

The Rundown

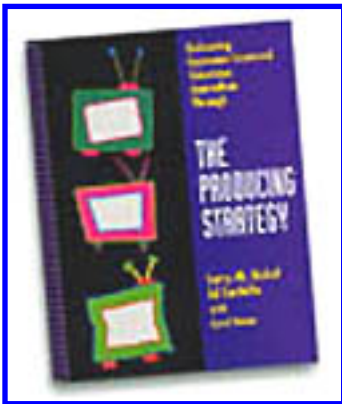
Reporting on Local Television News Since 1981

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Book is a valuable tool for staff development

Don't Get Distracted: Stay Focused on Your Core Product

VOLUME XXVII, NUMBER 32 AUGUST 6, 2007



An updated edition of a valuable newsroom resource has just been published.

Delivering viewer-centered information is the focus of *The Producing Strategy, Version 2.0*, by veteran consultant Larry Rickel and longtime successful anchor Ed Sardella.

Their premise: everyone in the newsroom is a producer. We must all be involved in strong storytelling and making the newscast a special experience for the viewer.

Don't abandon your power base while upgrading your new media

As broadcasters move onto new platforms, it is more important than ever to stay focused on the role the TV newscast plays in your four-screen strategy.

"We have to remember that our core product is still television. That's where the money is coming from right now. That is the brand-builder for all of this. We must make sure the newscasts we are producing are still appealing to the people who are watching," says consultant Larry Rickel.

The newscast has --- in some ways --- devolved, he suggests.

"Newscasts today are all about flashy graphics, production and speed. But what we have done is to suck out the emotion from the newscast," Rickel warns.

To succeed in an environment of competing information sources, and the "I want it right now" mentality, a newscast must make use one of the medium's main strengths --- the ability to connect on an emotional level.

"A newscast today needs to be more like what newscasts were 20 years ago --- such as the old Eyewitness News, which was about personality and content.

"If you add in currency and urgency to the personality and content, then there is something of value for people who watch the newscast."

**Larry Rickel
The Broadcast Image Group**

People can get much of the information that's on TV news today from the Internet.

But a good newscast is more fulfilling.

"They can't get the unique experience of a newscast --- the anchors interacting with the reporters or with one another --- to advance meaningful content. Not just chit chat. We're talking about anchors listening to reporters and asking good questions. Good writing in the newscast. All the things that will make a newscast compelling again for people to watch," says Rickel.

"A lot of the reason people aren't watching newscasts today is they are boring, they are routine, and there is nothing about them that has any real value to people," he says.

Tap into the power of your anchors

News managers must make better use of their main on air asset --- their anchors.

"It's all about storytelling, and that starts with the anchors," says Rickel.

Anchors have always been important to a station's success, and in the future they will be even more so.

"Anchors must take risks in their own storytelling. They must get out of the 'robotic, teleprompter reading' role and into the role of engaging storyteller," says Rickel.

Co-author Ed Sardella, who was a very successful anchor at KUSA-TV, Denver, believes the anchors must take the initiative themselves.

"The one ingredient that is missing from most anchoring positions today is that their stations and their ownership are not requiring them to know the news," says Sardella.

"Prior to going into work each day, I would take a lot of time to make sure I knew the news as well as anyone in the newsroom that day," he says.

Early in his career, Rickel produced for Sardella.

"Of all the anchors I worked with in all my years working in stations, that was the single biggest distinction between Ed and the others. Ed pushed me to know more about the news," says Rickel.

"He would toss folders back to me because there wasn't enough good information about the story so he could write it. How many anchors today do that?" asks the consultant.

Anchors must be involved, know the content

"The best advice a talent coach can give to an anchor is to know the content. If they know the content, they are going to deliver it better," says Rickel.

Obviously, an anchor can't write every story in a newscast.

"I believe they should touch the first story, a middle story and the last story of every segment they are in," says Rickel.

In that way, you are getting off to a good start with the lead story. You also have an impact in the middle and at the end.

"It is equally important how you go out. If an anchor touches those three places, then you have some sort of focus for a show," says Rickel. "The anchors are going to have to step up and do things that they might not have done in the last 5 to 10 years. Not only is it important to the storytelling, it is also important to their ability to communicate the information effectively," he says.

