

NewsLab Report

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Making the Team Work

Teamwork is essential in television news, and it's not easy to achieve. Personalities, job skills, and schedules can all get in the way. But when people do work as a team, the end result is almost always improved. At a minimum, team members who work well together will get the job done with less stress and end the day more than ready to work together again. That alone is a worthy goal. So how do you build a newsroom that values and supports teamwork?

First, define what you mean by teamwork.

It's more than just "getting along." Teams do better work because they work *together*, not simply side by side. A team is in essence a partnership. Partners engage each other in decision-making, challenge each other to do their best, and backstop

each other. Most importantly, partners show respect for each other. When they disagree, they discuss their differences and find ways to resolve them, usually without appealing to a higher authority.

In most newsrooms, teamwork is expected mainly from reporters and photographers who work in pairs. But in a team-oriented newsroom, producers and assignment editors also work as a team. So do desk editors and crews in the field. Producers and graphic artists need to demonstrate teamwork too.

The most basic element of teamwork is shared information. "Broadband, not dialup," says Chris Henao, investigative photojournalist at KHOU-TV in Houston, TX. "Keep the flow of communication wide open—the more the better." That doesn't mean one-way communication, with the

reporter telling the photographer what to shoot and how to shoot it. It does mean sharing ownership of the story, says reporter Nancy Amons of WSMV-TV in Nashville, TN, from concept to final edit. One way to start that process is by routinely asking two simple questions: "What do you think?" and "How can I help?"

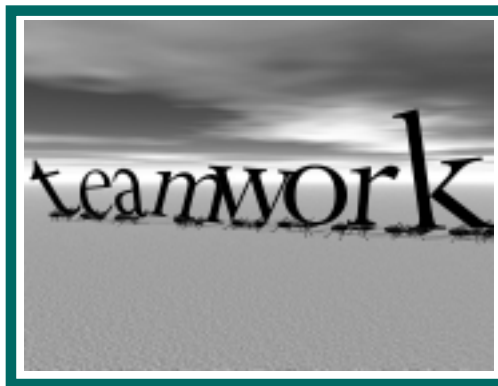
Sharing information matters inside the newsroom, too. WRC-TV in Washington, DC, keeps everyone informed by using its "conference bridge"—a telephone line that

can be accessed simultaneously by several callers from inside or outside the building. A reporter in the field can call in to the desk, be transferred to the "bridge" and speak to managers, assignment editors, and multiple show producers at the same time. That keeps ev-

eryone on the same page and avoids misunderstandings on deadline.

Face time counts when you're building a team. In today's high-tech newsrooms, it's easy to go for days without seeing your colleagues in person. Team members need to spend time with each other, even if it's just a few minutes, and each of them should do some of the walking so they don't always meet in the same place. Those visits can build a better understanding of what the other person really does. Job swapping—trading duties for day—can also improve teamwork by raising awareness of what's involved in, say, running the desk, or producing a live shot.

Teamwork doesn't just happen. It has to be modeled, taught and nurtured. But in newsrooms where teams work, the payoff is worth the investment.



Animated Graphics: Worth the Cost?

by Julia Fox and Deborah Potter

“Animated graphics can help build ratings and better inform viewers.”

Television newscasts these days are replete with graphics, in part because new, inexpensive technologies have made it relatively easy for even the smallest newsrooms to produce them. There has been little research, however, to determine the effectiveness of different types of graphics in helping viewers understand and remember what they see on the air.

A study by researchers at Indiana University in collaboration with NewsLab found that graphics can make a significant difference in how viewers process television news, but not for all stories. Perhaps most surprisingly, not all of the difference is positive.

Working with Knight Ridder Tribune’s News in Motion, a company that produces animated graphics for television news subscribers, NewsLab created three different versions of seven stories. The original versions, produced by local stations and provided by News in Motion, used an animated graphic to illustrate a segment of the story. For example, in a story about breast cancer drugs, the animation showed how estrogen attaches to breast cells to create tumors, and then how the drug Tamoxifen attaches to breast cells to block estrogen. NewsLab then created a second version of each story by replacing the animated graphic section with full-screen text graphics matching the audio track. In the breast cancer story, the graphic spelled out how estrogen-blocking drugs work, over base art of a woman getting a mammogram. We also created a third version, replacing the graphic section entirely with B-roll video. The breast cancer story used shots of a woman undergoing a mammogram, and mammogram x-rays showing a cancerous tumor.

The Institute for Communication Research at Indiana tested the stories by showing

them to college students and adults ranging in age from 28 to 80. All subjects saw two stories using B-roll, two using text graphics and two using animated graphics. The specific stories and the order in which they were shown varied.

The researchers found that viewers who saw a version with graphics, whether animated or full screen, had an easier time processing the information in the stories than viewers who saw a version illustrated only with B-roll. But there was a key difference between the two different types of graphics. Full screen graphics did not hold viewers’ attention. In fact, attention as indicated by heart rate dropped off steadily the longer the text graphic stayed on the screen, but stories using animated graphics held viewers’ attention just as well as the B-roll versions.

