Taking News & Talk to new heights

Susan Whiting
Her new, expanded role at The Nielsen Company

Paul Karpowicz
One on One with Meredith’s President & TVB Chairman

Media Markets & Money
Selling your towers & leasing them back
The next generation of news branding

For a lot of years local TV news has stayed away from more contemporary advertising tactics and stuck with tried and true creative campaigns born in the 80s and 90s. But you can’t build a strong brand unless your customers have a perception that your product is different from the other guys.

Citizen Journalism: Everything old is news again...

As many news staffs at radio stations have been cut to the bone, stations are increasingly relying on “Citizen Journalism.” Although that’s a fancy new name for it, Citizen Journalism has been around since the early days of News/Talk radio. Broadcasting has historically been interactive, with extensive use of the “eyewitness report.” Whenever there’s a major local or national event, say, an earthquake, hurricane, or car accident (think “traffic spotters”) news and talk radio, have always utilized phone lines to allow audience members experiencing or witnessing the events to participate.

You may remember the Zapruder film. On the day President Kennedy was shot, a bystander with a movie camera captured the tragedy for the nation to witness. What has changed is that with new technology readily available and affordable, more “citizen journalists” are walking around with cameras and phones, that are capable of sound or video recording.

Right now radio and TV stations are falling all over themselves to be first to get citizen journalist’s raw audio and video footage onto their airwaves and websites.

And research shows that listeners and viewers are flocking to those websites to get “the rest of the story...” or “see” what they’re hearing on the radio. There is also a not-so-secret “secret” about footage that’s being posted to station’s websites. Some of the best of it is coming not from citizen journalists, but from the station’s own staffs, who may not have carried cameras or recorders in the past. The audience doesn’t care who took the footage, they care that it helps tell the story.

From the Virginia Tech shootings to May’s midwestern tornados, from soldiers’ blogs to battlefield diaries, news and talk radio have come to expect and rely on genuine contributions from members of their audience to help cover events, replacing or augmenting the staff they once sent to cover these events and give them context and perspective. So far we’ve only been burned a few times, but it’s bound to happen again and in a huge wave.

When events of the day affect the lives, well being or safety of the audience, that’s when you not only need the news, you need news that is trustworthy. You have a chance to serve your public by broadcasting credible information. If done right, this is an opportunity for your news or talk radio station to grow its base by attracting new audiences to your format - people who may come to check on the big event and then perhaps stick around.

Many listeners regard the news as an insurance policy. They listen to make sure the world is safe. But what about an insurance policy for your news?

What is to stop the station from broadcasting audio or video that’s been concocted on someone’s home computer editing station? How are we to know whether what we are seeing is real? As always, it will come down to your people.

Your people, though you may have fewer of them, will have to become more expert editors, fact checkers, skeptics, and as always, powerful storytellers.

Your producing, programming and on air team will be more important than ever in giving the stories you cover, context and meaning. Raw video is just that—it usually tells only part of the story. The background, the story’s possible implications, are all provided by your station.

Your station’s reputation is what you have to offer “citizen journalists.” Your call letters and credibility are the reason they want their photos and sound posted at your website and your airwaves, as opposed to simply putting them on their blogs or You Tube.

There is a benefit to both sides. Without your News and Talk personalities, it’s just pictures and sound. As anyone who has ever conducted an interview or taken a call on the air can tell you not everyone with a story to tell is a good storyteller. Your storytellers who can present the facts in a riveting way, will be gold to you in the age of new technology.

The trick to it all will be hiring right, and seeking out the best that citizen journalists can offer you. You don’t have to spend a lot of money to do it. ABCnews.com executive, Bernard Gershon offers this advice in “Creating Powerful Radio.”:

“Look for three primary qualities: Intelligence; Desire and Sense of Humor. Intelligence means the ability to solve problems, to complete complex tasks with resourcefulness initiative and resolve. This is what it takes to use citizen journalism responsibility. You want someone in the editor’s chair who can take that raw footage or audio and use it to tell a truthful story that will touch your audience.”

“Look for job candidates who have traveled, and have taken an eclectic mix of courses in college. I hold nothing against history or economics majors as long as they have the ability to communicate.” Again Gershon is stressing the importance of an interest in the whole world, not just a small slice of it. Using Gershon’s criteria, you might find that one of your citizen journalists could become your next great hire. “You’re not looking for a wise guy or a standup comic. But you are looking for someone who can roll with the punches, take criticism and still take his or her job seriously.”

It’s easy to know what to cover when there’s a big story breaking. Citizen journalists can work hand in hand with your staff to generate talkable topics or human interest stories on a slow news day. If someone has filed great audio or video for you from the street, keep their contact information and invite them back if you think they can add something to your product. With all the talk about citizen journalists as the future of the industry, Creating Powerful Radio in the age of citizen journalism will depend at the end of the day on something as old as communication itself: tell the truth, make it matter and never be boring.

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