



Seeking Diversity in Small Markets

The nation's small-market newsrooms are the training grounds for tomorrow's journalists. That's where the commitment to diversity should be strongest.

By **Bob Papper**

Diversity doesn't "just happen." At least, it doesn't for most small- and medium-sized news departments.

Witness KQTV in St. Joseph, MO. St. Joe itself is only 5.9 percent minority; less when you include the surrounding area. No ocean, no balmy climate, and at market 201, it's certainly not the metropolitan feel that's the attraction. Yet, KQTV boasts a staff almost 28 percent minority (5 of 18)—impressive even in a market that's not known for its diverse population.

"I don't know if we have a magic bullet," says KQTV news director Jill Jensen. "We've never had a problem recruiting [minorities]." Jensen thinks KQTV's draw starts with the atmosphere: Diversity has to be valued on the air and in the newsroom.

"People here have a good experience," Jensen says. Current and past employees spread the word and encourage others to apply. Most hires are referrals—which means someone who works at KQTV can speak about the applicant, and that cuts down problems.



In St. Joseph, MO, news director Jill Jensen leads a staff that is 28 percent minority.

“In a shop as small as this, attitude is really important,” Jensen says.

And that’s about as good a recipe for diversity that can be found: Make diversity a core newsroom value, make sure minority hires fit in and have a good work experience, and then make sure the word gets out. If you can do that, then perhaps diversity will “just happen” as a result.

Reflecting the Market

When the current ownership of KZTV in Corpus Christi, TX, took over two years ago, there were no minorities on the anchor desk and few minorities among the reporters. For a market where “minorities” are the majority (nearly 60 percent, almost all Hispanic), that seemed hard to believe.

News director Kent Harrell has changed all that.

“It just so happens that when I started opening up positions,” says Harrell, “some of the better-qualified people for these jobs were minorities. But I was also looking to diversify the on-air staff a bit.”

The anchor desk now includes Hispanics, and about half the staff is minority—including Harrell, who is African American.

Harrell says he just hired the best people for the jobs, and that led to a diverse staff. But if diversity just happens, then it’s hard to explain why it didn’t happen earlier in a place like Corpus Christi. Harrell also is news director for the sister station in Laredo, KTV, where the staff is virtually all Hispanic.

Harrell says he likes hiring people from the area because they know the community, they know the culture and they’re more likely to stay. But what if the area isn’t diverse to begin with? That makes it harder, but it hasn’t stopped St. Joseph—or plenty of other places.

“You have to care that you have a diverse staff,” says Harrell, “and you have to believe in it and want it and make it work.”

The latest RTNDA/Ball State University Survey found that, generally, smaller market stations were likely to have fewer minorities if they had any at all. News directors point to three key challenges: supply and demand, few minorities living in the market, and low pay.

A Problem of Supply?

“I still firmly believe that it’s supply and demand,” says Susana Schuler, vice president and corporate news director for Nexstar (which owns KQTV), “and the supply is still so small that the demand goes to the bigger markets.”

Dave Smith, news director at WIFR-TV in Rockford, IL, says that’s the problem for him. “It’s very difficult to attract and even get applicants, much less hire them,” he says.

Smith is just now advertising for the first reporter position he’s been able to fill in the year he’s been there. Right now, the station has no minorities in the newsroom. Rockford’s home county is about 21 percent minority—about half African American and one-third Hispanic.

Many news directors say that with few minorities living in the area, it’s harder to attract them to the station. If few minorities live in an area, they say, there are few minorities who may want to return “home” after they finish school. And, some say, minorities don’t want to go where there are few people like them.

Jon Gulliver, news director at WAGM-TV in Presque Isle, ME, has little base to draw on. The area is about 3 percent minority—primarily Native American. That means the one minority (an African American anchor) in the staff of 19 (including production) gives the station a higher percentage of minorities than the market.

Still, Gulliver says about 15 percent of job applications he receives come from minorities. But, he says he prefers to hire locals.

“I’m more likely to keep them,” Gulliver says, “and they have a better understanding of what things are like here: no nightlife, and they roll up the sidewalks at 8:30 p.m.” Gulliver says he’s never had a Native American apply for a position, but he does have a Native American who works as a freelancer with Canadian stories.

“Our staff is more diverse than our population here,” says Christine Riser Kopidlansky, news director at WJHL-



In the Tri-Cities area of Tennessee and Virginia, minority candidates are surprised to find the area “so white,” says Christine Riser Kopidlansky, news director at WJHL-TV, shown here reviewing research material with reporter Lara Moore. That makes recruiting difficult.

TV in Tri-Cities, which straddles Tennessee and Virginia and ranks market 91. That’s actually not very diverse. The minority population in the area is under 5 percent, and the newsroom is a little over 5 percent—with two African American employees (producer and anchor) out of 35 full-timers. The lack of diversity in the area makes it harder to recruit, Riser Kopidlansky says, and minority candidates are surprised to find the area “so white.”

