

# Chapter 1

# The Producer's Roles

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**“Because today’s producers have so much more responsibility, most formal job descriptions don’t work.”**

It’s a moment every producer experiences. You’re at a family gathering or a neighborhood party, and someone comes up to you and asks what you do for a living. When you reply that you work in television, the person then asks the inevitable question, “Have I seen you on the air?” When you say no, you’re a news producer, the person looks disappointed, having no idea what a producer does. It certainly doesn’t sound important. The person drifts away, unhappy that you aren’t someone famous like a news anchor.

People outside television, even some in television, have little idea just how important news producers are. However, as a producer, you play a crucial role in deciding what news the viewers see. You decide what the anchors do and say. You control the pace and flow of the newscast. You create a newscast valuable to the audience and to your station. Producing is incredibly important and increasingly complex.

Because producing as a career isn’t understood, it’s hard for news managers to find good producers. Few students graduate from journalism schools or communications programs with producing as a career goal. Faced with a small pool of producer applicants, news directors often hire bright people with broad life experiences and then train them as news producers.

Unfortunately, the downside of bringing in people without journalism training is that they don’t understand the basics of broadcast journalism. Producers first must be journalists, and learning to be an accomplished journalist is hard work. Producing is a demanding profession and it

doesn’t tolerate many mistakes. A simple lapse in judgment can end your career and even make you a national laughingstock.

No matter what your background, this handbook is designed to help you avoid mistakes and build a successful producing career. Whether you need help with the basics of broadcast journalism or ideas on how to improve your tease writing, this handbook provides you with all the information you need to become a “power producer.”



What is a power producer?

Basically, you become a power producer when you’ve taken the time and personal dedication to reach the top levels of producing—it’s when you’ve mastered all of the producer’s many roles. In this chapter, you’ll learn how you can become that unique and highly valued person. You’ll begin your development into a power producer by defining the job.

Power producers know they can’t do the job unless they understand what it is. The chapter ends with a valuable framework for you to use in understanding the full scope of your job: the seven roles of a power producer.

**What Do Producers Do?**

The way to start learning about your job is by defining it. How would you describe your job to someone who has no idea what producing is all about? Perhaps you might say that a news producer assembles the various pieces that make up a news broadcast. Then you get that broadcast on the air ... and off ... on time. Along the way, you write the copy, decide which story belongs where in relation to the others, and decide how long each story runs.

**Yesterday’s producers.** Twenty-five years ago, producers took the stories covered by the station’s reporters, along with stories based on wire copy, and arranged them in some logical sequence. Producers had little say in what stories were covered, and they gave little thought to the audience or how to make the news more relevant. Their main concern was getting the film edited and the stories written. These producers still exist, and are called “stackers and packers.” That’s not a compliment. Stackers and packers perform only two

roles: news decisions and newscast production. That concept of producing is limited.

**Today's producers.** Today, producers do far more. And power producers do even more. A power producer acts as journalist, news writer, production expert, promotion writer, team leader, researcher, and lawyer/ethicist.

### **A Formal Job Description**

Because today's producers have so much more responsibility than they used to, most formal job descriptions don't work.

A producer's role can vary from newsroom to newsroom. That's one reason job descriptions don't cover all your potential roles. Why producers in your newsroom work the way they do depends on your department's structure and history. It's important that you understand how your colleagues view producing because you must work within the newsroom culture to be successful.

**Talent.** For example, who originally produced the news programs—the anchors or the news director? If anchors used to be in charge, they may want to continue to tell you what to put in the broadcast. If the news director was in charge, he or she may take control of the rundown, leaving you the role of production assistant instead of producer.

**Reporters.** Does the station have a strong reputation for being a "reporters' shop?" In some newsrooms the reporters call the shots. This may limit your ability when it comes to creating your newscast. You may not have much flexibility in assigning story length and story order.

