

A REPORTER'S CHECK LIST

1. THE CENTRAL POINT OF THE STORY ... What is the one essential element of the story that I want to put across to the viewer? How does it affect him?
2. WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT THE STORY? ... How can I depart from the traditional in terms of putting the story together? Does the story have historical value? Is there anything different about the story to impart?
3. ONE - OR A SERIES? ... Is this a once-and-done story or is this a first episode in a continuing series of two or more parts?
4. DOES THE STORY REQUIRE BACKGROUNDING? ... Has it been adequately and properly backgrounded? Need I, at this time, fill the viewer in on what the story is about?
5. HOW DO I BEGIN? ... What opening technique might I employ as an attention-getting device? What use of film or sound will improve the story?
6. HOW CAN I BEST CONVEY THAT I AM PRESENT AT THE SCENE? What use of film and/or sound will improve the story and enhance the feeling of being on the scene?
7. EFFECT ON VIEWER ... What can I say and show that will best bring the story home to the viewer? What aspects of the story have a direct effect on the viewers in my area? What can I do or say to broaden interest in the story? What can I do that will be different from what the competition is likely to do?

"THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A DULL STORY - ONLY DULL APPROACHES TO INTERESTING STORIES."



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ACTION NEWS

The Action News format began at WFIL-TV, Channel 6, in Philadelphia and was subsequently installed at all six Triangle Stations.

Conceived following an exhaustive motivational research study by Frank Magid Associates, the format includes many recommendations made by that organization as well as many more individual ideas growing out of the broadcast and personal experience of several people. Magid's recommendations went almost not at all to format but principally to human behavior and reaction, and the Action News format, which has since been embraced by a number of television stations across the country, is principally the child of broadcast people applying the excellent research work of the Magid organization.

There follow some of the basic principals of the Action News format as it was first developed and as it still remains effective.

The title was given the format after the development of the format, but it does - literally in two words - express the philosophy . . . Action News.

In concept, Action News is a television version of a radio "Top 40" newscast as contrasted with the CBS radio-type of news presentation. The whole concept, the entire feeling of an Action News half-hour or hour is, action.

Where a CBS radio newscast of 15-minutes duration might include 8 to 10 stories, the typical Top 40 newscast (lasting 3-minutes without commercials) might include 13 to 15 stories.

A top Philadelphia talent personality once wrote a memo at the end of which he apologized for its wordiness simply by saying, "I'm sorry this memo is so long; I didn't have time to be brief." This goes to a very basic element of the Action News format - writing style. It takes careful, close attention - and time - to write succinctly and expressively.

Action News then is a series of numerous shorter stories, carefully and closely written, giving all details but sparing the viewer the burden of wasted words.

A good Action News telecast of 30-minutes duration, including open, close, and commercials - should contain 25 to 30 stories of varying lengths and all kinds - straight news stories, sports stories, and weather stories; include more stories if possible, and have film or tape on at least 1/3rd of them - more when national news is included, as in the late news. Pace is important. The program should open with graphics that express action. These can be animated drawings, slides, film, special effects - any pictures that show movement . . . and action. It is desirable that an up-beat, inoffensive music background accompany these graphics -

"inoffensive" in the sense that weeks and months and years of use of the theme will not pall on the listener/viewer; but it should be a theme that is up and exciting . . . action all the way. Titles should be included in the graphics and over the theme. The opening narration over both is most important.

These comments must not be passive or modest. They should reflect the Action News feeling, the number one position of Action News; refer to the broad station coverage area, and must include words like "exclusive" . . . "exciting" . . . "number one" . . . "Anytown's first" . . . "Anytown's best" . . . etc. Opening copy should close with the names of the anchorman, weatherman, and sportscaster; the theme and the graphics should end as the copy ends.

The program then goes to a close-up shot of the anchorman who teases the news. The quickest, most effective way of doing this is to present it in the following fashion: "On Cyprus today, Turkish armor made new gains, and in Anytown, a 4-alarm blaze destroyed an abandoned warehouse, but the big story is a scandal of huge proportions in Anytown's Police Department. "

The anchorman then identifies himself, "Good evening, I'm Joe Doaks. " He then launches into "The Big Story. " It might be added here parenthetically that no one on the newscast ever refers to "everyone" - as in "Good evening, everyone, I'm Josephine Doaks. " It is most important to remember that television is principally a one-on-one situation - one news person or performer relating to one viewer - not to an auditorium filled with hundreds or to a room in which 5 or 6 people are sitting. The approach is always one-to-one - me giving you information that I have in which I feel you are interested. I must always feel that you are interested in me and you must always feel that I am extremely interested in you.

