**Local TV News and News Consultants**

**by Bob Papper**

Periodically, I get asked about news consultants, and so, for the first time, the RTDNA/Hofstra University Survey collected data on whether stations employ consultants and, if so, how they use them.

A slim majority of stations do *not* employ news consultants at all; just over a third said yes, and the rest said they employ them for specific projects only.

**Does the station employ a news consultant?**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Yes, employ a consultant | No, do not employ a consultant | For specific projects only |
| All TV | 37.3% | 50.8% | 11.9% |
| Market size |  |  |  |
| 1 – 25 | 41.9 | 39.5 | 18.6 |
| 26 – 50 | 51.2 | 27.9 | 20.9 |
| 51 – 100 | 44.2 | 50 | 5.8 |
| 101 – 150 | 33.8 | 52.7 | 13.5 |
| 151+ | 20 | 72.3 | 7.7 |
| Staff size |  |  |  |
| 51+ | 50.7 | 35.6 | 13.7 |
| 31 – 50 | 45.8 | 43.1 | 11.1 |
| 21 – 30 | 28.8 | 62.7 | 8.5 |
| 11 – 20 | 8.1 | 81.1 | 10.8 |
| 1 – 10 | 11.5 | 80.8 | 7.7 |

It’s not an absolute relationship, but, generally, the bigger the newsroom and the bigger the market, the more likely that a station employs a news consultant. Note that the number peaked at barely a majority (51.2%) for markets 26 to 50. ABC, CBS and NBC affiliates in our survey were all around 40% yes, 46% no and the rest special projects only. Fox affiliates were 17% yes, 75% no and 8% project only. Other commercial stations were nearly as low as Fox affiliates. Stations in the West and Northeast were more likely to use consultants than stations in the Midwest and South.

Most often, consultants work with talent, conduct research and work with the news director. Then it’s working with producers, the general manager and marketing/promotion. Well down, suggests/supplies sweeps plans, structures newscasts or works more with digital than on air.

**What does your news consultant do – overall and by market size?**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Overall TV | DMA  1-25 | DMA  26-50 | DMA  51-100 | DMA  101-150 | DMA 151+ |
| Conducts audience research | 73.5% | 73.1 | 64.5 | 83.7 | 79.4 | 52.9 |
| Works with talent | 74.8 | 53.8 | 83.9 | 81.4 | 70.6 | 82.4 |
| Consults with news director on news | 69.5 | 73.1 | 51.6 | 67.4 | 79.4 | 82.4 |
| Works with producers | 55.6 | 57.7 | 48.4 | 62.8 | 55.9 | 47.1 |
| Consults with general manager on news | 49.7 | 53.8 | 22.6 | 58.1 | 55.9 | 58.8 |
| Works with marketing/promotion | 48.3 | 38.5 | 38.7 | 65.1 | 52.9 | 29.4 |
| Suggests/supplies sweeps series | 23.2 | 26.9 | 9.7 | 34.9 | 17.6 | 23.5 |
| Determines how newscasts are structured | 12.6 | 11.5 | 0 | 9.3 | 26.5 | 17.6 |
| Helps with digital more than on air | 5.3 | 11.5 | 6.5 | 2.3 | 5.9 | 0 |
| Other | 7.3 | 7.7 | 3.2 | 9.3 | 5.9 | 11.8 |

**What does the consultant do – by staff size?**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 51+ staff size | 31 – 50 staff size | 21 – 30 staff size | 11 – 20 staff size | 1 – 10 staff size |
| Conducts audience research | 74.5 | 80.5 | 54.5 | 66.7 | 40 |
| Works with talent | 78.7 | 73.2 | 86.4 | 50 | 60 |
| Consults with news director on news | 68.1 | 68.3 | 77.3 | 50 | 80 |
| Works with producers | 55.3 | 65.9 | 54.5 | 33.3 | 20 |
| Consults with general manager on news | 42.6 | 56.1 | 40.9 | 33.3 | 40 |
| Works with marketing/promotion | 53.2 | 53.7 | 36.4 | 33.3 | 40 |
| Suggests/supplies sweeps series | 19.1 | 29.3 | 18.2 | 0 | 20 |
| Determines how newscasts are structured | 8.5 | 9.8 | 22.7 | 16.7 | 20 |
| Helps with digital more than on air | 6.4 | 0 | 4.5 | 0 | 20 |
| Other | 4.3 | 4.9 | 9.1 | 0 | 40 |

The numbers speak for themselves, but, honestly, I simply don’t see any consistent patterns that can be attributed to market size or staff size … or network affiliation or geography. The system appears more individual than that, with each station or, perhaps, station group determining what they want from a consultant – if they use one at all.

Some news directors said they don’t work with a consultant because they work with someone at corporate who serves that function. Some said they do work with a consultant – someone at corporate. Those probably balance out.

There were relatively few answers on “other.” Half said they work with a corporate person on some of these things. A few said continuing education. A couple said research (but apparently not audience research?). A couple said they hadn’t met with the station consultant yet and weren’t sure.

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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.