PoliceOne Roundtable: Using simulators in law enforcement training (part two)

We connected with four of the top industry experts in the area of police simulators, and got their thoughts on the challenges, solutions, and future prospects for this continually-developing technology.

What mistakes do departments make during the testing and evaluation process?

**Chuck Deakins:** Agencies don't always commit sufficient resources to conduct proper research of the systems including manufacturer site visits, service availability, hardware replacement, and warranty programs. It is critical to compare "apples to apples" and think long-term on this one.

**James Peters:** A major mistake is when they don't do a complete testing and evaluation process. You wouldn't buy a new patrol vehicle, switch to a new handgun or purchase new body armor without ever putting your hands on the product. The same should apply to your department's simulator purchase.

**Robert McCue:** Often, we see bids and evaluations that place the highest emphasis on minor technology specifications and requirements that do not add to the overall training capability of the system. For instance, agencies will require a firm bid specification on a projector to be 3,000 lumens minimum and a contrast ratio of 10000:1, and failing to start with asking, "Can this system we are evaluating actually help us with relative to our training goals?"

**Jimmie McCoy:** When we see a system that claims it can train officers for firearms and driving, yet it is unable to complete the training by passing all the requirements, this is a huge mistake. We can solve, as well as the key things departments need to consider when buying simulators. Here we'll investigate mistakes that departments sometimes make during the testing and evaluation process, as well as some of our experts' suggested best practices for using training simulators.

Meet the Experts

**Chuck Deakins** is Public Safety Specialist for **FAAC**. Deakins is a retired officer from Santa Ana (Calif.) whose knowledge of simulator training strategies, tactics, and techniques, has led to his success in all applications of simulation instruction.

**James Peters** is the Law Enforcement Subject Matter Expert and Trainer for **VirTra Systems**. Peters is a retired officer from an Arizona Law Enforcement Agency. He had a distinguished career in Patrol, Street Crimes, SWAT, and holds numerous training certifications.

**Rob McCue** is General Manager for **IES Interactive Training**. McCue has been in the simulation and training industry since 1990. Prior to that, he served as a weapons and tactics instructor as an NCO with the U.S. Army's elite 1st Ranger Battalion.

**Jimmie McCoy** is Manager of Courseware Development for **Meggitt Training Systems**.

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The hardware specifications are important, but having a high-contrast projector system means very little if the system you get doesn’t include any realistic less-lethal options, or a detailed after-action review capability for trainee skill improvement. Lastly, avoid evaluating a simulator as a cure-all or a replacement for current training issues — a diminished supply of training ammo, for example. The systems are not designed to replace traditional forms of training like regular live-fire exercises, but simply as another tool that instructors can use to augment and increase training capabilities and output.

Jimmie McCoy: By not realizing that the simulator is a tool, it is not the training instructor. Too often departments look at the simulator as a game, and view the scenario on the screen — watch the movie — rather than realize the ability of the training officer to develop interactive lesson plans designed to challenge and test the officers’ decision making capabilities as well as their knowledge, skills and abilities.

Most participants will start a judgmental exercise with their weapon drawn regardless of the situation. This is a result of the “gaming mentality” and peer pressure that comes from co-workers looking on during the evaluation. During the evaluation, participants should emulate the same behavior that is displayed during an actual encounter.

What are some of your suggested best practices for using training simulators?

Chuck Deakins: Without a doubt, use adult-learning concepts with practical application exercises. Instructors need to stop talking and start training. Officers learn best when they participate in ‘hands-on’ training. Simulators are very hands-on.

James Peters: As a trainer, you should not believe a box exists. Research done by Force Science suggests that unless we train/test under stress, we are not preparing our officers to make better critical use of force decisions in dynamic situations.

Besides quality content, the other way to increase stress is through the use of a shoot-back device. Two main shoot-back devices exist: the shoot-back cannon and the Threat-Fire electronic impulse device. I believe the Threat-Fire electronic impulse device to be the best based on ease-of-use, less down time with cleanup, less potential for an accident, and no need for eye protection allowing trainees “to train like they play”.

Another thing departments have to remember is that life does not happen in a 60-degree field of view directly in front of you. Even on a live-fire square range, where you focus and shoot only downrange for safety reasons, we tell our trainees to scan their 360 after they complete a course of fire.

Having said that, if your department can only afford a single-screen simulator, additional “things” like props, people, and threats will be needed. A recent Force Science article suggested that unless props and other assets are used in conjunction with single screen simulators, officer’s heart rates never really increase enough to force a critical use-of-force decision in a stressful situation.

Robert McCue: Instructors always set the tone. If they take simulator training seriously, and have a well thought-out lesson plan supported by examples of required performance standards in the simulator, the trainees will take it seriously, too, and learn and retain more.

Also it’s important to have the trainees in full uniform when they are in the simulator when possible — duty belts, gloves, helmets, body armor — whatever they typically wear on standard duty or specialized missions.

Lastly, safety is important. Ensure that all department safety rules are adhered to before and during simulator training — live firearms are to be cleared and secured, and firearms safety and awareness rules are to be used with simulator weapons. This will ensure that the simulator training sessions are engaging and intense, and will result in better-trained and more-confident officers on the street.

Jimmie McCoy: A virtual marksmanship and judgmental firearms trainer is a tool, so to use it effectively training objectives need to be developed. Lesson plans that effectively integrate scenarios, weapons, and tactics must be developed.

And you have to have regular use of the system. The benefit of a marksmanship and judgmental trainer is access — so officers should use the system often to maintain fundamental marksmanship skills.

Finally, ensure your officers leave the simulator training session with a positive attitude, as they will carry this with them into the field.

About the author

Doug Wyllie is Editor in Chief of PoliceOne, responsible for setting the editorial direction of the website and managing the planned editorial features by our roster of expert writers. In addition to his editorial and managerial responsibilities, Doug has authored more than 650 feature articles and tactical tips on a wide range of topics and trends that affect the law enforcement community. Doug is a member of International Law Enforcement Educators and Trainers Association (ILEETA), and an Associate Member of the California Peace Officers’ Association. He is also a member of the Public Safety Writers Association, and is a two-time (2011 and 2012) Western Publishing Association “Maggie Award” Finalist in the category of Best Regularly Featured Digital Edition Column. Even in his “spare” time, he is active in his support for the law enforcement community, contributing his time and talents toward police-related charitable events as well as participating in force-on-force training, search-and-rescue training, and other scenario-based training designed to prepare cops for the fight they face every day on the street.

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