The general source of the stories is not important; if the big story is local or regional or national or international it should run first. The second biggest story, from whatever source, should run second; but unlike the pyramid theory of writing newspaper news stories, a television newscast should not, throughout its duration, have story follow story in order of decreasing importance with the big stories at the head of the show and the little stories at the bottom of the show. The two or three most important stories must run first, but after that, some of the "bigger" stories should be placed 5 or 10 or 15 or 20 or 25 minutes into a half-hour show; the viewer should not feel that he gets the main news in the first 10-minutes and the rest is trivia in which he need not be interested and, therefore, can leave the program. The viewer should always have the feeling that the whole program is important (as indeed it is).

Imaginative planning should be given to the placement of stories throughout Action News. Stories should be placed adjacent to one another for the purpose of pointing up unusual similarities or contrasts.

Placement of weather and sports segments is at the option of the director, but generally speaking, if a weather story or a sports story is not of unusual character or importance, news and sports should be presented in two segments in the last half of the program. For example, the sports segment might run 15-minutes into the show, the weather segment 20-25 minutes into the show. Weather, generally, is considered as a hook which will help to keep people watching - particularly in the late evening editions of the news. If the weather is unusual, or if there is an unusual sports story, it can appear up near the head of the show as a hard-news item with a reference to sports or weather details later in the program.

We've talked about the opening of the show, let's for the moment, leave the content and talk about the closing of the program.

The theme should be used over graphics similar to those used at the opening, or over outcuts, or over a repeat of film stories used on the program. Any credits should also be presented at the conclusion of the show. The theme should have a definite ending - preferably an ending that comes very close to being one or several music "stabs." The theme should be back-timed and frequently should be sneaked in behind the concluding story delivered by the anchorman. The theme and the picture should end at exactly the same instant and the screen should go dark for another instant before the commercial break begins. This kind of neatly tied-up ending gives the viewer the feeling that here is a well-produced news program presented by people who know what they're doing. The viewer doesn't understand back-timing or black or theme music or many other things, but he does know what he likes and what he feels is right, and even the most inexpert viewer understands poor production.

Frank Magid once told a Triangle meeting - as I am sure he told many other people - that listeners or viewers don't leave a station, they are driven away from it. Viewers will leave a news program if it isn't credible. One of the quickest destroyers of credibility is sloppy presentation and poor production - wrong films run when the anchorman calls for a story, failure to respond when the newscaster calls for a film or tape roll, stumbling over words - anything that might be summed up as lack of sureness or knowledge or poor presentation.

The last news story in every program should be a kicker - a story with a twist, a lighter news story or something of warm, human interest. The anchorman then says something to the effect that, "That's the news to the moment. Stay tuned now for _____ which follows. For (name of weatherman), for (name of sportscaster, and the entire Action News Team, I'm Joe Doaks." As in Top 40 radio, he should not say



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"Goodnight"; he has, after all, invited his one-person audience - you - to stay tuned for the network news, or for the network variety show, or the syndicated program, or the movie, or whatever. Though he's leaving you, the show goes on. The anchorman just smiles warmly and pleasantly and says with his whole manner that he hopes you'll have a good evening, or a good night's sleep - as you wish. He doesn't turn you off.

Backing up further: just ahead of the kicker story comes the wrap. This should be 4 or 6 or 7 brief stories, 15 to 20 words each from around the viewing area but outside the city of license or other principal cities in the coverage area. If possible, at least two of the stories should be accompanied by film clips. In each instance, the dateline for the story is given by means of superimposition over the anchorman's shoulder. He doesn't waste time by saying "Vestal" or "Beckley" or "Bedford" or "Annville." But he does repeat the name of the town where the incident occurred as he delivers the story; "A group of teen-agers in Annville conducted a 37-hour basketball marathon which netted \$400 for Muscular Dystrophy." Some stations put this wrap-up 10 minutes into the program, 4-minutes into the program, 12-minutes into the program, etc., and this is wrong. It should be what it says -a wrap-up. It should be done at an extremely rapid pace without the short transitional phrases that characterize the remainder of the newscast. (This will be discussed shortly). Only if transitions come easily should they be used in the wrap; here we're looking for speed of delivery and no wasted words.

The concept is based on the Walter Winchell radio broadcasts where Winchell used to say at 9:14 on a Sunday evening, "And now let's race the red hand around the clock." The concept is that the wrap-up is intended to take up all the loose ends to make that one viewer watching you feel that the station is really on top of things and that it has covered everything of consequence that is happening everywhere - yea, even unto the smaller communities outside the major towns served - surely, from time to time, the very neighborhood in which he lives. It is intended to leave him breathless and ready to accept the good news which comes immediately in the form of the kicker, followed by a thoroughly professional, well-produced termination of his favorite news program.

