

Writing Your Own Policy Manual

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[Editor's note: Holden Kriss now is with Indian River County Gun Range, Indian River, Florida.]

Let me get started by thanking the folks that run the symposium for having me back again. This is something I really enjoy doing. As a range operator, like many of you, this is an opportunity for me to help people in our industry. If you get back home and realize you have more questions, please call me. I'm more than willing to talk with you. Also keep in mind that the National Association of Shooting Ranges has a lot of printed material available. I sit on their executive committee, and we're more than willing to help you in any way we can.

The most important thing affecting operations or procedures for your facility is the ability to hire staff who can learn, and are friendly and polite. That's basic. You need to start out with the right type of people, because they are going to be an extension of you.

Some of the most experienced range officers in the world may not make the best range staff. That's a critical factor. You've got to make sure that your staff has the ability to sell your facility, which is your product.

Let's move on to the dos and don'ts of writing policy manuals for your facilities. All of your brochures, operating hours, range rules and policy manuals should be integrated. Everything should relate the same story. You've got to say it over and over again.

Using the word "weapon" in shooting range literature is not really proper. I know there are many ex-military or law enforcement folks who use the word weapon in their descriptions, but it isn't the image I want to project for my facility. Weapon implies a tool whose purpose is to physically injure; firearm is the proper word for our purposes.

Start by writing your range safety rules. I'm going to hit highlights instead of discussing rule by rule. Keep it simple. The range rules should teach as much as possible. You need to explain to first-time or inexperienced shooters why your rules exist. Remember, you're going to get a lot of visitors who have never shot, and they want to see what the range is all about. Try to have rules and people available to help them. I have range officers who are very good with the public, and every chance I get, I use them as greeters. We service about 90,000 people a year at Markham Park. We make sure that visitors leave with a good impression. Half of our first-time patrons don't even bring their guns, so a first impression is important. Go out and visit other ranges. Years ago, we range managers and staff kept to ourselves, but I think you'll find a different attitude today. People really want you to help them, and you can help each other.

Write range firearm procedures. We use a bullpen area at my facility, where we make sure guns are unloaded and people have cardboard to tape their targets up. Then they're ready to

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be assigned to shooting positions. I highly recommend an inspection of firearms to make sure guns are unloaded and bores are unobstructed. I can't tell you how many people come to the facility with cotton or a piece of cleaning rod in their barrels.

Also write your range officer's responsibilities. Our manual is done in a narrative form, so that we're speaking with the staff. It's important that your staff feel a part of things. Of course, they have to watch for and address safety issues, and your materials should make these people comfortable with what they're doing. Our employees sign for and are issued procedures manuals, so we're sure they have it.

Include a simplified shooter briefing in your manual. Our briefing includes such topics as: put guns on the back bench in the ready area; no open toed shoes or tank tops, etc.; approved eye and hearing protection required (we've been specific enough to make sure they don't use empty shells, cigarette butts or cotton in their ears!).

Include firing line information. Any time a gun is moved from the rear bench, make sure the muzzle is up and pointed in a safe direction. Guns should be unloaded. Assign shooting positions. Let folks know what types of rifles or handguns are acceptable. For instance, we don't allow pistol grip shotguns at the skeet and trap range. Make sure folding stocks are out on the guns. A lot of these items are just common sense safety rules for you to bring back to your facilities. I don't care if you've been shooting for 50 years, there's always a chance that you could learn something.

We do allow fully automatic firearms shooting at Markham Park. We have a military club that shoots as a group before our normal hours of operation. We make sure that they have the original federal licensing stamps and all other paperwork with them. We don't let them shoot with the general public. We don't allow rapid fire which tears up your range and creates potentially unsafe situations.

Pay attention to details in your manual. Black powder arms should be kept half-cocked, uncapped and prime. People need to understand the different types of ammunition. Can a .38 shoot in a .357? Can a .380 shoot in a 9-millimeter? This is critical for your staff to know as well. Give people a chance to clear malfunctioning guns, but if a gun consistently poses a problem, it becomes a safety factor and needs to be pulled off the line. Mention eye relief for scope rifles, because if people aren't experienced, they are going to put the guns up to their faces and get cuts near their eyes.

We don't allow the holstered guns. Targets should be appropriate for the kind of shooting being done. No targets depicting humans are allowed. Junior shooters are required to have direct supervision from adults—very simple. Toy guns are not allowed. People bring their children out with toy guns that look realistic. Dress code is an important factor. If you're going to collect brass at the facility or let patrons pick it up, put something down in writing to cover that.

Range rules and regulations also need to be included. Treat every gun as if it were loaded. Point every gun in a safe direction. Keep your finger off the trigger. Keep the actions open. Keep the guns unloaded. This is simple, smart, direct information for the public. A lot of information will be repeated, and your regulations should be updated as you continually assess risk management factors.

Florida has a concealed weapons permit, so again, we have to make sure guns are unloaded before they come on the range. Markham Range is part of the parks and recreation system; we have birds and other animals on the range. We tell people (it's also in writing) not to shoot the birds or deer.

The policy manual includes information on handling guns and how to deal with inexperienced shooters. Make sure that all shooters are in shooting cages at the skeet and trap ranges or on the firing line before they load guns. Be clear about extra target costs—breakage is where you're going to make a profit or lose money with clay target shooting. You've got to make sure that people are comfortable and happy, but the excessive amount of targets some shooters use will cost you. I suggest that you limit shot size on your fields. Some ranges even limit dram loads. Mention squib loads and snap caps that allow shooters to dry fire.

Markham issues a special use ticket that's good for up to 10 rounds in 90 days, so we include a detailed policy on how to deal with these tickets. Believe it or not, you should put something in your procedures about parking or folks will park right next to the field.

Put everything in writing. Explain how you want customers to be treated by staff, and how to shut down and clean up the fields. Explain how to watch for safety issues. I emphasize that throughout Markham's manual, even where it's out of context, in case people only read every other page!

If your skeet and trap range closes early, be sure to note that, and let folks know that the last targets fly 45 minutes before that closing time. Skeet and trap shooters need to be told to stay on the fields when shooting; you don't want anyone shooting from the club house or the parking lot.

Develop a written emergency plan in case a customer or range officer gets hurt. Develop an incident report form, and document incidents at your range. If people bring in loaded firearms, we don't let them shoot that day. We *do* teach them a lesson in a very nice way, and we document the incident.

My favorite document is the patron questionnaire. You can use patron questionnaires to justify things that need to be done on or added to your range, and your patrons also may notice issues that you've missed. You also need to ask for feedback from your staff. Your best information comes directly from the people who use and work at your range.

[Editor's note: For a sample policy manual, contact Holden Kriss at (561) 567-8000 at Indian River County Gun Range, Indian River, Florida.]