

Gearing Up for Fall Elections

by Judy Flander

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Quality election coverage means bringing your viewers and listeners the information they need to make an informed choice. Here are tips to help you gear up for your best coverage ever.

In recent years, the media have been refocusing their attention from the political horse races to the issues at hand. Many news managers are preparing for election coverage that is more than politics as usual.

Radio and television stations have the inside track in covering local candidates and issues. In fact, they are likely to have the most involved and receptive audiences. "Right now people are turning their attention to communities," says CNNRadio's Robert Garcia. He says that the country is at peace, the economy is good, and scandal doesn't interest them anywhere as much as bridges, roads and schools. "They don't want to know a whole lot about Vince Foster. They want to know a lot more about whether their kids are going to get a good education."

Today's candidates fight their campaigns with TV ads and canned speeches. Handlers monitor their appearances, choose their words and try to control their airtime — whether with paid ads, scripted town hall meetings or rehearsed debates. These paid political consultants package the candidates as products for the greatest return — the most votes. In that atmosphere, it's hard to reach beyond the political screen and get to the real issues of importance to voters.

"Politics has become just a branch of the ad industry," says CBS Washington Correspondent Eric Engberg, who specializes in getting behind the political spinners. When you are up against sharp, ruthless paid pros, covering candidates and elections takes more preparation, more time and new approaches to get beyond the smoke and mirrors.

Counterattacking the Attack Ad

"We have a policy of not basing our coverage on the ad campaigns. I'm stubborn about that," says Bruce Johnson, news director of WCTC-AM in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Johnson says he urges his reporters to cover the politicians and the issues independently. He says it can be done, even though the ads are as provocative to reporters as they are to anyone.

One effective tool for foiling the spin doctors is the "Ad Watch," in which the reporter "deconstructs" the candidates' commercials. That's what Engberg does in his "Reality Checks," where he fact-checks the ads from beginning to end and passes on the results to viewers.

Ad watches are part of the coverage at WCVB-TV in Boston, too. News Director Candy Altman says reporters regularly do "truth tests" on ads. They also get advertising experts to help them analyze the ads to find the manner in which candidate messages are sent out — "subliminally or overtly."

There's no question that ad watches are time-consuming. But even smaller stations can do them on a limited and effective basis. "I would urge local reporters to use old-fashioned shoe leather," Engberg says, "taking even just one ad and checking the assertions with sources." Depending on what you find, he suggests matter-of-factly confronting the candidates with the facts and asking for an explanation. With the camera running, of course.

Still another way to expose phony rhetoric in campaign ads is "Stop the Tape," a popular election feature of KATU-TV in Portland, Oregon. For the task, News Director Mike Devlin hires local political guru Tim Hibbitts for the election season. Hibbitts researches the ads with help from others at the station, then rolls the tape until whoppers appear. Graphics flash across the screen — WRONG! — and on comes Hibbitts to explain what's really the case. Devlin says the research takes time, estimating that it can take Hibbitts 12 hours to do one segment.

Who Is That Candidate?

During a campaign a candidate usually puts many faces forward — whatever seems to please voters at any given moment. But who is he, or she, really? Take a close look at biographies and résumés. Check everything from age to college degrees. Engberg cites a story that's legend in the industry. Because it was suspected that presidential candidate Gary Hart was lying about his age, Washington Post reporter George Lardner asked Hart if he could look at his driver's license. Whoops. Hart had shaved a year off his life and a syllable off his name (Hartpence). Of course Hart got into worse trouble later.

Another famous red face was that of Wes Cooley, the Republican congressman from Oregon who lost his seat in the House when it was discovered that he'd been lying about serving in the Korean War. When Cooley finally confessed on camera it was to KATU's Washington reporter, says News Director Devlin.

The Money Trail Question

Campaign finance may be one of the least-covered campaign areas. Many news directors admit they don't do enough of it. They're concerned about the time involved and their reporters are often deterred

by what they perceive as particularly difficult reporting.

What they may not realize, says Chuck Lewis, executive director of the Center for Public Integrity, a candidate watchdog group, is that the Internet has revolutionized the job. Even five years ago, he says, it may have been a tedious job, “but now I can pull up the Internet and find contribution lists in 15 minutes.”

Lewis, a former “60 Minutes” producer, says he prefers the drama of television over print. “When you have a camera in tow, he explains, the accountability factor is immediately ratcheted up a notch or two. You can say, “How about that \$50,000 you got from so and so?”

Kristin Emery is an anchor/reporter for WFMZ-TV in Allentown, Pennsylvania, who has added campaign finance to her beat. Emery says she can use the Internet, but she usually uses her feet. For local or county contests, she goes to the election offices where candidates are required to file financial disclosure reports listing their contributors.

