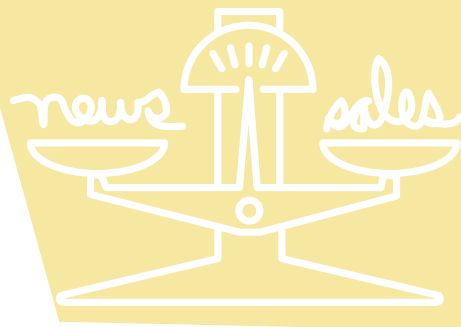


ETHICAL ISSUES



It's harder than ever to be a news director these days. There is so much financial pressure and so little support. What can you do when the top managers at your station want to breach the line between news and sales?

Learn from each other

Try to understand and to be understood by other department heads, especially on the business side. "You've got to maintain the integrity of that news department, but an understanding of one another's disciplines would go a long way toward creating a great television station instead of just a good one," says Griffin's Joyce Reed. "They're real people, they've got a mission, understand their mission."

Educate

Explain to other managers at your station why it's important to maintain the newsroom's independence. Become a champion of credibility and its value to the station. "Once that's gone, you've got nothing to sell," says Gannett's Rob Mennie. "That gets their attention."

Offer solutions

Your GM wants to start charging people to appear on the morning show? Suggest an alternative approach to protect the newsroom's credibility. For example, the station might create a new program that meets the station's need to raise revenue but that's outside the news department and doesn't involve any news personnel.

Muster an argument

It's not enough to say, "I'm a journalist, and this is wrong." If a specific proposal crosses the line, in your view, find cases where it was done elsewhere and didn't turn out well when it hit the papers, for example. Know the FCC rules about sponsorship identification and insist that the station abide by them. Explain that running a billboard in a newscast noting "commercial consideration received" would taint not just one segment but the entire news product.

“You’ve got to maintain the integrity of that news department, but an understanding of one another’s disciplines would go a long way toward creating a great television station instead of just a good one.”

Joyce Reed, Vice President of Strategy • Griffin Communication

Back out

You can’t always pull the plug on a bad idea immediately. Maybe it was in place when you arrived. Back out slowly and get the deal undone. Stand up for the independence of the news department. “If you’re not willing to wage those battles, you are in the wrong business,” says one news director.

Get out

Sometimes a situation that crosses ethical boundaries just can’t be tolerated. “Try to change it, and if you can’t, have the courage to walk away,” says Robin Wojtanik, news director at KIMA-TV and KEPR-TV in Yakima, WA.

Seek help

The RTNDA website (www.rtna.org) offers a collection of ethical decision-making guidelines and resources, including the RTNDA Code of Ethics.

