**Local TV News Working at Getting Better, More Innovative**

**by Bob Papper**

The latest RTDNA/Hofstra University Survey found that almost two-thirds (62.6%) of local TV news directors say they have done something in the past year that had significantly improved their journalism. Generally, the bigger the market and the bigger the newsroom, the more likely that the station has done something to make themselves better. Percentages were highest in the South and West.

Almost 300 news directors answered this new question, and I broke down their answers into five categories:

First came content at 42.5% of the responses. Many news directors just talked about getting better, covering more important issues. Many (about a third) noted a new emphasis on enterprise reporting and an increased focus on investigative work (about a quarter). Some of the Tegna news directors noted the company’s Verify project … to counteract attacks on “fake news.” In their own words:

* Better storytelling
* Changed the way we produce content
* Coordinated other stations in our group for a statewide newscast
* Created "spider" meetings that develop ways to dig deeper into stories on all platforms
* Defined beat structure for reporters, improved standards
* Focused more on original reporting
* Focused on accountability journalism
* Focused on issue-oriented news with much less attention paid to low-hanging fruit
* Focused on storytelling versus data dump … measure our diversity representation in newscasts
* Long form interviews with local leaders to discuss substantive issues
* More in-depth coverage of big topics
* More in-depth, enterprise pieces
* Produced regular political town halls, more extensive in depth issue coverage and special event live newscasts for July 4, eclipse and presidential visits … we plan on launching ALL LIVE newscast and investigative unit in 2018
* Refocused on local, original content by using a beat system
* Stopped covering commodity crap people don't care about and focus on enterprise, shareable content
* We run stories that affect the lives of our viewers … and have cut back on general crime reporting

Next, at 22.8%, came training and workshops. In their own words:

* Al Tompkins from Poynter came to speak with our staff and conduct 2 days of training
* Digital engagement training/MMJ storytelling training
* Ethics review with staff
* Had internal production seminar, work on storytelling
* Invested in more continuing education for reporters
* Increased critiques, watching stories from other markets, increased expectations
* More coaching sessions, taught new hires how to do long-form stories, invested in training
* More one on one meetings, Poynter training, guest speakers
* Regular legal seminars, establishing best practices that ensure we are properly vetting stories and facts that we get alerted to via social media
* Scheduled regular, monthly training workshops for staff
* Training boot camps on the weekends for staff
* Training on making an emotional connection with viewers
* Training. IRE. Poynter. MMJ. Storytelling. Steadicam

Next came staffing. Some just said more, some said added digital staff, but over half said they added investigative reporters or producers or added a complete investigative team. In their own words:

* Add producer and reporter to State House team
* We hired a new Investigative Reporter with deep roots in the community who has elevated our investigative journalism
* Created an enterprise content team
* Added an executive producer to handle our digital/right now content
* Expanded our digital team and grown our MMJ staff

Right behind that. At 12.6%, came management and oversight issues. Almost half of the responses involved changes in hiring. In their own words:

* Fired two people who weren't Capital "J" journalists
* Hired a news director with vision, innovation and discipline
* Hiring more staff with journalism backgrounds instead of TV production backgrounds
* Implement more systems in daily operations, more discussion during editorial meetings, more experienced leaders in the newsroom
* Implemented new editorial guidelines and added an executive producer to the staff
* In recent years, we've added several specialty reporters (3 state government reporters, 1 education reporter, and 1 enterprise MMJ) … we're now going to add an Enterprise Editor position
* Increased experience level of new hires … focus on exclusive and enterprise content with local community focus … working to provide context to all stories
* Mandatory original story ideas from reporters daily

At 9% came technical issues – mostly buying and using drones, but one mentioned buying and equipping a boat. Also studio and workflow technical issues.

**News innovation**

Another new, related question: What’s the most innovative thing your newsroom started doing this year?

There were more than 200 answers to the question, and I broke down the answers into four broad (and sometimes overlapping) areas:

First came content-related answers at 44.9%. Some referred to programs, some reference program and content distribution, coverage issues and simply more. Just over a third of the responses included references to live streaming and/or Facebook Live. In their own words:

* Added special segments to each night's newscast
* Alternatively formatted prime time news program
* An aggressive "beat" system that involves all newsroom employees which increased our local content by more the 100 percent
* Assigning digital producers to reporters on a daily basis
* Became the market leader in viewer submissions of videos and photos
* Breaking News, 137 hours straight of Harvey coverage
* Broadening reach on digital/social platforms
* Continued new digital beat journalists/focus on touching new audiences in new places
* Digital first approach, more Facebook Live, Twitter, Instagram, etc.
* Dominating social media
* Facebook Live during severe weather/breaking news ... HUGE numbers
* Facebook Live from local sporting events
* Facebook Live hurricane reports
* Facebook Live with closed captioning
* Facebook Newscasts
* Instituting context and perspective producers
* Lifestyle website
* Live daily Facebook Live sponsored show
* Mini political segments that start on TV and continue on Facebook as the news ends
* More social media integration and streaming
* Multiple series that have digital-only components and Facebook Live components
* News documentaries
* The 5 Things You Need to Know and the 5 Things You will be talking about today
* Using contributing bloggers to add hyperlocal content to our website
* We dramatically reformatted our morning news and 11 pm newscast
* We launched a community wide anti-bullying initiative with content, PSAs and community engagement efforts on all platforms
* We no longer lead with crime unless it is a significant event … we exclude crime from the first 5 minutes of each show
* We went back to basics ... better storytelling and more investigative work

Not far behind, at 37.4%, came technical and production issues: 360 storytelling, new graphics packages, new sets, new newsrooms, OTT. Nearly half of the mentions included drones and how they were being used. In their own words:

* All new stand-up set with all LED lighting technology
* Brand spanking new newsroom, January 2017, with new newsroom shots
* Live drone coverage of news, weather and traffic every morning
* OTT app
* OTT newscast
* OTT, programming specifically for Facebook
* OTT, Roku, Amazon Echo
* Use of drone for day-turn stories and live on location shows sets us apart from other guys
* Use of drones - we now have 3 drones and 9 licensed operators
* Used our phone to do a live newscast
* We added software that allows us to insert a mapping grid and other features over our helicopter video
* We are developing digital content specifically for our OTT channels and producing long-form digital shows for digital/social/OTT platforms

At 10.7% came management and structural newsroom issues. In their own words:

* Changed job duties/roles to be platform agnostic
* Cross training everyone for every position to improve cooperation and understanding
* Restructured newsroom, putting a "digital guy" in charge of content, running the daily editorial meeting, planning both digital and TV coverage with emphasis on digital
* Started a program to develop news producers
* Using an app to recruit stringers for breaking news coverage

At 7% came software and apps, including Banjo, Burst, YouTube, Snapchat, Twitter, and Trello.

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**About the Survey**

The RTDNA/Hofstra University Survey was conducted in the fourth quarter of 2017 among all 1,683 operating, non-satellite television stations and a random sample of 3,542 radio stations. Valid responses came from 1,333 television stations (79.2%) and 415 radio news directors and general managers representing 1,110 radio stations. Some data sets (e.g. the number of TV stations originating local news, getting it from others and women TV news directors) are based on a complete census and are not projected from a smaller sample.