

Assist the individuals that are on duty that day. Don't wait for them to ask you to assist them. If you see someone doing something, ask them if you can assist; especially if it is something you have never done or seen before.

You are at the fire station to learn; so do it! Listen, don't talk. I've heard lots of comments from firefighters about "know it all" ride alongs. Don't say "at the academy we did it this way," or "at the other station they do it this way." Remember, you are there to do it their way. Be flexible and adaptable, there are many right ways to do things. Remember, when in Rome, do as the Romans do.

Don't tell people what you know or what you can do. Let your actions speak for themselves.

Doing ride alongs with various fire departments was an eye opening experience for me because it really convinced me that this was the career I wanted to get into. Plus, it allowed me something to talk about when I was asked the question "how have you prepared yourself to become a firefighter."

Before I took the Captain's promotional exam at my department, I went up to our dispatch center and spent about four hours performing a "sit-along" with a couple of dispatchers. That really opened my eyes to how tough of a job the dispatchers have. I sincerely believe their job can be more stressful than our job.

Communications was an area I had a lot of questions in, so by doing that sit along, I was able to get those questions answered and also provide me with an understanding of what they do (which will allow me to better interact with them). It also gave me something to add to my answer when I was asked "how have I prepared myself for the

position of Captain." How many other candidates did what I did? It was something else that might have made me stand out.

I highly recommend to anyone wanting a career in the fire department, the police department, and or the EMS world, to go out and do some ride alongs with various agencies - big departments, small departments, etc. Expose yourself to a variety of agencies so that you can see what might work best for you. Follow the suggestions I have provided and you increase your chances of leaving the crew with a positive and lasting first impression!