**Unions.** Although it is uncommon, some producers are unionized. This tends to be the case in a few stations and in the largest markets. If you are in a union, then you are limited in what you can do. You may be working for an executive producer from management who has the final say. Even if you aren't in a union, in large markets you

## **SAMPLE JOB DESCRIPTION**

This is a formal job description from a major-market television station, part of a large station group. It focuses on the mechanics of producing and covers some of the supervisory roles that producers handle.

### **A. Identification**

Job title or classification: News Producer  
Immediate supervisor's title: Executive Producer  
Department: News

### **B. Responsibilities**

1. Direct content, production, writing and execution of assigned newscast and news updates.
2. Direct and supervise the work of news anchors, including weather and sports.
3. Direct and supervise reporters and assignment editor.
4. Write, direct and supervise writers assigned to newscast. Review scripts.
5. Accurately communicate with the director to ensure the cleanest on-air product.
6. Ensure that all videotape is ready for air.
7. Select appropriate graphic and pre-production for best story presentation.
8. Perform other tasks as assigned by the executive producer.

### **C. Special Skills**

1. Ability to make difficult decisions under pressure.
2. Strong leadership skills and the ability to motivate staff.
3. Excellent editorial judgment and writing skills.
4. Strong organizational skills.

## THE FOUR STAGES OF PRODUCING

may work with unionized writers. You won't be able to write copy, only edit it.

### The Evolution of a Power Producer

Precisely defining the producer job also is difficult because producers evolve during their careers. That evolution begins almost immediately. Remember that it's impossible to graduate from any college journalism program as a power producer. You need daily experience in newsgathering and in the news production process. You can liken this need for real-world experience in broadcast journalism to the residency physicians must complete after medical school.

For example, you can't really appreciate the coordination and logistics it takes to get a big breaking news story on the air until you've done it. Imagine this scenario: A passenger jet crashes. You're alone in the newsroom producing the morning newscast, and you need to know exactly how to respond: how to get a bulletin on the air, whom to call in, where to send the live trucks and crews, and how to deal with all the networks and stations calling for tape or a live report. This isn't covered in a course or a textbook.

There are four stages of producing (see box). So if you are just starting, you must serve a residency as a beginning producer. You work through progressive stages before earning the unique status of power producer. And even if you have produced for a while, you still are evolving toward becoming a power producer. Where are you on the path?

### The Qualities of a Power Producer

Once producers have progressed to the power producer stage, they share common professional skills and qualities. Think about the best producers you work with now. Watch how they conduct themselves during the news process.

As you watch these producers in action, you'll notice that power producers share at least five special traits: presence, command, organization, passion and decisiveness.

**Presence.** Power producers have presence, and other people in the newsroom pay attention to the way they go about their job. When they say something or make a decision, people listen and respond. Other producers seek out their advice. Power producers command respect and are looked

After watching hundreds of producers develop during my career as a producer, news director and general manager, it's clear to me that producers go through four distinct stages. Of course, as in any progression, the lines between the different levels are imprecise.

**Stage One: Scared to Death.** At the first stage, the primary concern is just getting the newscast off the air on time. Who cares if the story flow doesn't make sense or weather was cut by 30 seconds, leaving out the forecast? The producer made it off on time. This is the white-knuckle or computer-hugger period that takes place when someone has just started. At this level, the beginning producer really is just trying to come to grips with the complexity of getting a newscast on and off the air.

**Stage Two: The Mechanic.** This is perhaps the largest group of producers. These are the stackers and packers. They can get the show off on time and assemble a clean-looking broadcast, but with the format dictated from above. At this stage, most producers are afraid to break the format. Heaven help them if a big story breaks. They won't know what to do because they're lost without the format rules. Mechanics seldom know much about the community, and they spend a good deal of time thinking about their next

up to by the newsroom team. Presence doesn't mean being an attention-getting dresser with red suspenders or a red power blazer. Producers earn their impact on the newsroom based on skill, ability and the way they work with others, not clothing and style. You, too, can create presence in the newsroom by the way you work with other people, and by being fair, open and honest. Communicate clearly, make good decisions and keep your cool. Presence is built by these and dozens of other traits that add up over time.

