

A Brief Survey of Best Practices for Users of EmComm and Public Service Nets

For this month, I'd like to cover some aspects of nets used in public service and emergency communications.

There are various types of nets used in amateur radio emergency and public service communications. Tactical nets generally carry informal message traffic. Tactical nets are often used when amateurs have responsibilities in addition to communications, and may directly observe and report or inquire about some aspect of an event or activity in furtherance of those responsibilities. This may be contrasted with formal traffic nets, which typically carry messages created by an agency official and addressed to another official or agency, and the amateurs involved act solely as communications conduits. Resource nets are used to manage staffing and other resources in conjunction with an event.

But all of these nets share the function of providing reliable, efficient communications. So here are some suggested best practices for net operation:

1. Listen before transmitting. Observe the operation of the net to determine its style of operation and to ensure that the net is ready to accept your call. If the net is restricted, for example, to emergency calls, do not call the net unless you have emergency traffic.
2. Follow instructions from Net Control. Handling a busy net is surprisingly challenging, and Net Control stations often divide traffic or activity by geography, traffic category, callsigns, or the like, to avoid congestion and organize the work. Unless your traffic is truly earthshattering, avoid disrupting the NCS workflow by interjecting traffic at the wrong time.
3. Accessing the net. Different nets have different access procedures. Access the net with your tactical callsign if one has been assigned. If no tactical callsign has been assigned, use your callsign, PHONETICALLY, or if you reasonably expect net control to recognize it, an abbreviation for your callsign, such as its suffix, again, PHONETICALLY. Some nets use break tags, which are a short one-word interjection, such as "Emergency", "Priority", or "Medical", to identify the type and priority of the access request. The break tag is typically given immediately before or after the tactical call. Example: "Rest Stop 1, Medical".

It is almost never useful to call net control by saying "Net Control" before delivering your tactical call.

4. At the end of your exchange with net control, sign with your full callsign. This lets Net Control, and everyone else, know that you believe the exchange is complete, and for exchanges that are shorter than 10 minutes long, satisfies legal requirements for identification. Obviously, if you are participating in a longer exchange, you will need to identify every 10 minutes. But it is not necessary to identify at the end of every transmission. Excessive identification takes time and can increase net congestion.
5. Do not leave the net without checking out. This is both a matter of courtesy and safety for your EmComm colleagues, who may put themselves in harm's way to investigate why you are not responding.
6. At the same time, we all need to exercise a lot of patience. When net control or another station is busy or fails to respond, we need to understand that they may be occupied with another task. This is particularly the case in tactical nets where operators may have duties in addition to communications.