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'Narrowcasting' reaps rewards for VNRs

Craig McGuire - 17 Oct 2005 00:00

VNRs need not solely look to major markets. Local and cable stations, as well as websites, are prime pitch targets to reach groups attuned to your issue.

The top 10 media markets are obvious targets for most VNRs, but experts agree that being more selective in pitching can often produce the most desired results. And the term "narrowcasting" is one that comes to their lips most readily.

Narrowcasting, or the practice of narrowly targeting a specific geography or demographic with your VNR, has become much more popular in recent years, says Lidj Lewis, VP of media relations at Medialink and Newstream.com.

"The media landscape is far more fragmented than it was just five years ago," Lewis explains. "More media than ever compete for our attention. It is incumbent upon marketers and PR pros to seek them out on their terms."

If a story is especially compelling, and the client insists on national exposure, such targeting is not as necessary. However, in a fast-moving media climate in which even a major story can get bumped off the front page in favor of something simply newer, narrowcasting has become more attractive.

"As the story angle weakens or the client's target-market focus narrows, targeting gets more important," says Tim Bahr, managing director of MultiVu.

The providers of broadcast PR services can explain options to anyone considering a more targeted approach.

Doug Simon, CEO of DS Simon, says, "Communicate with your provider, and explain what your goals are. You will get a better sense of what audiences are 'gettable,' and you'll [be able to] better set objectives and expectations with your provider."

The first thing to do is identify who to reach, where they might be, and how they absorb certain media.

To tackle the geographic challenge, there are tools available, such as Medialink Demographic Intelligence (MDI), a consumer-driven database that provides trend information on buying habits for markets across the country, including everything from healthcare products to financial services.

Traditionally, most clients wanted to break into the top 10 or 20 US media markets, but that's not necessarily the best route to take, explains Lewis.

"Sure, these have the largest population concentrations, but they may not always be right for

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your campaign," he says. "Data can yield Kansas City as a market that may have more value for your client than New York City."

For example, the organizers of a major charity golf event recently produced a VNR and were in the process of pitching media in a number of markets, but they were dissatisfied with lackluster interest among the TV producers they were pitching.

"They went into MDI, and we found all of these markets where golfers were concentrated," says Lewis. "They weren't top 10, and, surprisingly, included several Midwest markets. With that information, they had a much more successful campaign."

Once the prime geographic locations have been identified, the next step is to zero in on relevant media in those areas. Here again, providers can help.

"In terms of broadcast placement, we offer customized pitching, and our media relations staff is extraordinarily knowledgeable about what plays well with specific reporters and the media in general," Bahr says. "We also rely on an extensive media contact database that helps us determine where a particular story might be well received."

Data gathered about the relevant local media should then be used to craft a compelling pitch. "If a story has market-specific information, such as specific details about the occurrence of a disease, incidence of a type of crime, or any other topic that can be communicated in terms of its relationship to a specific region, this information should be used to position and pitch the story," Bahr says. "National associations with local chapters can often use affiliate activities on the local level to help encourage coverage of a wider national event."

Because of increasing competition for time, some have opted for guaranteed placement, which is also much less expensive in local markets. It's important to note, however, that paid placement is not supported by Nielsen methodology.

And it's important to be cognizant of just what you are buying. Simon cites the example of buying a placement on FoxNet during *American Idol*.

"FoxNet is the satellite service for those really remote areas of the US that can't get Fox," he explains. "I think that night only 31,000 people were watching."

With nearly a third of Americans saying they receive information from the internet, it makes a lot of sense to target VNRs to online audiences.

And just as there are local television affiliates, there exist websites dedicated to local communities and organizations that draw significant traffic and often need fresh content.

"If you are thinking about targeting a VNR, consider looking beyond broadcast or you may be missing the opportunity to cost-effectively reach a variety of your target audiences," Bahr says. "Today VNRs are much more than just broadcast placement tools. They are being targeted to a variety of audiences through web syndication, strategic placements in broadcast, cable, and site-based media in retail outlets and hospitals."

For example, they are being distributed in vehicles like MultiVu's Multimedia News Release that package VNRs and other video and text content into multimedia packages that can be customized for target audiences ranging from print media, investors, and customers to patients, doctors, and employees.

Lastly, understand that just because local producers are not from LA or New York does not mean they should be treated with any less deference or do not have high standards.

For example, DS Simon conducted a survey earlier this year that found that fewer than half of the VNR pitches received by producers clearly identified the client. Of those, 85% of the stations threw them out without even looking at them.

"Be respectful, be ethical, and fully disclose everything up-front," Simon says. "We insist by contract to disclose the initial funding source for every VNR we are involved with. In addition, we have data from stations that indicates such disclosure is critical for even being considered."

Technique Tips

- Do** research to identify target geographies, demographics, and media
- Do** use the data you gathered on consumer trends to accentuate your pitch
- Do** identify how these trends have a local angle
- Don't** cast a wide national net when a local audience will be more receptive
- Don't** limit your VNR to broadcast. Extend it to the web by using a multi-media package
- Don't** buy placement until you're sure it will reach the right audience

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