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Going beyond the talking heads

Craig McGuire - 2 Oct 2006 11:08

While the "talking head" format is popular in SMTs, other ways exist to engage audiences.

Anecdote has it that nothing makes a TV producer groan louder than a talking head. These days, generating interest in an SMT requires innovation and imagination, and maybe even a stunt. All the while, the art of the successful SMT is in its subtlety, where the subject - the product, movie, or any other property being promoted - is almost incidental in the context of a larger news angle.

Bank of America (BoA) spends millions demonstrating its commitment to local communities. But it does so creatively, as it did in its Neighborhood Excellence 400 event in June, a NASCAR race in Delaware.

Promoting the event, KEF Media Associates brought in NASCAR star Kasey Kahne. A member of the President's Council on Service and Civic Participation, Kahne interviewed from the Latino Community Center in Andover, MA.

"The broadcast media was interested in the segment, not because of BoA's sponsorship, but because of Kasey and the volunteerism theme," says Linda Buckley, SVP at KEF. "Sometimes you have to get out in the field. Some things you can't manufacture in a studio." Moreover, an SMT outside the studio, though challenging, can add that extra layer of timeliness and context news producers angle for.

Michael Friedman, EVP at DWJ Television, has an interesting tactic he uses to lure clients out into the field.

"We have found great success in doing SMTs from various trade shows," he says. "Even when the organization won't let us on the floor, like the [International Builders Show, which] has a selective rule against it, just being in the same city with the [event] allows us to show viewers what is new."

The more novel the setting, the easier it becomes to pitch a tricky message. For example, in a recent effort, E&J Gallo Winery, working with KEF, wanted to appeal to more blue-collar sensibilities that traditionally pass by its products. A romp through a vineyard would not work in this instance.

"We just wrapped a tailgate at Giants Stadium for Gallo; but upscale tailgating, like wine and shrimp, not beer and hot dogs," Buckley says. "The setting gave the SMT a whole different flavor."

Recruiting a star can work well. Even if the segment essentially amounts to a talking head, a celebrity talking head can push it into a higher realm - as long as it's the right head.

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When Cohn & Wolfe needed a star to promote headache remedy Imitrex for GlaxoSmithKline in May, Marcia Cross was tapped not just because of the immense popularity of *Desperate Housewives*, but because she is also a longtime migraine sufferer. Cross offered a vivid personal perspective that lent the interview the legitimacy that is just not found with a regular hired gun.

For those without a TV star, a studio's sterile environment doesn't always help raise interest in an SMT, so what you do with the product can make all the difference. Get imaginative when demonstrating how it works, says Bev Yehuda, VP, MultiVu, as her company did with a recent tour for "Healthy Fuel for School" for canned-food giant Del Monte.

For this segment, Yehuda says MultiVu utilized a kitchen set with an array of foods to provide a focal point for the segment, adding that if demos aren't available or applicable, b-roll allows producers to cut away from standard studio shots.

But while innovative camera work, props, and on-the-scene shooting can entertain, if a segment strays from its news value, it may not be as attractive to broadcast producers.

Look for a local angle a producer knows his or her audience will stop to watch. Your spokesperson will be conducting a battery of interviews through the course of an SMT, so enabling them to provide different data sets that appeal to each interview's market will increase your success rate.

Lastly, understand the schedule for SMTs has broken out of the "traditional" booking model, says Michele Wallace, SVP at Medialink. While SMTs previously were scheduled predominantly in the very early morning, she sees more targeting of mid-day programs and evening network news blocks. This gives SMTs more air opportunities.

"Local stations have added more news, so a station that may have had one five-minute cut now has an hour to fill," Wallace says.

DO

Focus on the news wrapping your subject

Know your markets and their idiosyncrasies

Give producers unique data that makes your story relevant to their audience

DON'T

Hire a celebrity that doesn't have a connection to the subject

Forget media training for the difficult questions

Forget logistics. Shooting on location is rife with challenges, from noisy traffic to passersby

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