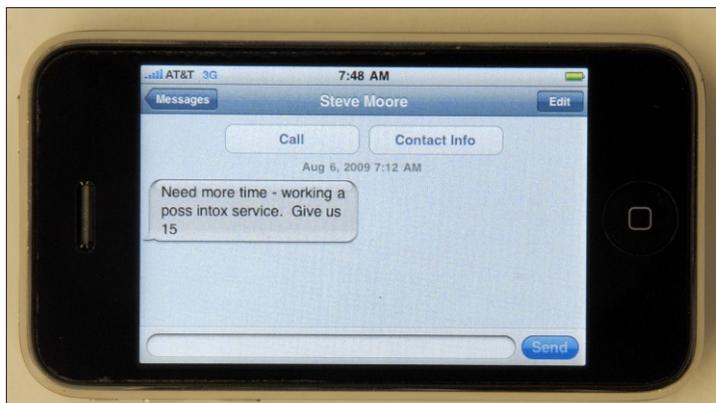


UNDERCOVER OPERATIONS: The Use of Text Messaging Could Enhance Officer Safety

Every officer knows the importance of communication during tactical situations. Undercover operations are no exception. The effective use of communication during undercover operations can not only save lives and enhance officer safety, but can allow backup personnel to remain alert and be provided with valuable updates as the investigation progresses. Obviously, undercover officers cannot rely on conventional means of communications while maintaining their undercover status; however they can utilize text messaging as an extremely effective communication tool during many undercover operations.



ENHANCING YOUR SAFETY: *Text messaging can update the status of undercover officers and share valuable information as to the progress of their investigation.*

Text messaging has become common place in many urban environments and in a majority of undercover operations, text messaging would not be considered out of place. The use of cellular phones inside crowded and noisy ABC licensed premises is problematic at best. Because of background noise, effective communication is limited and confidentiality is compromised. It would be extremely difficult to verbally update backup officers as to any investigative changes while sitting with potential violators. However, periodic text messaging to backup officers can be accomplished without compromising the investigation or alerting potential violators that they are under police surveillance. The LAPD vice personnel rely on text messaging during the majority of investigations conducted inside ABC licensed premises. Through our ongoing use of text messaging as an investigative tool, parameters have been developed that minimize the use and optimize the officer safety benefits.

Prior to entering the location cellular phone numbers must be exchanged and test calls made. Once inside the location, a wrong number inadvertently entered into the undercover officer's cellular phone will do little to enhance officer safety. Undercover officers must have an on-site contact point, typically the officer-in-charge (OIC) of the specific investigation. It is paramount that the officer managing the investigation be on-site to accurately assess the changing needs of the undercover officers and direct backup or arrest personnel if needed. The OIC should be the only contact point for the undercover officers and all investigative information or requests, need to be channeled through this individual.

Shortly after entering the location, undercover officers should use text messaging to alert backup officers regarding activity inside the location. Size and demeanor of crowd, number of employees, and potential problems which could hamper the investigation should be addressed. This information allows the OIC the opportunity to begin accessing the possible resources needed should a violation be obtained and arrests become necessary. Also, when working venues which are large in size, if not predetermined, undercover officers must identify a rally (Code Alpha) location inside the premise to be used in the event an unforeseen incident occurs during the operation. The Code Alpha location will provide backup officers with a starting point to locate undercover personnel in an emergency situation. Typically, backup personnel are deployed at various locations around the targeted premise; therefore the contact officer should **forward all text information received to all officers assigned to the operation.**

Periodic updates should be text messaged to the OIC in order to keep backup officers apprised of the status of the investigation. Most of the time undercover officers are given limitations regarding the length of time they will be inside a licensed premise. Updates and requests for additional time aid the OIC in managing the investigation. If more time or additional undercover resources are needed inside the location, the OIC is in the best position to facilitate this request.

These messages do not need to be lengthy. A simple “no change” or “need more time, working a possible drunk service” should be sufficient to continue with the investigation and alert backup officers to the undercover officer’s status. It is recommended that these updates occur at 30 minute intervals. Once again, **forward all text information received to all officers assigned to the operation.** Not only does this keep all personnel actively involved in the investigation, but it will relieve the stress caused by not knowing the status of undercover officers during prolonged investigations.

Point personnel (officers deployed in an observation position and assigned to monitor the exterior) should relay any pertinent activity noted outside the location to the officer-in-charge; who in turn will text message the involved undercover officers. This provides undercover officers with valuable information which could impact their investigation. A disturbance or fight in the parking lot could become an officer safety issue or cause the response of uniformed personnel which may affect the investigation.

Officers may use text messaging as a means of providing limited suspect description and location (i.e. the only female working behind the bar). However, should the arrest of potential violators become necessary, backup officers should not solely rely on information received via text messaging as probable cause to arrest involved suspect(s). This has led to confusion and the misidentification of potential suspects. Rather, officers should establish predetermined hand signals to assist in verifying a suspect’s identity prior to arrest. The same is true in regards to potential evidence collection.

As with radio transmissions, unless prearranged, all text messages received during an undercover operation should be acknowledged. Messages sent are useless unless they are received by the intended recipient. A simple “Roger”, will alert the sender that the text message was received. Common abbreviations will aid in reducing the length of text messaging, but should be avoided if not generally understood. Most cellular phones have a “quick text” option which allow the user to load frequently used messages and can greatly enhance the ease of text messaging by sending a pre-recorded messages (i.e. need more time, working an illegal solicitation).

Urgent or messages of an emergency nature should **never** be transmitted via text messaging. Undercover officers who require the immediate aid of backup personnel should employ predetermined methods of alerting cover officers as to their situation. Cellular phone calls can be made if practical or undercover officers can exit the location and visually alert the point officers as to their needs. Obviously, the emergency response by backup officers and methods of alerting backup personnel to problems inside any location must be thoroughly discussed by all involved personnel prior to working any location in an undercover capacity.

Undercover officers operating locations must remain cognizant that excessive text messaging may compromise their investigation. Likewise, predetermined excuses for the needed to be text messaging must be established. It is easier to recite a well thought-out reason for text messaging, than attempt to fabricate a weak excuse on the spot. Due to camera phone options, some locations prohibit the use of cellular phones. Many adult entertainment locations fall into this category and require an additional level of security when text messaging is attempted.

The key to the success of any undercover operation involves flexibility, investigative expertise and the ability to maintain control while providing the highest level of safety for the involved personnel. Text messaging by no means is well suited to all undercover operations, but used within the confines of specific operations, can be an extremely valuable tool.



ON-SITE SECURITY: *Point personnel must be deployed in a position to maintain a visual observation on the premise, relay pertinent information to backup units working the perimeter and be available for immediate response.*