“You find out names, addresses, occupations and how much each contributes,” Emery says. “Sometimes things will jump out at you, like five members of one family each making contributions, or a contribution from someone with a criminal record. Look for similarities, for what the contributors have in common. Find out all you can about the contributors. Someone might list occupation as housewife and be up for an office. Or someone could be the wife or friend of someone who is in power.

“Look for clues. What committees do they sit on if they’re already in office? What issues are they interested in? It’s a match game and you’re finding pieces of the puzzle.” Emery says that even if you don’t uncover a scandal, the payback is

that you have added depth to your coverage.

Also, remember to check out the laws governing campaign finance in your state. The state house should be able to point you in the right direction for that information. At the national level, the FEC is the place to look.

Let’s Go Polling

Poll results come in from multiple sources depending on how many a station accesses. Voter News Service, a cooperative effort of ABC News, CBS News, NBC News, Fox News and the Associated Press, services 200 stations. Local affiliates use their networks for national polls; many use CNN and CNNRadio reports. A common practice is to hire outside pollsters. KATU’s Mike Devlin uses his hired hand, Tim Hibbitts, for polling. The station does two polls, one seven to 14 days out and the other on election night, bringing in about a dozen people to do the job. During election evening, Hibbitts, equipped with a wireless mike, roams the newsrooms, looking over shoulders, assessing the races and — almost 100 percent of the time — accurately calling them.

Many stations do their own polls to keep viewers and listeners posted on local races. On election night, many stations commandeer staff stationwide to make the calls; others hire local pollsters. Some have volunteers. One source is the communications department of a local college. Lucy Himstedt Riley, news director of WSFA-TV in Montgomery, Alabama, and RTNDA’s chairwoman, uses journalism students from nearby Auburn University. A few years ago, Ric Smith, an instructor at Auburn, suggested the idea. “No extra credit,” he says. “I stress the importance of real-world experience.” On election night, Smith brings eight students in and they go right to work. “About half of them go out to

the sites and scope out when candidates might be arriving. The others stay in the studio and “run the numbers.” Anchor/Managing Editor Bob Howell, who has been with WSFA for 21 years and has never lost his enthusiasm for election coverage, loves using student volunteers. “These are bright kids who want to be here.”

Gearing Up For Election Coverage

For many — but not all — news departments around the country, election coverage begins after the primaries. Once the cast of characters is in place, you can begin planning and strategizing, gathering material and dogging candidates.

“Our strategy is to cover the political scene going into the primaries, then to gear up,” says Bob Freeman, news director for WFIE-TV in Evansville, Indiana. Freeman has 13 reporters, eight of whom are also anchors, so he assigns each to a particular candidate. “They are well-versed come election night, and they have news nuggets that give perspective.”

Freeman assigns his anchor-reporters to the major candidates. He likes them in high-profile positions, particularly on election night, when he wants viewers to turn to the station and to the familiar faces they trust. They do. “We are tops among four stations, and the other three stations are very, very competitive.”

“It’s a matter of getting people tuned in early,” says WCTC’s Johnson. “You can’t start doing it in October.” His reporters don’t all have to be political experts, but they have to know what they’re talking about. So information is gathered, collated and distributed in the newsroom, and everyone is expected to be on top of issues and candidates. “We prepare our people to the utmost,” Johnson says.

Devlin in Portland continually updates a binder of detailed elec-

tion coverage expectations for both reporters and technicians. "It says, by this date, we have all names; by this date, all the coverage mapped out, and so on." The binder also includes directions on "how we all communicate with one another," exchanging information during the year and coordinating election night.

Todd Hallidy, news director of WDEL-AM in Wilmington, Delaware, has his small staff begin working on the campaigns a year before election night. "We look at upcoming primaries and state races and map out how much coverage we'll do," Hallidy explains.

Brad Smith, news director of market leader WHAM-AM in Rochester, New York, says his station doesn't plan ahead for election coverage. He prefers to cover elections like breaking news stories. He doesn't go in for debates and town halls. "I'm not a big believer in forcing news down people's throats," he says. "I'm not a big booster of community journalism." While Smith prefers to cover elections as part of the day's news, reporters are assigned to particular candidates. "We don't do the big push. If there's an event or a reason to get into it, we will." He and his crew of eight seek out local issues to cover, though, such as a state budget crisis or the long-standing need for better bridges and roads.

