

Please note the new partnership on this research as it becomes the RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey. I am privileged to have joined the outstanding faculty at Syracuse. That's the name you'll see on the research from here on ... and that's what you'll see on the painfully long survey questionnaire later this fall.

Bob Papper

The Biggest Threat to Local TV News by Bob Papper

As you might expect, TV news directors view the biggest threat to their operation as declining audience. But some of the other answers might surprise you.

The question on the latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey was, "What do you perceive to be the biggest threat to the long-term health of your operation?"

It's the first time I've asked this question, but it generated more than 250 responses. That's really high for an open-ended question like this ... especially for the first time it's been asked.

At the top of the list: Audience. Specifically, declining audience, the fragmentation of the audience, increasing competition and the move to digital. All told, 36.7% identified audience erosion as the number one problem. To be perfectly honest, I'd have thought that would come in higher.

In their own words:

- "Netflix effect" - fewer TV watchers, forcing us to do more with fewer people and less money. It's turning people off the industry. They can work fewer hours, have less stress and make more money elsewhere.
- 24/7 digital consumption of news/information
- An aging audience.
- Audience erosion
- Audience fragmentation
- Changing viewing habits and their effect on the business model/advertising budget priorities.
- The decline of live television viewing/appointment viewing.

A surprisingly (to me) close second involved employee issues: recruitment problems, lack of good candidates, low pay, turnover, retention problems. All together, 31.1%.

In their own words:

- A lack of qualified candidates and low wages

- Difficulty in finding qualified employees due to competition from digital platform operations
- Diminished interest in broadcasting and journalism; a "shrinking field" of qualified candidates to hire from
- Employee retention, failing Journalism programs in some colleges/universities
- Fewer people entering the field, more people leaving the field, low pay with expectation to do more and more
- Finding quality, qualified journalists willing to work in a small market
- Having the ability to recruit and retain quality employees when much larger markets are hiring students out of college.
- Honestly? Being able to pay my team a living wage
- Lack of applicants and having to compete with larger markets for those potential employees
- Pressures of a 24/7 cycle on staff retention. I worry how many people leave the business after one or two years.
- Young journalists not staying in markets long enough to get solid experience. Constant churn of unseasoned reporters.
- Recruiting talent. Larger markets are going after folks we have targeted in the past.

Corporate issues came in third at 17.9%. That included budget cuts, staff cuts, a slowness of the industry to adapt and change with changing times.

In their own words:

- A system resistant to change
- Failure to innovate, particularly digital
- Balancing investment of resources in traditional revenue streams vs. innovation
- Commoditization of news
- Corporate ownership that takes the "LOCAL" out of local news with mandates and that we are "content" not news.
- Dilution of resources to the tasks at hand without adding personnel
- Doing more with less
- Far more local news programming than can be produced with truly relevant and important local news.
- How to make digital revenue comparable to traditional broadcast revenue, so the model for local stations continues
- Making sure we create relevant journalism that forces viewers to watch
- Outdated business model for revenue that does not match user consumption of content
- Spreading the staff too thin for the number of hours of local news they (owners/shareholders) want us to provide. Diminishes the quality of the product.

At 6.4%, news directors complained of a bad economy, weak revenue, the cost of living ... general economic issues beyond the control of the business.

Issues involving trust in the media came next at 5.2%. Fake news, negative media and the Trump administration were all named here.

In their own words:

- "Fake news"
- Credibility of the organization by the general viewing public because of the affiliation with national, network media
- Public perception of biased reporting
- The President of the United States

Other, at 2.8%, filled out the list:

- Keeping up with immediacy - viewers want it (news) right now
- Stupidity. Worthless content surrounded by basic mistakes

About the Survey

The RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey, funded in part by the Lawrence Herbert School of Communication at Hofstra University, was conducted in the fourth quarter of 2019 among all 1,702 operating, non-satellite television stations and a random sample of 3,427 radio stations. Valid responses came from 1,313 television stations (77.1%) and 673 radio news directors and general managers representing 1,996 radio stations. Some data sets (e.g. the number of TV stations originating local news, getting it from others and women TV news directors) are based on a complete census and are not projected from a smaller sample.

About Bob Papper

Bob Papper is Adjunct Professor of Broadcast and Digital Journalism at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University and has worked extensively in radio and TV news.