Let's talk about the writing. As mentioned above, it should be tight, crisp, descriptive and packed with action words. A fire "roared" out of control, not simply burned out of control. The Phillies "bombed" the Reds, not simply beat them. Or, the Pirates "shaded" the Phillies. Throughout our news, sports, and weather we're looking for dramatic, descriptive, action words in key places, although this writing must not be overdone.

We're looking for a transitional phrase between each two stories. Transitional phrases can tie together stories of a like nature - disasters, accidents, money matters; or transitional phrases can tie together stories of a dissimilar nature: "While the stock market was down, there was a brighter financial picture for Jim Smith. The young man from Vestal found \$2,000 in a grocery bag in a sewer along the Parkway this morning." Or, to illustrate the dissimilar story transition: "While there was bad news from Cyprus, the people in State College found good news on their doorsteps this morning; the State College Gazette has resumed publication after a 10-week strike."

The transition helps the viewer to understand. It puts things in order for him. It tells him that you've finished one story and are beginning another. It can give pace and excitement to the news. It is a kind of oral punctuation that should help the newscaster. In the Action News format, there is always a transitional word or phrase.

In the Action News format there are always lots of pictures as well - film, if possible, or slides or graphics or generic slides. There must be visual action as well oral action. Cameramen should be told to look for unusual angles; reporters and producers should frame interviews or reports so that backgrounds of the main subject are visually interesting. Talking heads in front of paneled walls are drags on Action News.

Don't labor for sound-on-film when a politician's statement can be summarized in fewer words without the hemming and hawing. Show him on silent film and summarize what he said. Many times, of course, the voice is important, the moment is important and must be captured by sound-on-film.

Whenever possible, the Action News reporter should be seen in the film story. An excellent technique is to start or conclude a story by zooming in to the action or back from the action to reveal that the Action News reporter is actually "on the scene." Again, the most dramatic and unusual film backgrounds should be selected. The element of surprise is useful visually with an example: an Action News reporter relating a railroad story that ends with the camera pulling back to reveal the reporter sitting atop the caboose, or in the engineer's seat.

Don't hesitate to use wild background sound-on-film - the noise of a fire or a confrontation or a group of pickets or kids playing or dogs barking. Wild sound is action sound.

Stories shouldn't be allowed to run just to use up time. Tell the story on film and then get on to another story. By the same token, if you have a good investigative

report or good exclusive film, label those reports for what they are, use supers and let them run on and on just as long as you're saying something important. Work to get stories related locally to major national or international stories. Work to get different sides on major local film stories. The Convention Hall in Huntington has been voted through for \$12 million, what does the Mayor think? What does the man-in-the-street think? What does the shopkeeper feel about it? By way of reckoning, count each of these as one of the 25 or 30 stories desired in each newscast.

Do an "Action News Wants To Know" proposal and follow up - as often as you can find a good one to do. Do "man-in-the-street" interviews about important issues and vary the location from corner to corner, from town to town throughout the coverage area. Have a good stringer system and use your stringers. Sign off each stringer report or each report from a regular reporter with something like "Freda Fearless, Action News, Oakhill." Introduce the reporter: "With that story, here's Action News reporter, Freda Fearless." Use that kind of introduction. Don't have the reporter repeat his or her name. Start the story, save the words.

Abundant use of supers over stories should be used to self-promote Action News. Words such as "special," "late film," "exclusive" along with "Action News, TV 00" should be used often. If we don't show pride in the news coverage, we are missing an important promotion technique. Such terms should also be used by the news people themselves within the stories and as part of the lead-ins to stories.

The sports segment should be relatively brief and limited to relatively important sports matters. The segment without commercials should almost never exceed 3-minutes - and neither should the weather segment. Major League scores of scores of any kind - baseball, football, hockey - should be shown visually by league division and never, never - well, hardly ever - read by the sportscaster. If the camera runs over the scores, he should comment, "Nolan Ryan pitched a three-hitter; Mike Schmidt batted in 7 runs; Jim Wynne hit a grand slam; Harold Carmichael caught 11 passes for 287 yards and three touchdowns." Any amplification of scores should relate almost totally to the local favorite team. Other references should be simply to point out winners or losers - "Los Angeles dropped Houston; The Lions annihilated the Tigers; The Rams squeezed out a win." The only time the score ought to be read when it's visible for the viewer to read on the screen, is when the score or circumstance is unusual. The sportscaster should try for interviews - on tape or film in natural settings (at a practice, before a game, after a game). Too often the news is action and the sports is inaction.