In addition, the research found a significant difference between the effect of graphics in stories that the subjects rated as easy to understand and those that were considered more difficult. Viewers who saw difficult stories using animated graphics understood and remembered those stories significantly better than those who saw the same stories with text graphics. Difficult stories using text graphics were remembered better than stories with B-roll. In easy stories, graphics had virtually no effect on what younger viewers remembered, but the animated graphics did help older viewers recall what they’d seen.

For news producers, this study suggests that animated graphics offer a way to keep viewers watching and to help them remember stories better. In other words, animated graphics can help build ratings and better inform viewers. But the study raises a caution flag about the use of text graphics. While they can help viewers remember important information in difficult stories, they’re no good at holding viewers’ attention, so the gain may not be worth the risk of losing the audience.

References

- Contact researcher Julia Fox at jurfox@indiana.edu
- News in Motion’s Web site is at <http://www.newsinmotion.com/index.htm>
- This research was presented at the AEJMC annual convention, Miami Beach, August 2002.

Old Dog Learns New Tricks

by Tim White, assignment editor, WBZ-TV, Boston

Teaching an old dog new tricks can be tricky, especially when the old dog is a 50+ year-old television operation in the number six market in the country. Even applying a handful of ideas from NewsLab, however, can produce some pretty impressive results. This spring, I joined a group of fellow assignment editors and managers at a DC workshop co-sponsored by NewsLab and Best Practices in Journalism. The ideas I brought back have become invaluable to our day-to-day news operation.

The first change we made was to our morning meeting. The idea discussed at the workshop of getting more people involved, even down to the cleaning staff, was intriguing. The issue we faced was the time of our morning meeting. Being later than most stations, it was not conducive to including reporters or photographers, many of whom are assigned directly from home (our photographers have take-home gear). So we've brought the meeting to them. Given the number of reporters and photographers, it is difficult to hit each one up at the same time every morning. But on a fairly regular basis, we take time out each morning to talk about daily story ideas, on the phone or in person, and to keep other ideas simmering on the back burner before they go cold. It is a wonderful opportunity to reinforce the idea of "owning a story," or covering a beat, something that is often overlooked in broadcast news.

Something particularly valuable from NewsLab was how the assignment desk can coach reporters and photographers through their stories. We now ask questions to encourage thinking instead of spoon-feeding reporters the material. This has been particularly valuable in assigning political coverage. Common questions we now ask when assigning a story at the State House are, "How can we make this story more visual? How can we get this out of the State House? Who does this affect... who are the real people here?"

We've also changed the way we communicate with crews in the field. A phone bridge is now in use in the WBZ newsroom. We use the bridge regularly when we check in with our reporters. The executive producer, assignment editor and line producers are always on the call, and whoever else wants to join in can do so. Now we just have to implement the intercom system so someone isn't yelling out "Ron is on 7018!"

Walking away from the News Lab workshop in Washington, D.C., my mind and notebook were bloated with ideas and ink on how to improve the news operation at WBZ-TV. The trick is to actually apply them and think realistically as to a time frame in which to do so. Six months after the workshop, we have a handful of ideas up and running at full steam with more to come. The old dog has a few things up its sleeve.



Trade Tips

Many news managers believe that local live reporting can attract and hold the most desirable viewers—the younger demographic. But a new survey of 18 to 24-year-olds finds that live reporting is not a factor in their choice of which local newscasts to watch. And when they see live reports, these younger viewers aren't always impressed. Seven out of ten respondents said there are times when live reports are meaningless. Almost half said that local TV news operations often report live for no apparent reason other than because they can.

The study by researchers at the University of North Carolina, Texas Christian University and the University of Memphis found that younger viewers see live shots almost exactly the same way that older viewers do, based on an earlier survey. Viewers of all ages say that live reports can enhance a station's coverage of a story, but most don't see the point of going live when there is nothing happening at the location. As the researchers see it, "Committing time and resources to stories with little news value but which lend themselves to live coverage may further erode viewer confidence...rather than attract and retain a new wave of loyal watchers."



image © 1998 PhotoDisc, Inc.

Jumpstart Your Election Coverage



Election Day is just around the corner. Do you have a plan for covering what remains of the fall campaign?

It's not too late. NewsLab and the non-profit group Best Practices in Journalism collaborated this year on a series of workshops to help TV newsrooms report on the 2002 campaign and election. Here are a few of the many suggestions that emerged:

- Set up a political team with a lead producer and assign reporters now.
- Create background files on key races and a political calendar.
- Save and log political tapes.
- Make a master list of story ideas and a timeline for doing them.

Politics doesn't have to be dull on television. Most political issues are just problems that affect real people in your community. Cover the issues by finding those people and telling their stories; then challenge the can-

didates to be specific about their proposed solutions. Consider immersing the candidates in the problems they seek to solve. If traffic and transit are major issues, for example, take the candidate for a ride in rush hour to discuss what could be done.

That's not the only way you can bring candidates to life. WNET in New York assigned a photographer with a small DV camera to spend a day during the campaign with each candidate for mayor. The resulting vignettes ran without narration and revealed a lot about the candidates by showing their unrehearsed interactions with individual voters. Stations also have arranged for candidates to have dinner or coffee with a family or a group of uncommitted voters while the camera rolls and the reporter just listens. But make sure the candidate sits still for a follow-up interview to clarify any discrepancies.

For more suggestions, check the resource section of the NewsLab Web site at: www.newslab.org/resources.htm



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