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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to answer questions regarding television news outlet decisions-makers' use and perception of agricultural video news releases (VNRs).

Use Of Agricultural Video News Releases By Television News Outlets

Ricky W. Telg

The purpose of this study was to answer questions regarding television news outlet decision-makers' use and perception of agricultural video news releases (VNRs). A questionnaire was mailed to the 26 television outlets to whom Texas A&M University's Department of Agricultural Communications sends video news releases. A 92.3 percent return rate was achieved. Among the findings: two-thirds prefer 3/4-inch videotape over Beta; more than half prefer having VNRs mailed to them, rather than distributing VNRs by satellite; and stories about nutrition and personal health are most likely to be aired on television stations.

Introduction

In 1991, television news components of departments of agricultural communications at the nation's land-grant universities were surveyed to find out such information as their resource commitment, the types and natures of the projects they produced, and their video distribution methods (Booth, Telg, Smith & Tomlinson, 1992). As a result of that study,¹ questions arose as to television news outlet decision-makers' (news directors and producers and agricultural reporters) use and perception of the quality of agricultural video news releases. Are the topics agricultural communicators focusing on the ones on which television news directors and producers place the most emphasis? Are agricultural communicators distributing video

news releases (VNRs) in the fashion that ensures a greater probability of use on a television outlet? How do news directors and television agricultural program directors perceive the quality of the VNRs distributed?

This study focused on these questions and others as they pertain to Texas A&M University's Department of Agricultural Communications (DAC) which produces five to 10 VNRs per month and mails them to 26 television outlets — commercial television stations in the Southwest, agricultural programs and television newsfeeds.² Additional interviews and B-roll follow each agricultural story.

Literature Review

Although extensive research has been done in the field of newspaper

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use of agricultural print news releases, (Fritz, 1985, 1987, 1987; Davis, 1991; Phillips, 1992; Morton, 1986) no studies could be found as to television outlets' use of agricultural video news releases. Studies were found comparing the gatekeeping role (deciding what will or will not be used) of television stations and newspapers regarding the use of printed news releases (Abbott & Brassfield, 1989). Of specific interest to Abbott and Brassfield was the method each medium used to screen releases, reasons given for rejection or use, and the extent to which news releases specifically tailored to a medium were more successful than more general releases. The authors found that television gatekeepers place additional emphasis on visual possibilities for a news release, although its absence does not lead to automatic rejection; television gatekeepers are almost always single individuals who make the final decision, while one-fourth of the time newspaper gatekeepers reroute the release on to someone else for a decision; all television gatekeepers and half of the newspaper gatekeepers said news releases should be concise statements of the news which can be used as story ideas; and small television stations lead the way among all media in acceptance of news releases, with large television stations rejecting the most.

In recent years, the traditional "press release" format that had been used to send information to television stations has undergone changes. Rather than sending simply a piece of paper informing a television station about a new product or technology or whatever, entities desiring to express themselves are — more and more — sending news stories to television stations on videotape. (Green

& Shapiro, 1987-88). These VNRs are designed to resemble any normal story the staff of a television station would produce. Most come complete with "B-roll" footage, interviews and narration. Most range in length from 90 seconds to two minutes, are packaged either on videocassette or are distributed via satellite and are geared for airing during a news program (Rubin, A., 1985). One of the VNR's more appealing features to the stations is that VNRs are free to the end user (Green & Shapiro; Harmon, 1989), meaning television news departments have access to a story on a topic of interest to them that they did not have to pay a reporter to produce. Further, the VNR may concern a topic that the station — primarily a smaller-market station — would not have the resources or access needed in order to get the necessary video or interviews (Green & Shapiro, 1990).

Since the advent of VNRs in the early 1980s, their production, distribution and use have continued to climb (Rubin, M., 1989; Turk, 1986). VNRs have become so pervasive that some now are worried about the ethics of it all (Lukovitz, K., 1989). From 1989 to 1990, the number of VNRs distributed to television stations was estimated at 5,000 to 15,000 (Rothenberg, 1990). One market analyst, who conducted an in-depth survey of every station in the country, said 85 to 90 percent of all markets use VNRs at least once a month (Rubin, A., 1985). Another study revealed that 75 percent of surveyed stations were willing to accept VNRs by satellite (Rothenberg, 1989). However, television news gatekeepers often deny the use of VNRs.