The weather segment, likewise, should run no more than three minutes except in unusual circumstances. Current conditions in the forecast should be presented clearly. A five-day forecast is exceptionally desirable; a two-day forecast is essential. The weatherman, too, should strive for descriptive and colorful language. If he's competent to do so, the weatherman should explain weather patterns or occurrences from time to time - clockwise motion of the winds around a high, the meaning of rising or dropping barometric pressure, the significance of different cloud formations. He should use visuals to illustrate these comments in addition to the regular weather boards. The boards and the dials or the charts should be readily visible to that one viewer who's watching on a 15-inch black-and-white set. Never, ever rely on color to carry the story; remember the black and white and gray values. Remember that all sets are not 25 inches or bigger. Keep weather boards clean and uncluttered.

The exchanges, the quips among the three principals of the newscast live in the studio, should be warm and friendly with a quick reference to something of topical interest, if possible, or a little chuckle, if possible, but don't push it. Be nice guys or nice girls to each other. Don't put down the other guy except in rare circumstances and then only about friendly things (a particularly loud necktie, or a pretty dress, or a good tan, or a wild sports jacket). No references ever to physical features or deficiencies of delivery unless the relationship is friendly and obviously warm. Remember, we're always striving for accuracy, credibility, trust, and any reference to an earlier boo-boo is dangerous. Any comment is a warm reference only if it is handled warmly. It should never be a putdown - particularly as the anchorman is affected. We can kid a weatherman about a wrong forecast or a series of bad weather days or we can kid a sportscaster about a prediction that didn't come out, but it must be done in friendly fashion. We can never kid an anchorman about a word he's chewed up or about a story that ran out of sequence. He - or she - is RIGHT, THE AUTHORITY. We create this illusion, do not destroy it.

A word about appearance. Extremely important. Remember, you're in a one-on-one situation. If your hair is mussed, or your tie is crooked, or your jacket sticks out in the back, or you look bad after a bad night, the viewer will worry about you. Remember, your face fills most of that screen through much of the time you're on. Directors must be on the lookout to catch rumpled jackets, collars up or out of place, hair that must be smoothed or combed, ties that are askew, pins that are crooked, etc. Repeat - television is a one-on-one medium, and if you don't look right, look happy, exude confidence, that one at home is going to worry about that one on the tube.

Let's talk briefly about dress. We're in a time of turtlenecks and open collars and informality in many instances. We prefer to be somewhat more formal on Action News and for the men, jackets and ties are required; for the women, dresses or pants outfits of relatively modest or conservative styling - no halter tops or skin-tight jeans,

for example. If you were calling on someone for the first time, you'd probably tend toward the conservative side, and there are a lot of first-time viewers we don't want to turn off. Anyone will accept a jacket and tie; not everyone will accept a turtleneck or an open collar. Why chance prejudice when it can be avoided?

The same thing is true about hair and hair styles. Modestly modish hair is acceptable, but keep it neat and well-groomed. Anyone will accept neatly trimmed hair. Prejudices will build up among some over exceedingly long locks. Dress and groom yourself for the middle range or tending toward the conservative. You will be more credible with more people, and we're striving for credibility.

Many reviews of audience diaries show that a station's news audience will in great numbers view both the early evening and late news programs on the same station. It is important that the audience at 11 PM does not have the feeling that they are merely watching a repeat of the early news program. News stories should be rewritten, updated, given a new look for the second program. This can be accomplished with film stories by shooting sufficient film to allow the use of new footage in the late evening program. If important footage warrants being used in both programs, a fresh look can be achieved with the use of additional "B" roll or supplementary supportive film in the second program. Copy certainly must be rewritten for the 11 PM Action News stories.

Interspersing of top stories throughout the half-hour, special features like Action Reel, or other innovations that may be tried from time to time, all should fit within this format and all should follow the same basic rules. Obviously, there are going to be times in matters of great local importance where you put the book aside and do what must be done - periods of disaster or depression or great success or great happiness. There might come a time when the Flyers have won the Stanley Cup when a Philadelphia station might well spend the first 10-minutes of its newscast on the Flyers - or as much time as is needed to present many different elements of coverage. There will be times when a live interview with a top figure in the news involved in an important story is available. There are times when mistakes will be made and the professional will overcome these gracefully and without loss of aplomb. But by and large, the principles which have been set forth above are the ones to which we shall adhere.

The winners are the ones who produce the newscasts most people look at - one at a time - and most people will look at the newscasts in which they feel they're getting the most for the investment they have made in their television set - in information, in friendship . . . in ACTION.

September 1974

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'George A. Kachler'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.