Rewarding Experiences

Low starting salaries are a real problem—possibly more so for minorities graduating from school with student loan debt and a smaller chance of having parents who can continue to subsidize underpaid, struggling children.

The last minority working in news at WIFR quit last fall. “He came in and said he [couldn’t] afford this,” Smith says. The African American reporter/photographer said he could make far more money working outside the business.

Budgetary concerns are not easily changed. But a good work environment can go a long way toward making the lower salaries worthwhile. “Creating the right culture in your newsroom is

Overcoming Challenges

Be committed. Find a diverse newsroom, and you’re going to find either a news director or a company—or both—committed to diversity. Even in a country that’s about one-third minority, a diverse staff isn’t any more likely to happen accidentally than an overwhelmingly white one.

Keep a minority-friendly environment. That means a minority candidate you bring in for an interview has to feel welcome and wanted. There’s some measure of self-fulfilling prophecy here, because the more minorities you have on staff, the more likely you are to be able to recruit more. The more those minorities feel welcome and encouraged, the more likely they are to help recruit others.

Make contacts. Susana Schuler at Nexstar found that many of the minorities she talked to at a UNITY conference had seen her ads for jobs but hadn’t applied. She still doesn’t know why, but that direct contact at UNITY led to a review of 300 tapes and five minority hires. Advertising in the usual places will get the usual applicants. Contacting local (and other) universities can help, but it’s not a substitute for visiting the school and establishing a relationship with at least one key faculty member. And contact the various minority journalism groups—along with local and area minority organizations. The more people who know that you’re looking for someone, the more applicants you’re likely to get.

Chris McIntosh

important for having an atmosphere that recruits well,” says Schuler. “I don’t think any of our stations are purposely hostile to a diverse newsroom. I just think that if they don’t give it thought, it’s not going to happen on its own. It’s just like recruiting.”

“Diversity is a consideration (in hiring),” says Steve Voorhies, news director at WJHG-TV in Panama City, FL, “but I’m not going to hire somebody because they’re a minority—just like I [won’t] not hire them because they’re a minority.”

Voorhies has hired two of the three minorities in his newsroom during the year he’s been there. That makes the newsroom 13 percent minority; Panama City’s home county is just over 18 percent minority—almost two-thirds of that African American.

“In the last few years, the percentage of minorities applying for positions is quite high compared to the rest of the population,” says Mike Conklin, news director at KIMA-TV in Yakima, WA. Conklin says he’s had little trouble finding minority applicants. He estimates that half of the women applying for positions and about 30 percent of the men are minorities.

Three of his 11 staff members are minorities—that’s 27 percent. The minority population around Yakima is about 36 percent, primarily Hispanic with Indian a strong second.

Dave Rose, news director at KRDO-TV in Colorado Springs, CO, says how conscious you need to be about diversity depends on what your staff looks like. “If you’re not diverse,” says Rose, “then you better be pretty conscious [about diversity].”

At about 30 percent minority, Rose is confident his newsroom reflects the community. Colorado Springs is about 16 percent minority—about two-thirds of that Hispanic.

Keeping Good Hires

Recruiting isn’t a problem, says Rose, but retention is. With Denver just up the road, it can be a struggle to keep good people for long. Rose, like many



Two years ago, KXTV in Corpus Christi, TX, had only a few minorities in a town where minorities constitute nearly 60 percent of the populace. News director Kent Harrell changed that. “You have to care that you have a diverse staff,” he says, “and you have to believe in it and want it and make it work.”

news directors, has been able to use the increasing number of newscasts to help keep people a little longer. Usually after the initial contract is up, Rose can promote them internally to keep people for another year or two. After that, it’s something of a struggle to retain quality minorities.

Retention is a problem for many news directors—often a larger problem than hiring. But there are some strategies that help.

First, promote from within. Rose and others follow this guideline, and it helps keep good people on staff. Bumping someone up to part-time anchoring or a better newscast can get them to extend their contract by a year or two. If the staffer in question has outgrown all the opportunities at your station, work to keep them within your company at a larger station.

If neither of those options works, help them get their next job and wish them well. This will help establish your reputation as a feeder station that does great training. That will pay back in referrals and word of mouth that will get you plenty of replacement applicants.

And the commitment doesn’t end once the staffer makes the move to a bigger market. About six months after

losing a staff member, Jensen says she calls the new boss to find out how that person is doing and what else she needs to teach. “I want to develop our name as a feeder place,” she says.—Bob Papper is professor of telecommunications at Ball State University, director of the annual RTNDA/BSU Survey and author of the “Broadcast News Writing Stylebook.”



RTNDF Diversity Toolkit

RTNDF offers the free Diversity Toolkit which can help you evaluate how diversity-friendly your shop really is—along with tips to strengthen that environment and help in recruiting and retaining minorities. Get yours at www.rtna.org/diversity/toolkit.shtml.