Anchors must ask knowledgeable followup questions.

Sardella says most of the time in his career, he would ask followup questions cold.

"The questions were either about things I was curious about or they were the result of the fact that the reporter had not covered the basics of the story, and I wanted to make sure the missing element was covered," he says.

"Anchors are the last gatekeeper for the viewer. They should listen to stories and ask relevant questions," says Rickel.

That makes the interaction even more genuine.

Plan interaction, but don't script it

The questions and responses must be informed and relevant. Scripting may be forced and artificial.

"It is important for the anchor and the reporter to talk together about what they will discuss coming out of the package, but not to script it. Scripting makes it seem too canned, and it loses spontaneity," says Rickel.

"It takes more work on the part of the newscast producers, the anchors and reporters. In newsrooms where they are doing this, you can see the impact it has on the quality of the interactions in the newscasts," he adds.

Rickel says this is about providing viewers information --- not about hearing the anchors talk more or finding out how their pets are doing.

"It must advance the content of the story," he stresses.

On stories where interaction is planned for, Sardella says anchors and reporters must set aside time to talk briefly during the day.

"You have to make time to do it! The organization must create the culture where I can pick up the phone and call a busy reporter 10 minutes before air time, and ask a question, without having the reporter bite my head off. It's not my right to do so, it is my duty," he stresses. Newsroom managers must set that as an expectation.

Sardella adds that management must allow the anchor time to do all these things.

If the anchor is out covering a story before the show, the person probably won't have time to talk to the reporters about their stories before the newscast.

They'll be busy getting their own story ready.

Or if the 5 p.m. anchor has to fill in at 6 p.m. when someone is off, they have double duties and won't be able to spend as much time getting prepared.

"Being genuine in your approach is the key.

"What has happened is that when your anchors don't know the news, you have to create an atmosphere for them. Invariably, that atmosphere is not genuine."

Ed Sardella

Author and former anchor

Anchors can sometimes use their clout to get an important interview.

In a world where everyone in the newsroom is a producer, an anchor might be able to break through the clutter of the dozen of other news organizations calling for an interview.

"Then you can go on the air and say, 'I called so-and-so at 9 o'clock tonight and he told me ...' It becomes more than a promotional tool. It is the truth," says Sardella.

More stations are having their anchors blog online and talk to their viewers about how a story evolved.

"It is another way to create a relationship. Let's face it. It still gets back to the fundamental fact that people want to trust the person they are getting information from," Rickel adds.

It takes a plan

It takes planning to produce compelling newscasts.

And, planning doesn't happen by accident.

Whether it is the interaction between the anchor and reporter or the different elements of the story, planning is critical.

"Never before has planning been such an important ingredient in a successful newscast," Rickel stresses.

"Too often we think we will hire good people, and they'll just wing it. But there aren't enough good people out there who can do that. Secondly, if you plan and you come up with a better idea at the last minute, you can do that. But if you didn't plan, you have limited your options," he says.

Plan the lead.

Plan the anchor interaction.

Plan the tags.

Focus on managing key stories from one day to the next, to the morning meeting through the day and into the newscasts.

Planning also helps to eliminate repetition.

Rickel feels repetition is TV news' biggest enemy.

"It's the number one reason people are watching less local news," he says.

Things you must address to avoid a feeling of repetition are the angle you take on the story, the way you write the story, the video and sound you use, and where the reporter stands for the standup.

Avoiding repetition is one key to a new 7 p.m. newscast

Rickel points to the 7 p.m. newscast on WBTV-TV, Charlotte, as an example of some of the changes needed in the way we do business in order to keep local TV newscasts viable.

One of the show's greatest strengths is that the viewer doesn't feel like they've seen it already. "WBTV has really embraced the idea that when a reporter goes out, they must shoot three interviews --- one for 5, one for 6 and one for 7. You don't see the same person twice," says Rickel.

He says most newsrooms try to avoid repetition by using a different soundbite from the same interview.

But Rickel says viewers aren't watching that closely.

"If they see the same person show up, they think the person is saying the same thing," he explains.

"You need to shoot additional video. Don't use the same three shots in sequence the same way. Those are all things that are obstructions to the viewer. These are barriers to entry and why people are watching less," he adds.