But Hazinski's study (1991) may cause news directors to re-evaluate the stance of not accepting VNRs if their decision was based on viewers

noticing the source of video in news releases. Fifty undergraduate students at the University of Georgia were questioned both immediately after seeing a VNR and two weeks later about their ability to recall the stories and their attitudes toward the credibility of them. Hazinski found the fonts labeling the source of the video did not seem to affect audience judgment about the stories and the audience members did not notice the actual source of the video described by the fonts on the screen.

In a survey conducted by the *Public Relations Journal* in 1988, 61 percent of television news directors said they "seldom" or "never" use VNRs. Twelve percent said they used them once a month. Rubin (1985) reported that news directors in the top 30 or 40 markets are "especially leery about using VNRs." And when they do use them, they want to exercise editorial control over them (*Public Relations Journal*, 1990).

Although television outlets may not have been targeted to determine their use of agricultural VNRs, a survey of agricultural communications departments at land-grant universities was done in 1991 to find out information as to how their operations ran (Booth, et. al., 1992). Among the findings pertaining to VNRs were: most projects produced by television news components were VNRs; audience definition seemed based largely on geography and large size with considerably less regard to the components of the audience; and slightly less than half of respondents sent extra B-roll and interviews.

Method

A survey instrument was developed and mailed to all 26 television outlets that Texas A&M University's Department of Agricultural Communications mailed to on a regular ba-

sis. One limitation of the study was that the survey was mailed to stations on the Texas A&M DAC VNR mailing list. Although this excluded other stations, it was deemed necessary to find out what actual users thought of agricultural VNRs. The introduction to the survey requested that it be answered by the individual in charge of airing or using the VNRs. So one assumption is that the survey actually was completed by a decision-maker. The questionnaire, with cover letter, was mailed in May 1992. Follow-up telephone calls and replacement surveys produced a return rate of 92.3 percent.

The responses were analyzed in the following three ways: all responses; population-based; and content of the program on which the VNR aired. Responses based on population were divided into the following categories: area of dominant influence (ADI) television households of 150,000 or less (defined hereafter as "small markets"); ADI of 150,000 to 350,000 (defined as "medium-size markets"); ADI of greater than 350,000 (defined as "large markets"); and "specialized markets," such as newsfeeds and regional or national satellite-fed agricultural programs that do not have ADI rankings.³ The program content category was divided into shows that were predominantly news-oriented and those that were predominantly agriculture-oriented. However, it was found that the category answers provided similar results to the overall, aggregate data, except when it pertained to which story topics were most and least likely to be used.

Results and Analysis

Television outlet decision-makers were asked to estimate the number of agricultural video news releases (AVNRs) used each month.

The mean was 5.02 AVNRs per month. They also were asked to estimate the number of AVNRs they used from sources other than DAC. The mean was 15.38 a month. However, if the three national, daily predominantly agricultural programs are excluded, the mean drops to a more representative 4.34 per month, because each one said they received and used around 100 VNRs a month.

With regard to outlets which receive AVNRs from other sources, 17 (70.8 percent) stated they receive AVNRs from sources other than Texas A&M. Sources of ANVRs included Texas Farm Bureau, Texas Department of Agriculture, United States Department of Agriculture and several out-of-state land-grant television news components. Sixteen (66 percent) stated the program on which Texas A&M ANVRs aired was predominantly news-oriented, with the remaining eight (34 percent) stating the program was predominantly agriculture-related. AVNRs were aired mainly on weekdays (75 percent of the time) and in the mornings (29.1 percent of the time), although several stations did air AVNRs at other, more highly watched, times of day, primarily at noon (20.8 percent) and at 5 p.m. (25 percent).

A series of questions was asked to determine which story formats, relating to actual videotape formats, time-length and content, the outlets preferred. On the question of content, 59.2 percent of respondents stated they were more inclined to use "hard news (timely)" stories over "features (timeless, 'evergreen')." About two-thirds (64.5 percent) said they primarily used ANVRs in their entirety; 12.9 percent primarily used just soundbites; and 22.5 percent primarily used just B-roll. More than four-fifths (87.5 percent) said they would be

more likely to use VNRs if custom outcues were supplied.

