

Local TV news remains vital for consumers, communities

Evolution is often a cruel process in which weak, underdeveloped species perish in the face of stronger, more adaptable ones. We saw it with the dodo. We're seeing it in the television news industry right now.

When I started my public relations career in New York City some 30 years ago, it wasn't unusual for a local news crew to show up at a media event with a producer, a cameraman, a sound man and a grip: four people to tell a 70-second local news story.

This was back when the news operations in New York and everywhere else relentlessly battled for the coveted ranking of number one in their markets. They had helicopters and expensive anchors; satellite trucks and top-of-the-line Sony camera gear. No expense was spared to find and report news that mattered.

Before he became a cable news fop, Geraldo Rivera was once a serious journalist at WABC-TV in New York where he won a Peabody Award exposing patient abuse at Willowbrook State School in the early 1970s. Such was the quality of local market television news.

In Chicago, the ABC affiliate had a reporter who did nothing but cover "media." The CBS affiliate there featured a guy who only reviewed restaurants. Sports staffs consisted of five reporters with a ten-minute segment every evening.

Golden age

Times were flush because advertisers had few options in those heady days. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the vast majority of Americans said they got their information from their local newscasts, so it was almost literally the only game in town for many national, regional and local advertisers.

"It certainly was the golden age for TV news and the folks working in it," says David Brunner, a former long-time news director. "Management hardly ever cut corners and salaries for talent were through the roof."

But like the aforementioned dodo bird who decided he really didn't need his wings, the future finally caught up with TV news rooms in the form of the Internet. In the wake of the dot-com boom of 1999-2000, consumers of information suddenly found they had thousands of new options. Today they have millions.

Adapt or die

The consequences have been stunning. Where once local market television news operations were lavished with fat budgets and ample time to tell their stories, we now see news directors trying to stretch every dollar as far as it will go. Even in the largest markets, camera operators act as reporters

and reporters act as camera operators. In Atlanta, several network affiliates pool news gathering resources, something unthinkable just 20 years ago.

Naturally, it's the lack of money that's pushing news directors to these unprecedented extremes. National advertisers no longer place spot ads on local air with the frequency they once did. In the same way

TV viewers have millions of other Internet options, so do advertisers.

"Now stations want talent to multi-task. Anchors must produce and shoot. Sports and weather departments have been cut back. They are asking folks to double their work load, but paying less than ever," says Brunner.

These days advertisers are a sorry parade of personal injury lawyers, chiropractors, trade schools and title pawn brokers hawking their services during local newscasts. It's all decidedly low budget despite the happy faces you see on the anchor desks.

Local connection

If you're a TV station general manager, you might wonder why you should present a local newscast at all. Wouldn't it be cheaper and easier to offer re-runs of "Hogan's Heroes" instead of producing a local newscast?

It might, but if you did, your local station would lose pretty much its only visible connection with your market. For all the problems facing TV news in the second decade of the 21st century, local market news programs and the anchors and reporters who staff them remain the station's vital link to the communities they serve.

"Community involvement is so important that we've created a community-driven program, 3 Plus You," notes Julie Beaty of WRCB-TV in Chattanooga, Tenn., a television news veteran and the show's cohost and producer. "Management has staffed our show with many of the longtime faces and personalities viewers have grown to know and trust. Having the community take part in the show ensures we're keeping that vital link open between broadcaster and viewer."

Force multiplier

For public relations professionals, TV news presents a very different medium than the one I encountered when I started KEF Media 25 years ago this month. It's a smaller audience, and older now. But — and this is important — TV news audiences are still very relevant and this is where the fate of the dodo and local TV news diverge.

TV newscasters may have been slow to adapt, but adapt they have by using the Internet to interact directly with their audiences, creating a conversation between newscaster and news consumer that didn't exist 25 years ago.

Station web sites today are loaded with news and feature content from a wide variety of sources. In fact, they actually deliver more news and information because there is more time and space available.

Herein resides the opportunity for PR professionals because these web sites serve as a force multiplier for your client's message. When your spokesperson or B-roll appears on a local newscast, the spokesperson or B-roll will also appear on the newscast's web site.

Given the limited resources at hand, any content that informs, educates or entertains will get a hearing in most newsrooms. The trick is (and has always been) to offer this content in ways the TV newscasters can make it relevant for viewers in Scranton or Sacramento. One size does not and never has fit all because news consumers in Scranton look and sound different than those in Sacramento. It takes more time to do it right, but the rewards are manifold when you develop and adapt your message for the intended audience.

Happily, local market television news continues to stave off extinction by adapting to forces — both evolutionary and revolutionary — at work in the mass communications field.

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