



Station to Station

By Allison Romano -- Broadcasting & Cable, 6/27/2005

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Young Tests News "VJs"

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Two years ago, over a breakfast at the Pancake Pantry in Nashville, Tenn., Young Broadcasting executives Mike Sechrist and Mark Antonitis enthusiastically agreed that the high-quality, portable video cameras flooding the market would change local TV news. They just didn't know how.

Then they met Michael Rosenblum, a former CBS News exec who has pioneered VJs—which stands for video journalists in this case. They're TV reporters armed with portable cameras and laptop editing equipment—the modern version of the one-man band.

Next month, Rosenblum will start training Young's WKRN staffers in Nashville, and sister station KRON San Francisco will start the transition later this year. Each reporter, editor and photographer will receive a Sony Z1 high-definition camera and a Dell laptop loaded with editing software. WKRN, in the 30th-largest market, has ordered 30 cameras; KRON, in the No. 6 market, will be getting 45 cameras. Equipping each VJ costs about \$15,000.

Revamping Newsgathering

With their armies of VJs, WKRN and KRON plan to revamp their newsgathering and on-air product. Staffers will have beats, such as education and/or specific neighborhoods. With more VJs reporting, the newscasts will feature more stories. And when the stations move to high-definition broadcasts in the future, they will already have the field equipment necessary.

The experiment comes at a time when broadcasters are watching their audience shares dwindle, with viewers lured away by cable, the Internet and TiVo. Local news is a station's biggest money-maker, but also its biggest expense. Economic pressures demand more out of newsrooms with fewer resources.

"This is to get more people on the street and boost ratings," says Sechrist, also WKRN's president and general manager. "We have to get the audience back."

Both stations need to shake things up. In Nashville, WKRN—an ABC affiliate—is mired in third place behind formidable WSMV and WTVF. KRON's woes are more pronounced. Formerly an NBC outlet, the station lost its affiliation three years ago and is trying to establish itself as an independent. The station's news ratings have

plummeted.

But Young's VJ conversion is controversial. Critics say VJs are merely a cost-cutting tactic, ultimately watering down news coverage. "It is really a downgrading of reporting," says Valerie Hyman, a news consultant who has worked for The Poynter Institute, a journalism think tank. "Reporting is a skill, and photojournalism is a skill. Very few people can be expert in both."

Heavy Investing

The Young executives say they are actually investing heavily—in the six-figure range—for training and new technology and will not cut any jobs. Both former news directors and camera operators, they say that, with proper training, staffers of different backgrounds will thrive.

The switch can create issues with unions, though. Some union contracts limit staffers' roles: For example, some photographers are not allowed to edit tape. WRKN is not a unionized newsroom, but Antonitis, KRON's president, says he is in discussions with his station's unions. He would not elaborate.

Rosenblum tinkered with his model for a decade, training reporters for Oxygen Media, NY1, *The New York Times*, BBC and others. The Young stations are his first local-broadcast clients.

One-man bands aren't new: Many small-market stations and regional news networks teach reporters how to shoot their own standups and cut tape, and the results are often bad. But Rosenblum says his system—the one WKRN and KRON will employ—is different. Clunky cameras have been replaced by smaller point-and-shoot models, and immobile editing bays are being replaced by featherweight laptops that allow for editing anywhere. The technological advances convinced the Young stations. Says Antonitis, "As an industry, we need to take advantage of developments in equipment and pricing."

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