With regard to videotape formats, 66.6 percent preferred material sent on 3/4-inch videotape, with the remaining 33.4 preferring Beta tape. Outlets also were asked what time-length they preferred AVNRs to be. Thirteen (54.2 percent) stated they preferred AVNRs of 60 to 90 seconds in length; one (3.4 percent) wanted AVNRs of no more than 60 seconds; eight (27.5 percent) preferred AVNRs of 90 seconds to two minutes; and two (6.8 percent) wanted AVNRs of two to three minutes. When asked what the maximum AVNR time length the outlet would use, 4.3 percent said 60 seconds was the maximum; 17.9 percent said 60 to 90 seconds; 21.7 percent said 90 seconds to two minutes; 47.8 percent said two to three minutes; 8.6 percent said three to five minutes; and one did not respond to the question.

To find out what could be done to improve Texas A&M's AVNR effort, television outlets were asked to determine which items, from the list that was provided to them, could be improved upon. More B-roll following the end of the AVNRs was requested by 19.1 percent; 4.2 percent requested less B-roll; 6.4 percent wanted more interviews; 12.7 percent wanted less interviews; 19.1 percent stated they want more graphics; 4.2 percent wanted less graphics; 2.1 percent wanted better graphics; 8.5 percent requested shorter stories; and 21.2 percent said no changes were needed.

Decision-makers also were asked which is more important to them in a news story — story content or video quality. Content was more important to 33.3 percent of respondents, with the remaining 66.7 percent stating that story content and video quality were of equal value. They also

were asked to judge the quality of Texas A&M's story content and editing/video quality. On story content, 19 percent stated it was "excellent"; 47.6 percent stated it was "very good"; and 33.3 percent stated it was "good." On editing/video quality, 22.7 percent said it was "excellent"; 45.4 said it was "very good"; 27.3 percent said it was "good"; and 4.5 percent said it was "fair."

As far as outlets' satellite downlink capabilities, one station (4.2 percent) had only a C-band downlink; 20 (83 percent) had both C- and Ku-bands; two (8.3 percent) had neither; and one (4.2 percent) did not respond. When asked what would be the likelihood that respondents would use stories distributed via satellite over those provided by a mailed 3/4-inch videotape, one station (4.2 percent) said it would be "more likely" to use satellite; 14 (58.3 percent) said they would be "less likely" to use satellite; and seven (29.2 percent) said they would be equally likely to use stories provided by either satellite or mailed videotapes. The one station that said it would be "more likely" to use a satellite-fed story gave the following as its reason: "By taking feed and receiving onto Beta tapes, the quality of the video is much better than on 3/4-inch. Plus, it is fairly easy for us to take feeds, as long as we're aware of what's available....By getting feeds we want and pick, we're sure to use what we set up to take." However, all of the responses from the 14 who said they would be "less likely" to use satellite were similar: They do not have the resources available, either in technical manpower or in time, to schedule and receive another satellite feed.

From a list of 16 story topic categories, television outlet decision-makers ranked from one to 10, with "one" being "most likely" and "10"

being "least likely," which story topics their outlet would be most likely to air (Table 1). "Nutrition and/or personal health" emerged as the most popular topic category (3 on the scale), with "production agriculture" close behind (3.02). Following these was "veterinary medicine." The two least likely topics areas to be aired were "forestry" (6.22) and "marine issues" (7.0). See Table 1.

Population and program content of the television outlets also were examined as they pertained to this list to determine if different-sized markets or varied program content emphasized the same or different story topics. The small-market stations' top choices for story topics were "nutrition and/or personal health" (2.83) and "entomology" (3.2), with "production agriculture" in third (3.83). Medium-sized markets also had "nutrition" as its number one choice (2.38), with "production agriculture" (2.625) second and "community development" and "family development" tied for third (3.63). Large markets chose "nutrition" (2.0) first, "wildlife and/or fisheries" (2.66) second, and "consumer sciences" (3.13) third. "Special" markets preferred "production agriculture" (2.83), with "4-H and/or youth" (4.17) and "international topics" (4.2) in second and third, respectively. News programs had "nutrition" (1.76) first; "personal finances and/or investments" (3.6) was second; and "family development" and "veterinary medicine" (4.0) were tied for third. Agricultural programs had "production agriculture" (2.43) as most likely to be aired, followed by "community development" (3.14) and "forestry" (3.16).

Conclusions

In the 1991 study of television news components at land-grant universities, almost two-thirds of the

respondents said their method of distributing VNRs was by mail. They were then asked to project how they would distribute VNRs by the mid-1990s. Average mail use dropped significantly to 38.7 percent with distribution by communication satellite or other such electronic deliv-

ery system* increasing to 34.32 percent (Booth, et. al., 1992).

