

TELEVISION NEWS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Despite the explosive growth of digital media in recent years, local television is still America's most popular news medium.¹ In addition, audiences for cable newscasts have remained steady in the last two years, and viewership for Spanish-language television is growing—Univision is the fifth largest broadcast network in the nation.²

What's more, the audiences for network, cable, and local news websites are increasing.³ To capitalize on growing online traffic and broaden their reach, TV news stations are exploring a variety of other web-based strategies, including partnerships with newspaper and video websites, user-generated video, and anchor and reporter blogs.

Even in the digital age, television news can be an important part of your media strategy. This issue of *The Feed* focuses on why and how to get your story told on TV news.

With a television news story, you can:

- Transport the viewer. A great broadcast storyteller brings the story to life, making you feel like you know the person being interviewed or were at the location being showcased.⁴
- Tell a story visually. Words can't substitute for seeing a clear-cut forest, polluted river or smoggy sky. And there is no better way to project the value of a special place and encourage its protection than by taking your audience there with images and sound.

- Frame an issue with images. Even the shortest TV story can link specific imagery with an issue. Though it occurred many years ago, viewers still recall the images of wildlife drenched in oil that initially fueled public outrage during the Exxon Valdez disaster. Deciding which image to link with your issue and then promoting that image in the media is a key element of strategic communications.
- Develop a multimedia story that works across platforms. Today, content from TV newscasts is used for TV websites; also, newspapers and other media outlets feature video and audio clips on their websites. When pitching, let television reporters know that you have graphics that can enhance a story in a variety of platforms.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD TV NEWS STORY?

Timeliness, immediacy, and compelling characters and visuals determine whether a story makes it to the air.

TV news stories come in many shapes and sizes, from interview segments to 15-second voice-overs that serve as visual headlines. In this issue of *The Feed*, we focus on newscast stories that feature a reporter track, interview “sound bites,” and visuals. These stories typically focus on one key concept and are on average 70 seconds long, with sound bites that last 10 to 15 seconds or less.

Visuals and B-roll

Images for TV news stories come from video shot by TV photographers, video supplied by other stations, or video supplied by third parties. How quickly and easily reporters can get images is a key factor in determining whether a story is covered.⁵

Although television reporters and photographers generally prefer shooting their own video, you can facilitate coverage by providing video (B-roll) that newsroom crews can’t easily film on short notice, such as remote wildlife or polluted sites. B-roll provides broadcasters with images they can edit into a TV segment with a reporter narration track.

Many stations still use Beta SP format, but DVD and mini-DV are also acceptable for B-roll. If possible, check with stations about their B-roll format preferences by calling the assignment desk.

In the case of truly unusual or breaking news images, almost any quality will run on the air, even cell-phone images.⁶ But most of the time you should strive to make your B-roll as high quality as possible to increase the likelihood that it will be aired.

Here are some tips for producing effective B-roll packages:

- Hire a professional photographer to shoot and edit your B-roll when possible. This will increase the chance of having your images—and story—air. The cost of hiring a



photographer varies from market to market, ranging from \$1,000 to \$3,500 per day. You can control costs by hiring someone to shoot DV rather than Beta.

- Include shots that are wide, well lit and at least 10 seconds long. Limit the use of pans and zooms.
- Include a natural audio track. The sounds of a babbling stream or a working oil rig help bring a TV news story to life. Avoid sending B-roll with a music track, narration or text.
- Label the video and its origin, preferably through slates (at the beginning or end of footage). It also helps to include a “log” sheet with time code references to help editors and reporters know what is on the tape, how long it is, and how to locate the images they need.

THE TV NEWSROOM

When pitching a story idea, explain to the assignment desk why it is newsworthy and how to get images that illustrate the story.

Most stations assign the stories of the day at a morning meeting involving assignment editors, producers and sometimes, the news director. Ideally, you should pitch a reporter *and* the assignment desk. (Be sure to let each of them know who you are pitching.) Reporters are encouraged to develop their own ideas for stories, and can be effective messengers in editorial meetings, whereas the assignment editor pours through dozens of pitches every day.

For an effective TV pitch, you should:

- Send story ideas by e-mail and follow with one phone call (not multiple calls). Avoid calling when the station is airing a live newscast, as the newsroom will have less time to pay attention to your pitch. Media advisories should be sent two days in advance of the story and press releases the day of. For breaking news, contact the assignment desk anytime.
- Remember that compelling characters carry the greatest currency in the world of TV. Provide contact information for relevant interview subjects to the reporters.
- Consider having a visual backdrop for a press conference, from a banner that repeats your message to a location that supports your story. If indoors, provide a well-lit area for interviews. For outdoor events, consider weather conditions, sound and logistics. In most markets, if reporters have to travel a long way they may not cover your story.
- Think about opportunities for a reporter to broadcast live from the scene. If you have an interesting backdrop for live shots, be sure to include that in your pitch.
- Offer ways to get reporters out in the field. Giving a reporter a unique visual opportunity is a great way to promote interest in a story and make the final product more compelling.

