

Effective Communication — The Crux of Field Day

The Bullitt Amateur Radio Society's tips on pooling club members' skills and experiences to operate efficiently on ARRL Field Day.

Buddy Sohl, KC4WQ

The Bullitt Amateur Radio Society, KY4KY, has had very successful ARRL Field Day efforts, primarily because we prepare, and we build on past successes and failures. Operating events held throughout the year are the bread and butter of our success. For each event, we set a personal or group goal. We look at whether there was anything lacking last year (phone station antennas, number of operators at the CW station, equipment needs, etc.) and how we can fix it for this year.

Transferable Member Skills

During the year, many of our members participate in different operating events, all involving skill sets that prove useful during Field Day.

Several members are Parks on the Air® (POTA®) enthusiasts who have developed the skill to handle multiple callers (pileups) and have learned to keep their exchange to just the facts. Another skill set the POTA ops have gained is how to use compromise antennas efficiently and effectively.

Our club has supported the Lewis and Clark Trail on the Air special event since its inception. This is another operation that requires handling the occasional mini-pileup and getting contacts in the log efficiently and correctly. All those call signs in your log are looking for this special event award. If we get it right, everyone is happy.

Several of our members are contesters. Their success is measured by contacts and multipliers, so accuracy is paramount.

A few of our members love chasing DX. They've developed the ability to figure out a pileup and find the optimal time to insert their call to get through.

These skills become shared assets as members work together toward common goals. And they all have one commonality — effective communication.

Effective Field Day Communication

Exchanging information quickly, efficiently, and correctly is the crux of Field Day. As a young air traffic controller, my instructor asked me why I talked so much. I came from a law enforcement background, and upon considering his point I realized that there was a lot of unnecessary verbiage in my communications. Those extra words add nothing and actually degrade your effort by introducing points of potential confusion, errors, delays, and unnecessary repeats. When you're providing emergency or public service communications, eliminating errors and minimizing airtime are two high-profile considerations.

When we train for Field Day, there is an emphasis on minimizing verbiage and getting the message through quickly, efficiently, and error-free. Our members familiarize themselves with the rules of the event and the type of exchange, and practice writing out the exchange and verbalizing it out loud several times before they ever key a transmitter. There's a focus on minimizing words, regardless of mode. CW and digital are fairly easy to corral, as so much of our exchange is accomplished with the aid of computers and logging software. Phone communication is where the largest issues arise. We're talkers by nature, and an occasional extra hello or thank you doesn't detract too



Tina Sohl, KJ4QFK, at the mic.

much from the score, but it's the beginning of a slippery slope.

This increases the amount of time to complete a contact and decreases the number of contacts the station is able to accommodate. Just a bit of simple math — if it takes 20 seconds to complete a two-way exchange using minimal verbiage, you can optimally make 180 contacts per hour. However, by introducing an extra 10 seconds of talking, you've reduced your efficiency to no more than 120 contacts per hour optimally (a 33% reduction). Over the 24-hour Field Day contest window, you've effectively removed the opportunity for 1,440 additional contacts. Another simplification is minimizing the number of exchanges. When you are CQing, answer the caller with their call sign only and the exchange. Don't waste time by verifying call signs or saying, "[call sign] go ahead." All of these introduce opportunities for errors and reduce efficiency. If you got the call sign wrong, they will let you know.

Keep It Simple

If your exchange is "2 Foxtrot Kentucky," then that is what should be conveyed. Don't add verbiage such as "please copy" or "2 Florida Bluegrass State KY" or repeat the exchange two or three times or out of sequence. Keep it simple and straightforward, and use standard phonetics. Use a speed of voice or CW that is effective for your audience — remember, Field Day has a lot of new and inexperienced operators.

Slow things down a bit. Speak clearly and succinctly. Send what you need to type or write in the log, in the order you would write it. Learn to use the microphone or key quickly, and know what you're going to say before you push the push-to-talk button. Certainly, there are those times when fills or repeats will be required. Those become more obvious as you gain



Dustin Rhodes, KM4UNY, hamming it up with the antennas.



Glenn Petri, KE4KY, at the CW station.

experience. But looking at the basics, transmit your information one time. If the receiving station doesn't get it, they will ask for a fill or repeat.

Listen effectively. In a contest, there will be a sequence to the exchange. Incorporate intelligent listening. You know what should be coming. Anticipate what you should be hearing, and verify it in your mind. Decode it and log it, then move on.

The Rewards of Efficiency

The bonus of efficient communication is more contacts in the log and more points. If you have a small pileup and spend too many words on each contact, some of those stations in the queue may well move on to other frequencies. While they may end up in your log later, they also may just be a lost opportunity. Maximize your opportunities for contacts by minimizing your words.

When you send just the needed information, nothing is misconstrued, errors are reduced or eliminated, and you are one giant step closer to producing that golden log and being an effective and efficient communicator. Everyone wins when the correct information gets through quickly and efficiently.

All photos provided by the author.

Buddy Sohl, KC4WQ, was licensed in 1979 as KA4JMX and upgraded to Amateur Extra in 1980. Primarily a CW operator and casual contester, he has operated from 25 different states over the years and most recently has been bitten by the POTA bug. He is a trustee for the Bullitt Amateur Radio Society, KY4KY, and coordinated the first Big Project school in Kentucky. A Life Member of ARRL and CWops, he is a retired air traffic controller. He can be reached at buddysohl@gmail.com.

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