Doggin' the Candidates

At WDEL, reporters cover the candidates year-round. "We shadow these guys all year and we have contact with the party leaders, so we can stay on top of what's going on," News Director Hallidy explains. "The two most well-versed reporters actually cover the beats — these guys know how to get candidate interviews first and exclusively." But the rest of the staff covers elections, too. One goes to all of the state conventions and sends back hourly updates. Others

do debate coverage, candidate profiles, the works. Hallidy says there's also a concerted effort to report on the views of candidates who can't afford much advertising. "You try to educate your viewers. It's the image thing. You show that you're on top of things."

CNNRadio, with 500 U.S. affiliates, provides many stations with their national coverage and gives auxiliary backup. In the last election, CNN Anchor Dale Willman took a "Charles Kuralt on-the-road" trip through America, interviewing voters. Come election night, he called some of those ordinary folk back.

Stations with full-time political reporters will be covering this year's election with the 2000 elections in mind, adding perspective and depth. Joe Householder is political reporter for KTRH-AM in Houston. He's already excited about the next presidential election. "The Southwest is going to be a nice little-hotbed to cover," he says. Republicans are making noises. Dan Quayle, who has moved to Arizona, has "shadow exploratory committees" at work; Texas Gov. George Bush Jr. wants it; Arizona Sen. John McCain, "a dark horse," has already hired staff, including John Weaver, a consultant for Phil Gramm's campaign 1996 campaign, says Householder.

What to Cover?

Campaigning candidates, no matter how much they're coached and groomed, provide opportunities for terrific election stories — and not necessarily the ones they have in mind. Even on today's tightly scheduled and scripted campaigning appearances, it's still possible for enterprising reporters to ask questions that help answer voter's concerns.

But often, when candidates speak, you have to listen hard. For example, if a candidate is preaching public safety and domestic violence,

he's probably after women's votes. Women voters are fair game, of course, but what candidate wants to be watched doing the wooing? KTRH's Householder recalls that when Rob Mosbacher unsuccessfully challenged Lee Brown for mayor of Houston in 1996, they both sounded these themes as they "made a big grab for women voters." During Mayor Brown's next campaign you can be sure Householder will be checking his progress on those "women's issues."

Just how much coverage should you do of news conferences and other candidate appearances? Most news directors agree that it depends on whether they are news. "We'll go down and see what they say and determine the value as a news story," says WDEL's Hallidy. "But I am reluctant to let our newscasts be an open mike for the candidates." WFIE's Freeman has pretty much the same philosophy: "We ask them what they're going to talk about that will be meaningful and important to the viewer. Not just, 'Hey, vote for me.' If that's what they want, I'll send them to our sales department."

Getting Voters into the Act

Heavy public involvement is an important part of WFIE's coverage. In "Ask the Candidate," the station asks viewers to send or phone in questions for the candidates. "You call, we ask the questions," says News Director Freeman. Then, whenever WFIE reporters have access to candidates they are armed with viewer questions as well as their own. They interject the viewers' questions during news conferences, in hotel lobbies and on planes — wherever they happen to see the candidates. They also add voter questions to their own during interviews. One or two weeks before the elections, the station puts the questions — in the viewer's words and voice — and the answers into the regular newscasts.

Town hall meetings are another way to get voter participation. If you can get one candidate at a time to agree to a dialogue with voters, bring in a studio audience and let them have at it. KATU runs in-studio town halls every Sunday night year round. WFIE runs them during the election season. And you'll find larger stations, usually in conjunction with other news organizations, participating in town halls at local facilities.

The Big Night

In a state like Oregon, where there are usually hot issues on the ballot, the voter turnout can be as high as 70 to 80 percent. Competition is particularly fierce on election night but KATU leads the pack, says News Director Devlin. They do that

by paying attention to the issues year-round.

WCVB's Altman agrees. "If you ignored the campaign you can't expect election night to be successful for either the viewers or the station. It has to be part of the built-in process if you want to be the place where viewers go."

Most broadcast news divisions gear up for what they invariably call wall-to-wall election coverage. That can range from basic, bare-bones, who's-on-first reports to candidate interviews, winner interviews and punditry. WDEL's Hallidy dispenses with all that analysis. "I don't know if it is up to us to define the course of history," he says. "As a full-service radio station, we don't spend time on the horse race and all it means. We tell them what they

need to know, but we don't show off how smart we are. You can't cater to the political junkies on your staff or you will lose."

"We cover it more as an event, as a breaking story," says WCTC's Johnson. "The reporter doesn't have to become a political expert to report elections. People tune in to hear [news], not how much you know. They want updated counts, they want trends, human stories, people on the edge of losing, people on the edge of winning."

"My tip is to get updated numbers as often as possible." Devlin's motto exactly: "The numbers first. The numbers fastest."

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