Who's who in the TV newsroom:

- ***Reporter:*** Goes on story assignments, puts the story together for the editor and suggests story ideas. Most TV reporters these days are general assignment—they don't have a beat. Pitch reporters who you know might be interested in your story idea.
- ***Assignment Editor:*** Keeps track of what's going on in the newsroom's coverage area, maintains an outlook of the stories that will be covered during the day and future coverage. Pitch to assignment editors.
- ***Producer:*** News producers have both editorial and production responsibilities. They determine story placement in the newscast as well as graphics, and sometimes write stories. Each show has a primary producer.
- ***Executive Producer:*** Oversees all producers and is responsible for content on all shows. Again, you rarely pitch an executive producer directly.
- ***News Director:*** The senior person in a newsroom. At smaller stations, news directors may take an active role in story selection and show production. In bigger stations, a news director has mainly a middle management job overseeing department resources, long-term trends and the newscasts' look and feel.

ONLINE OPPORTUNITIES

Repurposing your B-roll or story line for other platforms can increase traction and audience.

Television News Websites

Television websites vary widely. Some are designed as marketing tools, while others are 24/7 news sites. Many TV news websites provide an opportunity for in-depth analysis, repurposing of on-air content and immediate airing of breaking news. These websites get most of their traffic between newscasts.

When pitching a television news website, first check out the website to inform your pitch—each website is slightly different. For example, CBS.com covers stories of interest to nationwide audiences. If the story doesn't rise to the national level, it's unlikely they'll cover it.⁷

You can email story ideas to the Web Producer or Senior Producer. Send them short and to-the-point story ideas, including relevant images and links instead of press releases.⁸

YouTube

Some television news outlets post many of their stories on video-sharing websites such as YouTube. While it's hard to predict which stories will “rise to the top” and attract viewers, it's often worth it to use YouTube to promote or distribute your video story. Uploading a video to YouTube is easy and takes only a few minutes. Follow instructions at www.youtube.com.

Keep in mind that because of copyright laws, you should not upload a video you didn't produce (such as on-air content filmed by a TV crew).

Blogs

Many television reporters are now blogging—you can contact them by email or by posting a comment at their blog site. Send a brief and semi-personal message with links to more information. If possible, include relevant images.

TO GO

When developing television news stories for broadcast and/or online media, remember:

1. Tell the story with pictures. Visuals can be used for many platforms and may include video, photographs, maps, graphs or charts.
2. Find compelling characters, places and sound—these are the elements that make a story come to life. Natural sound is often the most overlooked part of TV storytelling.
3. Include conversational language, not techno-speak. Use facts and figures sparingly—only to support the story's central theme. Emotion or personal experience trumps process and context.
4. Hire pros. Often it's worth the investment to work with photographers, video producers and others to get compelling footage and images.
5. Think multi-platform from the get-go. A news story airing on broadcast TV may be just the first step. Repurposing your B-roll, sources or story lines for other media may be a way to gain more traction and increase viewership.
6. Research the outlets, including their reporters and websites. Learn as much as you can about your media targets, especially in this changing media landscape.

RESOURCES

Tracking the Story

If you are unable to obtain a copy of a broadcast story on your own, news monitoring service companies such as VMS and Cision can track and record broadcast segments aired in U.S. markets. Digital files or DVD copies of each broadcast segment cost \$110 to \$170.

Stock footage libraries

Some are commercial, some free.

http://www.buyoutfootage.com/pages/col_environedu.html

<http://naturestockshots.com/http://www.naturelibrary.com/>

Literature

Advancing the Story: Broadcast Journalism in a Multimedia World, Debora Halpern Wenger and Deborah Potter, CQ Press, 2008.

More Terms to Know

Satellite Feeds: A satellite feed is video or live shot transmitted by satellite signal that TV stations can “pick up” if first notified about the time and coordinates of a feed. The interest of TV stations in a satellite feed depends on the news it illustrates. Production companies such as MultiVu charge about \$1,200 for a 15-minute block of satellite time.

Video News Release: VNR is a pre-packaged story with sound bites and B-roll. VNRs often have credibility problems and cost far more than B-roll and are generally not worth the money since TV stations prefer images and sound they can use to put together their own stories.⁹

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ABOUT NCI

Resource Media’s New Communications Initiative (NCI) is a program designed to increase and expand the understanding and application of new communications trends and technologies. NCI provides research and resources to help you and others in our broad community stay ahead of the curve.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, [Key News Audiences Now Blend Online and Traditional Sources](#), August 17, 2008

² Ibid.

³ Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, *Creative Destruction: An Exploratory Look at News on the Internet*, pg 8, August 2007

⁴ Interview with Deborah Potter, co-author of *Advancing the Story, Broadcast Journalism in a Multimedia World*, August 2008

⁵ Interview with Photographer Ken Jones, KING 5 TV Seattle, May 21, 2008

⁶ Interview with Photographer Ken Jones, and Assignment Editor Ed White, KING 5 TV Seattle, May 2008

⁷ Interview with Mike Wuebben, Senior Producer, CBS.com, May 2008

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Interview with Assignment Editor Ed White, KING 5 TV Seattle, May 2008