**Command.** When power producers speak, news teams swing into action. This is because power producers have earned respect. If you've been right before and won the team's approval, they'll do what you ask. However, you lose that respect and the ability to get things done if you ask your team to do something ill-conceived or unethical.

**Organization.** Even beginning producers recognize the need for organization, but power producers master organization and move through

job, trying to move up in market size. Their management skills are primitive, and they provide little leadership. Actually, they are often anxious and tense and have a hard time working with others. The mechanic just masters the mechanics of the news process and that's all.

**Stage Three: The Journeyman.** These are skilled craftspeople who travel from job to job earning a living. Unfortunately, this group is second only to the mechanic in numbers, and they're common even in major-market news departments. They don't produce shows with creativity or flair, but are reliable and hard-working, and they won't get the station in legal trouble. These producers know the mechanics and something about the community, but they aren't really involved. Their organization skills are good, and they don't often show anxiety. They have enough management skills to get others to work reasonably well together. However, journeymen have a hard time thinking "outside the box," a favorite news director cliché for creativity. Unfortunately, these producers also won't ask others to do anything new or challenging. They aren't leaders.

**Stage Four: The Power Producer.** This is the highest level of producing, and it's difficult to find. Unfortunately, just when a producer shows any of the traits of a true power producer, he or she is often promoted to executive producer.

the daily news production process with ease. They manage their time well and take care of tasks promptly, with a minimum of fuss.

**Passion.** Power producers have a passion for news. Their dedication to news is always near the surface. You see that passion in their story ideas and knowledge about current events. It's also evident in the decisions they make as they build the rundown. They come in without being called when there's a big story. They want to be part of getting the story on the air and are willing to do anything to help the newsroom.

**Decisiveness.** Power producers make decisions. They don't hesitate. They understand that a clear sense of direction and purpose may be more important than being perfect. It's better to make the wrong decision than no decision. At one station, an indecisive producer always led his rundown with a story entitled "TBA" (to be announced) because he was always waiting for a better lead. Hardly a decisive way to build a newscast.

### The Eight Roles of a Power Producer

Power producers develop these common traits because they realize all the demands of producing. Producing is not a list of things to get done every day. Producing is about the different roles a producer plays in creating and executing a news program. Think about your day and what you accomplish. Every task you do fits within one of these eight basic producing roles:

- Journalist
- Online journalist
- News writer
- Production expert
- Promotion writer
- Team leader
- Researcher
- Lawyer/ethicist

Power producers take these roles and make them part of who they are. They learn each role through hard work, experience and perseverance. You become a power producer once you master each role. Take a closer look at each role and think about how vital it is to quality producing.

**Journalist.** Power producers are first-class journalists and reporters. They have a professional drive to inform viewers about their world.

Producers at this level think like reporters, have their own news sources and are in touch with the community. As journalists, power producers deliver on the promise to provide accurate, fair and balanced reporting. They demonstrate this role as they build their rundown and develop enterprise stories.

**Online journalist.** In our new multiplatform world, television stations are delivering news and information not only via old-fashioned over-the-air television but also on station websites, over wireless devices including cell phones and on additional digital channels. This means you are producing for the Internet as an online journalist/producer. Power producers know how to package and write for these new content platforms. Writing for the Internet is different from writing

#### TIP

### SCREAMERS, PROFANITY AND CONFUSION



There's a macho idea in some newsrooms that you have to yell at people or belittle them to get something done. In television, these people are called screamers. They only add to the confusion, particularly when something goes wrong. Power producers develop an ability to stay calm and focused, even in high-stress situations. They set an example.

for air, and the type of video that attracts television news viewers may not work for web users.