Although electronic delivery may become a more cost-effective method of video distribution, TNC specialists would be wise also to take into account the "end-user benefits" of a satellite-distribution network. Sat-

Table 1: Likelihood of Television News Outlet, Decision-makers Airing Particular Story Topics*

Story topic	Market size				
	Overall	Small	Medium	Large	Special
Family development	5.00	5.00	3.63	4.33	9.25
Wildlife and/or fisheries	4.87	5.40	5.19	2.66	5.20
Home gardening	4.70	5.40	4.38	5.50	4.66
Housing	5.60	5.40	5.88	5.33	9.00
Nutrition and/or personal health	3.00	2.83	2.38	2.00	5.50
Personal finances / investments	4.50	4.20	5.32	4.00	5.25
4-H and/or youth	4.93	4.50	5.06	7.00	4.17
Marine issues	7.00	8.40	7.00	7.00	7.50
Consumer sciences	4.91	5.20	4.69	3.13	4.40
Agriculture	3.02	3.83	2.63	3.17	2.83
Community development	5.00	5.00	3.63	5.00	6.00
Rural sociology	4.37	5.25	4.13	4.00	4.83
Entomology	4.95	3.20	4.75	6.00	5.00
Forestry	6.22	5.00	5.71	6.50	6.00
Veterinary medicine	3.79	2.80	4.63	7.00	5.00
International topics	6.21	5.60	7.75	8.50	4.20

Story topic	Program content	
	Agriculture	News
Family development	8.00	4.00
Wildlife and/or fisheries	4.00	5.47
Home gardening	3.75	5.46
Housing	7.50	5.14
Nutrition and/or personal health	6.50	1.76
Personal finances and/or investments	5.70	3.60
4-H and/or youth	3.36	6.00
Marine issues	6.50	7.54
Consumer sciences	4.44	4.50
Agriculture	2.43	4.86
Community development	3.14	4.33
Rural sociology	4.00	5.27
Entomology	4.43	5.10
Forestry	3.16	7.00
Veterinary medicine	4.75	4.00
International topics	3.71	7.66

*10 being "least likely" to air a story topic.

ellite distribution may be less expensive, but if stations will not use the satellite-fed material, then little has been gained by adopting the technology. In this study, a majority of respondents said they would be "less likely" to use stories sent by satellite than by mailed videotapes. The overriding reason not to use satellite-fed stories was time constraints caused by a full downlink schedule. The advantages and disadvantages of electronic distribution as opposed to more conventional means of distribution, such as by mail, is a subject for further study. Also in the 1991 study, the majority of TNCs stated that they never or rarely sent B-roll (57.7 percent) or interview (61.1 percent) footage with their VNRs. However, by the responses in this survey, the practice of including additional B-roll and interviews is important, even though the vast majority used the VNRs in their entirety.

For comparison purposes, similar story topics of the 1991 land-grant university were listed to the ones the television news decision-makers were asked to determine which story topic they would be most- to least-likely to air. Although the topics included in the 1991 study included all television news component projects, including AVNRs, some comparisons and conclusions can be drawn. In the study of land-grant universities, "agriculture" (31.5 percent) emerged as by far the most common category in which video projects were produced, with the next-highest percentages dropping all the way to 7.7 percent for "4-H and/or youth", 7.6 percent for "home gardening" and 7.1 percent for "nutrition and/or personal health." Agriculture did constitute a very strong plurality.

Although agriculture was one of the leading choices to be aired by

news decision-makers in this study, "nutrition and/or personal health" was slightly more popular overall. Agricultural VNRs were more likely to be aired on predominantly agricultural shows and in small- to medium-sized markets. Larger markets and news-oriented programs were less likely to air ANVRs. With this in mind, agricultural communications television news components may be well-served if their goal is to get airplay on larger stations to supplement their VNR effort of production agriculture topics with those topics that are more consumer-related.

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End Notes

- ¹Return rate of the 1991 survey was 100 percent. The survey entailed all 52 departments of agricultural communications — the 50 states, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.
- ²Since the time of this study in the spring and early summer of 1992, the number of outlets receiving VNRs from Texas A&M's DAC has risen from 26 to 34. The original 26 were the ones surveyed for this study.
- ³Area of dominant influence is the geographic market design that defines each television market exclusive of the others, based on measuring viewing patterns. ADIs selected for this study are based on Arbitron's 209 ADI markets for 1990-1991 found in *The Broadcasting Yearbook, 1991*.