WBTV's program was formatted from the ground up to meet the needs of the audience in that time period --- commuters who are just getting home from work and want to know what happened during the day.

The Producing Strategy

Version 2.0

By Larry Rickel and Ed Sardella

174 pages

The updated edition sells for \$32.00 [and can be ordered through this link.](#)

Or call: 210-828-6664

Chapter One: The Producing Strategy

Goals and Concepts: Defining your customers.

Producing for your customers. Influencing your customers' viewing habits. Understanding what is going on in your customers' lives as they watch television. Impacting every story as a producer. Defining The Producing Strategy goals. Finding out "What people are talking about." Working through an event to identify a customer-centered story. Winning your newscasts' key stories. Understanding your relationship to your newscasts. Understanding how and when to use new media platforms

Chapter Two: Customer-Friendly Storytelling

Goals and Concepts: Delivering customer-friendly storytelling. Setting and meeting customer expectations every day. Producing stories customers will want to watch. Upgrading from processing events and ideas to producing stories. Using WIIFM and Point of Entry to produce stories. Applying WIIFM and Point of Entry to every story every day.

Chapter Three: Impact Players And The Producing Strategy

Goals and Concepts: Using The Producing Strategy to be an impact player. Planning a newscast through The Producing Strategy. Making The Producing Strategy work for field producing teams. Delivering memorable stories through content-driven storytelling. Deciding how and when to package story elements. Producing stand-ups that make your stories memorable. Delivering compelling live remotes using The Producing Strategy. Using video and graphics to showcase your stories. Directing newscasts by way of The Producing Strategy. Creatively using new media platforms to tell stories as an extension of your newscast and in support of your newscast.

Chapter Four: Achieving A Conversational News Writing Style

Goals and Concepts: Writing conversationally to create intimacy between you and your customers. Understanding the difference between what is conversational to you and what is conversational to your customers. Avoiding the Jargon Monger. Using common language instead of formal language. Understanding how "journalese" makes your news writing mechanical. Understanding that the quality of your writing is limited by the quality of your information. Effectively using wire services as a source, not the story.

Chapter Five: Building A Customer-Centered Story Goals

and Concepts: Replacing print journalism's inverted pyramid with television journalism's 'Pregnant I' as your storytelling baseline. Using the "Pregnant I" concept to turn your weather segment into a weather story.

Chapter Six: Using Language Effectively

Goal and Concepts: Using pronouns to achieve a conversational style, while also clearly communicating information. Using verbs to "show" instead of "tell" your customers what happened. Using active voice verbs instead of passive voice verbs to help you communicate effectively with your customers.

Chapter Seven: Picking Soundbites and Writing to Them

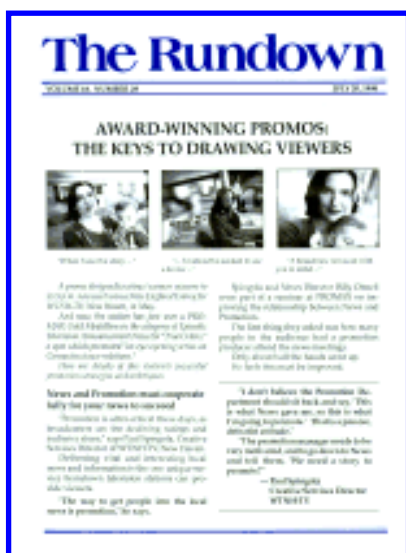
Goals and Concepts: Picking the right soundbite. Using soundbites to make your customers feel like they are at the scene of your story. Effectively writing into your soundbites.

Chapter Eight: Writing To Video

Goals and Concepts: Using the tools of television to show and tell your story. Using SWAP to coordinate words and pictures. Making best use of field-produced video. Getting organized before you write. Writing your story. Getting the video you want for your story. Considering how your video might play on other platforms.

Chapter Nine: Turning A Tease Into A Sell

Goals and Concepts: Developing customer-centered reasons to "stay tuned." Upgrading your tease writing to sell writing. Delivering a Specific Content Promise in your sells. Calculating the "real world" value of your sells. Understanding the difference between headlines and sells. Using different sell strategies for different stories. Marketing your sells. From processing to producing your sells. Sell writing Do's and Don'ts.



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