**News writer.** Power producers are excellent broadcast news writers, and understand how to match video, sound and words to tell a story. While some producers slip into clichés and non-conversational writing, power producers don't. They know how to command the viewer's attention and interest. They can sell a story.

**Production expert.** Power producers master the mechanics and showmanship of television production. How do you know you're in command of production? It can be little things—like looking at a rundown and realizing a script time is missing, or knowing just how long it takes a tape editor to get a new lead story done. Power producers know how

to manage their own time and how to manage the complex production process. If you aren't comfortable with the technical side of producing, it's difficult to become a power producer.

**Promotion writer.** Writing teases that hook viewers and get them to stay to the end of your newscast is only part of what you need to know about promotion. Power producers understand the importance of teases and how this daily task is tied to the station's promotion and marketing. They also understand that a good tease is journalistically accurate and doesn't mislead.

**Team leader.** Leadership is essential to developing into a power producer. A power producer leads a team. It takes dozens of people from different departments to get a newscast on the air.

## *The Producer Survey* **A Survey of Local TV Newscast Producers: Their Wishes and Wants**



**Janice Gin**  
*Associate News Director*  
*KTVU-TV*  
*Oakland, CA*

**A**t times, producers have the feeling that no one else understands or shares their

problems. This survey indicates that you are not alone. Most producers share the same experiences. For instance, there is little formal job training. News directors aren't good about coaching and feedback, and "people problems" are a major headache. But in the end, producers get a tremendous creative lift out of the job.

As you go through this handbook, you will find answers to most of the producer concerns identified in this survey.

You'll learn how to get past your lack of training, how to deal with people on and off the air, how to stay involved in your community, and how to make producing even more fun and more rewarding by evolving into a power producer.

In 1997, Janice Gin conducted a survey of local television newscast producers. Gin, then executive producer at KGO-TV in San Francisco, conducted this research while preparing to be a visit-

ing faculty member at The Poynter Institute. She wanted to know what producers need and want from their newsrooms and news managers, so they can do their jobs better.

What follows is a representative sample of the responses of two dozen producers from across the country. The participants had different amounts of experience and came from various market sizes.

### **Gin Asked Producers:**

*Looking back to when you first became a producer, what would you want management to tell you or teach you to make your job easier and your performance better?*

- Clearly define

Power producers have the ability to draw out the best from others on the team. This means working with an attitude of mutual respect and creating a positive environment.

**Researcher.** How can you communicate with your viewers if you don't understand how they live their lives and what they expect from television news? To successfully present the news needed by the audience, you must develop an accurate mental picture of the audience. This is tough to do for many reasons, so you need to research your audience.

**Lawyer/ethicist.** A power producer has the experience to know what kind of story could present legal problems, and what kind of story raises ethical issues that could embarrass the station and

damage credibility. Power producers recognize when to call in the news director or the lawyers, or when to kill a story because of ethical concerns.

Mastering all eight roles of producing is power producing. Now that you know the basic framework of producing and journalism, you've completed the first step to becoming a power producer. You also know how power producers evolve and how they do their job. To be successful, you need to make this framework the basis for your own career.

In the next chapter, we'll tackle a more practical side of your job—getting the news and getting it on the air. This is the first and most important role of a power producer, that of journalist and reporter.

expectations.

- Explain news director's philosophy.
- Give me feedback on what management likes or dislikes.
- Explain the target audience.
- Tell me what they want. Be consistent. Don't tell me it's my show and then at every turn challenge and change my decisions.
- Teach everyone in the newsroom that the newscast is a team product.
- You can't do the show alone, and you depend on others who might not always come through.
- Producing is as much managing people as it is managing the news.
- Ninety-nine percent of the battle is making your anchor happy.
- What segments or

talent are "sacred?"

