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VNRs: Extended broadcast

Craig McGuire - 20 Dec 2004 00:00

Producing a VNR requires a big investment, so users are seeking ways to extend their impact.

When it comes to VNRs, well-written commentary and slick production can only get you so far. With thousands of VNRs pumping into America's newsrooms each year - and sadly, with most destined to be tossed by picky journalists - it is easy to get buried under the pile. This newsroom clutter has driven a rise in the practice of extending VNRs, both in terms of adding more digestible b-roll-style content broadcasters can easily slip into segments, and repurposing the content to build new promos that inform and appeal to multiple audiences. "PR firms and corporate PR departments are increasingly interested in adding value to their VNRs and cross-utilization," says Jack Trammell, president of Dallas-based VNR-1 Communications. Earlier this year, VNR-1 Communications launched MediaACTIVE, a new multimedia platform it developed with Wieck Media Services, targeting the need to extend the value of VNRs. "Planning ahead allows an agency to discuss the afterlife of a VNR as an internal communications tool, or as part of a marketing initiative that may have PR components," says Trammell. The cost of producing and distributing a VNR can be formidable. Therefore, even if your VNR is repeatedly rejected by media outlets, you can still demonstrate a return on investment to the client when the content is recycled for months, even years, for marketing vehicles, internal communications, training programs, TV commercials, corporate image videos, sales presentations, webcasts, investor relations presentations, and so on. Unlike most press releases, a VNR is a living, breathing production that often takes on a life of its own. Because the production process can lead you down so many roads, it helps to broaden your horizons. "Almost every VNR we've produced for clients has either started out as a marketing video that got re-purposed as a VNR, or was re-purposed as a marketing video after the launch of the VNR," says Rod Starns, principal at Memphis-based VNR producer Running Pony Productions. Running Pony produced an educational and fundraising video for a hospital that created a "Grief Camp" for children who have lost a loved one. The video was so powerful, the client decided to use it to create a VNR, Starns says. With it, both the video and the VNR gained national exposure.

Multi-purpose content But producing a VNR is not necessarily the same as developing multi-purpose content for many vehicles. "There are two primary challenges," Starns says. "The first is making sure that when shooting and producing a VNR, you capture enough material to be able to produce longer, more detailed videos." The average news "package" runs one-and-a-half minutes or less, and therefore doesn't require numerous shots, sound bites, and topics. Conversely, a marketing video may run five to 10 minutes, and will require ample b-roll and interviews and much more detail than a VNR. The second challenge is making sure that the style in which you shoot the video will work for multiple purposes. "On the one hand, a VNR shouldn't look too slickly produced, like a commercial, or news stations won't air it," says Starns. "But a marketing video usually needs to have higher production

