



Focus on the Format

Does your newscast fit your station's brand?

In television news, the format is key. Your format should reflect your target audience for the daypart. Producers should remember that station formats are designed for competition in your market, and your newscast has to deliver on long-term station strategy, including during breaking news.

Producers should always have a good sense of the key elements needed for a newscast in their market and in general. Most have their own checklist to ensure a clean newscast. Consider these items for your own "Producer's Checklist," to make sure you are delivering on the mission and feeding that daily viewer appetite.

Use the morning meeting. This is the place to debate news angles for the day so your reporters are packaging the newsworthy "story," not the "event."

Work the lead story. Design an "A" block lead that differentiates in format and content and immediately engages the viewer. Consider pre-producing a very visual cold open with natural sound or a quick cut live to a dramatic scene playing out at the moment.

Keep viewers interested past the lead. Build a format with a strong "B" block lead that works as a second lead. The B block should contain a unique, teasable and promotable story, or a clear, differentiated sidebar to one of the day's high-interest stories. This helps flow viewers, whether your market is metered or uses diaries.

Produce weather like news. The weather department should be a regular part of the daily meetings and should deliver a highly produced weather segment. The day's weather should have the feel of a story. The

segment should be forecast-driven and not a rehash of "today." All the graphics should be built to support and explain the weather story. The weather anchor should devote lots of time to the weekend forecast, since viewers look at that right after the next-day forecast.

Think about your anchor's role. The anchor is a major reason viewers watch, and he or she helps define your localism. Check to see if the anchor's



copy really prepares the viewer for the reporter angle coming up next, or is simply words filling airtime. You also may want the anchor to frame a story geographically with a map or animation explaining important background or where the story happened.

Prepare properly for live coverage. Live stories are still stories. Live, on-the-scene coverage is important to your viewers for immediacy and story ownership, but it still requires producing, storytelling and forethought. Start producing anticipated live coverage in the morning meeting, and continue through the day. Make sure your reporter demonstrates something other than the predictable stand-up in

front of a dark building. You have to collaborate with reporters to shape the storytelling. Don't forget to consider what the anchor can say in the toss to avoid redundancy.

Deliver a difference. Make sure your style and presentation are unique in your market. Look at the key or important stories in the newscast and make sure they are not cookie-cutter solutions, and that they set you apart from your competition. Look especially at stories you know your competition will cover, and brainstorm unique angles. Make one of your checks be whether your reporters are covering the real impact of a story or simply packaging the event.

Showcase that difference. Today's technology lets producers do many things with video and graphic elements to explain the news more efficiently. Use those video components and pre-production techniques to let your viewers know you have something special on a defining story.

One producer recently told me she would spend an hour if it would create a "moment" for even a 20-second story.

Look for the best video. Emphasize to your staff the importance of logging the best video on average days—and especially on big story days. Use the best video for cold opens, bump-backs from commercials, weather leads or even in photo essay form. For example, all the network feeds had video composites of hurricanes. Another example would be using the dramatic still pictures from military action in Iraq.

Include your promotions department. As the stories start coming in, use the promotions manager and/or producer as a sounding board for tease material and promotable angles. Your distinctive coverage must be the tease or the impact, not the event itself.—Tom Dolan is president of Dolan Media Management in Frederick, MD. You can reach him at dolan@smartrecruit.com.