- Explain the relationship between producers and anchors and producers and reporters. Also, explain how to get the anchors more involved in the newscasts and how to give them feedback and guidance.
- Ratings are the real story, not the well-being of the community.
- Recognize a job well done; a pat on the back is nice.
- Emphasize storytelling.
- Learn how to handle pressure in the booth and how to make decisions under pressure.

*Describe how you learned your job as a producer. Who were the people who were the most helpful in this process? What made them so?*

- I taught myself by observing other producers. They also gave me advice and ideas about what to do, but trial and error was the most effective way to learn producing.
- Observed other producers. One in particular was well-rounded with knowledge about the community, news events, history and journalism. He set a good example.
- News director shared his philosophy during one-on-one sessions.
- Casual comments from the news director during the newscast.
- Learned writing from other writers in the newsroom.
- Anchors provided direction by telling me what they needed in order to do their jobs.
- Sink or swim

method of learning by doing.

- I learned by doing 10 shows a week for three years.

*Now that you have been producing for a while, what areas do you feel you still need to improve on?*

- Writing.
- Tease writing.
- Learning the market/community.
- Communicating with colleagues.
- Interpersonal skills—how not to be abrupt with people.
- More creativity with graphics and animation.
- Understanding the lead-in audience.
- Not internalizing stories that are close to me.
- Patience with reporters.
- Dealing with management. How to deal

with a lot of cooks in the kitchen.

- Time to look for memorable moment opportunities.

*As a producer, what is your biggest complaint about your job?*

- Managers who micromanage.
- Managers who call into the booth during the newscast asking questions about what they just saw and didn't like.
- Managers who make changes without understanding the circumstances of the moment or the background.
- Management's lack of understanding of simple physics, specifically the space-time continuum. You can only put so many stories, breakout elements, and graphics in the space of one newscast.
- Working with reporters, especially young reporters.
- Executive producers not backing producers, not taking an interest in the day-to-day issues, not pitching in to help (i.e., write a script), siding or giving in to the anchor over the producer.
- Reluctance of others to do new or different things.

- Not enough time to do everything I want done in the newscast—to think about graphic designs, full-screen text and other production values and to tweak scripts.
- Co-workers with bad attitudes.
- News can be depressing, especially bad news stories such as murders, fires and accidents.
- Long days.
- Not a great salary.
- Not enough support staff. Managers need to ask if we have enough help to allow us time to think about the content and presentation of the newscast.
- Never get an opportunity to be in the community. Most producers lose touch with the people they write about.
- Anchors do so little for so much pay and credit.

*What is the one thing that you like most about being a news producer?*

- It's fun.
- Making things flow.
- Seizing creative opportunities.
- Every day is different. Challenge to be creative when there's "no news."

- Crafting the newscast and seeing it come to life on the air. Seeing what you wrote on paper turn out the way you wanted it to look on the air.
- The excitement that comes when juggling several different things at once during the show and then seeing it come off without a hitch.
- Writing and seeing the vision of the newscast on paper become reality.
- Making an impact. Developing and presenting stories that affect people and community issues.
- The power to help shape the mentality of the viewers as it relates to certain issues.
- Doing good stories that have a positive impact on the community. Brave enough to not do what everyone else is doing that day.

*As a producer, what keeps you motivated?*

- Working with good reporters and anchors.
- A fair manager, someone who understands.
- Knowing that I can make a difference in society/community. I can have an impact on

- people's lives.
- I can help viewers see their community, country and the world in a realistic manner that makes their lives richer.
- Every day is a new day.
- The idea of creating a different newscast every day.
- Having the opportunity every day to tell a fabulous story.
- Wanting to be the best.
- Being the first to know. Being part of the big story.
- When there is a "win" every day.
- My family—and knowing that I have a peaceful place to come to every night.
- Paycheck.

*Other comments:*

- Want more input into manager's decision on what will be placed in my broadcast, specifically rating-period stories.
- Training workshops are very important but often seem to be overlooked. Managers have to make the time.
- Value the experience of others on the staff. There's a wealth of knowledge.