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values than a typical news story or VNR. Finding the right balance in style is critical." Multimedia news releases (MNRs) have emerged as a viable means for not only offsetting the costs of distributing VNRs, but also in enabling companies to package VNRs with other content and use them to accomplish direct marketing, employee communications, membership communications, and more. "Until fairly recently, clients wishing to extend a VNR's message were faced with the expensive and logistically troubling proposition of making hundreds or thousands of VHS dubs for mail delivery," says Tim Bahr, president of MultiVu, a PR Newswire company that offers MNR services. "This could be very daunting when you're trying to reach thousands of customers, patients, or employees." Moreover, multiple MNRs carrying the same VNR can be tailored to meet the needs of specific audiences. For instance, Six Flags Great Adventure often leverages its VNR investment by creating MNRs through MultiVu, which will directly communicate with roller-coaster enthusiasts and amusement-park attendants, in addition to their traditional media audiences. To drum up additional interest, consider adding elements featuring an expert who is a native Spanish speaker, advises Sandy Hausman, president of Hausman & Schott, a Chicago-based production company. Spanish-language TV is the fastest growing segment of the media marketplace, with Hispanics comprising more than 12.5 percent of the US population. Sixty percent live in ten television markets, and have \$800 billion in buying power. Hausman produced a VNR for the Duckling Council - a group that represents the nation's duck producers. The message: Duck is no longer the fatty, greasy product the public believes it to be. It included commentary from a respected chef and her sous-chef, who happened to speak Spanish. "His presence helped us get 186 airings, 31 of them in the top 25 markets, and we can only guess how many Hispanic families feasted on duck that Thanksgiving," says Hausman. The corporate community has embraced VNR and MNR technology, says Scott Michaeloff, VP of strategic development for Medialink Corporate Television. Once a VNR is produced and distributed to the news media, it is often repackaged by corporations to be used as demo reels, for sales presentations, or on monitors in vendor booths at conventions. "The most important reason is that most companies are video-starved and have very little video of their ideas or products," says Michaeloff. "Producing a VNR forces them to get started using video." If a news outlet or customer expresses interest in a company, that VNR is often the only video a company has of its CEO, or properties to show, he says. **Taking advantage of technology** Siemens is one of many leading conglomerates that have embraced the technology. Medialink produces a weekly technology news feed for the company. "They use the VNR material for corporate presentation videos and organize them on themed CDs to distribute to sales and potential customers," says Michaeloff. Telecoms giant Motorola is another example of a major vertical leader embracing and extending VNR technology. During NextFEST 2004 in San Francisco, Motorola was able to package three MNR features for distribution across the US and around the world. The packages, providing a sneak peek of new technologies for in-home and in-auto applications, were offered to traditional broadcast outlets, web-based media/news aggregators, and to consumers via the web. "In addition to the digital video packages, the web presence for these efforts contained links to useful ancillary materials, such as digital stills, supporting documents, and other content," says Albert Lopez, who until September had directed all of Motorola's MNRs. The biggest challenge, he says, was managing expectations of Motorola's executives. "The MNR must primarily inform the consumer or the market," says Lopez, who is now an independent consultant with UberMedia Communications. "As such, the product value and message must be geared toward the delivery channel, not necessarily delivering the party line." Paid placement is also an alternative - albeit sometimes an expensive one - for a client to use its VNR to target specific demographic groups. "A VNR lends itself to such activity because you already have quality footage that's been paid for," says Doug Simon, president of production company DS Simon Productions. In addition to nationally televised secured broadcasts, avenues exist in retail outlets, doctor's offices, health clubs, hotels, college campuses, film outlets, and street-based video walls, says Jeff Wurtz, SVP of News Broadcast Network (NBN). "Secured-placement VNRs offer peace of mind to both PR agencies and their clients because of their unique guarantee of broadcasts and audience," says Wurtz. "The only inherent limitation in secured-placement VNRs is the expense associated with reaching multiple national outlets and primetime broadcasts." Michael Hill, NBN's president, says that the expense needn't be prohibitive, however. He explains that if you are already spending between \$10,000 and \$20,000 to produce a VNR, you might not have to spend much more to get it in front of your desired audience. "Last summer, a company did a VNR with us. It wasn't the most newsworthy subject, but there was a small amount of pick-up. But the client had a specific interest of reaching people who were coming to a major conference in San Diego. We did two things: used broadcast cable [in the local conurbation] to reach them, and also put the piece in the information kiosks in the hotels where conference attendees were staying." The cost of doing something like this, Hill says, can start at just a couple of thousand dollars, even factoring in the cable network coverage - though of course, it can run up to tens of thousands of dollars for national guaranteed placement. Another advantage of the paid-placement method, Hill says, is that everything is known up-front, and the marketing people on the client side are comfortable when they're talking about known numbers. Above all, Hill says, the key advantage to such methods for extending a VNR's use is one of control. "When you have the extra elements," he notes, "you can have control over how your message is used." Traditionally, the effectiveness of VNRs has been measured in terms of overall audience numbers, numbers of television airings and the estimated advertising value of the television placements. "Today, however, clients should look for even more value," says MultiVu's Bahr. "They should be asking VNR producers how their VNRs can be leveraged beyond traditional

broadcast TV as a direct marketing vehicle." MNRs are even easier to track, says Lopez. "In addition to the old media monitoring offered by Nielsen and its sigma encoding, you can actually track the number of digital video downloads, the click-streams of visitors to the site, and the metrics provided by Nielsen/NetRatings on usage," he says. "Today, a company can get a 360-degree view when reviewing metrics of all available communications channels."

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