

**PERSONALITY
DRIVEN**

PERSONALITY DRIVEN

The Secret Sauce for Selling News

By Raymond J Brune

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To my inspired accomplices at



*News 5
Newscenter 3
10TV Eyewitness News
News 4
The KTLA Morning News
World News Now
Good Morning America Sunday
E! News Live!
Eye Opener*

What a *rush*.

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FOREWORD

BY JERRY SPRINGER

I first met Ray back in 1983 when I was named News Anchor of Cincinnati's **NBC** affiliate newscast. Around the same time, Ray joined the newsroom as an intern. I'd been a councilman and then the city's mayor before running for Governor of Ohio. But politics wasn't in the cards for me. Television was. Within a year of joining **Norma Rashid** on the news desk, Cincinnati's *News 5* went from dismal third-place in the ratings to a solid number one. There are many reasons for that victory. Our News Director had made some dramatic changes in the stories we'd tell, who's telling them, and how they're told. He let me be myself rather than some outdated image of a pinched-faced news anchor with a booming voice and a just-the-facts disposition. The station put its reputation on the line when it allowed me to share my point of view



through daily commentaries I would present at the end of every

newscast. I'd give a hopefully unbiased reporting of the facts, and later share my perspective on non-partisan issues affecting our town and its people. These commentaries often became a hot topic of conversation in Cincinnati – viewers agreeing with me - or just as strongly disagreeing.

All the while, Ray was watching. He took what we learned from our *News 5* days and applied it to local and network newscasts in Los Angeles, New York and many places in between. He possesses a knack for turning regular newscasts into hit shows! I've seen it first hand as he's invited me on many of them as a guest when *The Jerry Springer Show* took off. This book is a fascinating "how-to" mixed with his memoirs of the TV people he's transformed into true TV personalities.

It's a great read. Informative as well.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jerry Springer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

2018

INTRODUCTION

Have you seen those **Conan O'Brien** segments? The ones where he edits a succession of local news anchors from around the country reading the exact same news copy back-to-back?

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #1 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

Yeah, we're all aware inside the industry that they're reading pre-written scripts from **CNN Newsource** or from their network affiliate's news feed. But when you actually see the footage, you realize just how manufactured local news has become. Sure, it's cheaper (and easier) to use the scripts sent down from the network rather than hiring an additional writer to put a fresh spin on them. Viewers weren't the least bit wiser – at least until Conan exposed our dirty little secret.

Just admit it. After all the media consolidation, the duopolies, the content-sharing, the arrival of automation, the advent of desktop editing and a newscast entirely run by a keyboard spacebar, local news has become as processed as a package of Hillshire Farms lunchmeats. Hold the mayo.

Originality (right-brain) has given way to *efficiency* (left-brain).

That's why so many viewers will tell you that local news *sucks* these days (me, among them). Local newscasts look *identical* to viewers – they're all the same. Despite the brand beating stations do, the breaking news hype, the severe weather scares, the so-called "terrorism desk", the parade of monitors and flashy set pieces, even the investigative stories that give one station an exclusive, the only way viewers differentiate one newscast from another - is by who's delivering it to them.

For repeat viewers, your talent is what determines your tune-in. Period.

So why are your anchors so middle-market mediocre if your entire business hinges on them?

That's where I come in. If news is what we sell, it's the *how we sell it* that is my expertise. My competitive edge - my ***creative edge*** - is producing personalities & packaging content around them. That's how you produce any "hit show" – whether it's a sitcom like ***Friends***, a talk show like ***Jimmy Kimmel*** - or even a little, local newscast. It's the law of attraction in action - personalities attract eyeballs - eyeballs attract advertisers - advertisers attract cash. Your personalities are the one commodity your station has that your competition can't touch. But who'd want them? They're not produced. Anchors are just talking heads - mouthpieces to deliver the content. And they're presented as such.

Local news managers will tell you they've got bigger concerns. Viewers are demanding news content on digital and mobile platforms. And have you heard the talk around the industry that the linear televised newscast is on its death bed?

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Exhibit A: Local news is still the #1 destination Americans turn to for news. According to ***Pew's 2019 Local TV News Fact Sheet*** report:

- ☑ The majority of news viewers still get their news from television, although viewership is declining in every daypart;
- ☑ When choosing between local, cable or network, local news is still the viewer's top choice;
- ☑ Your local news stations' websites are the sources the majority of on-line news consumers go to for news – more so than local newspaper's websites. That's especially true in smaller markets;

- ☑ In 2018, an election year, local stations raked in \$19.3 billion in over-the-air advertising profits – so local broadcast news is still a solid moneymaker
- ☑ According to Pew and the market research firm **BIA/Kelsey**, 82-percent of that \$19(B) was earned by the 829 stations that produce local newscasts

So, rest easy in the knowledge that local news is still a very profitable enterprise – not the money-printing machine it once was – but your newscast still pays for itself.

That said, television audiences are slowly but surely shrinking. In 2018, Pew found that 41-percent of adults got their news from TV – 37-percent on-line. Seeing those numbers, you'd think stations would be going all-out to alter their broadcast formats to attract new and younger audiences. But for the most part, they're not. And the reason is simple – they don't want to alienate the older viewers who make up the base of their audience. In most cases, the local station's strategy for using social media and digital platforms is to *promote* their on-air product to get those social media users to tune in to the linear TV show. In other words, social media users are not getting the news on the platform/app they're actually using – they're just being teased on that platform to return to the televised newscast to get details of those teased news stories. That's because stations haven't figured out how to monetize actual news content on digital and mobile platforms. It's the biggest problem facing local news at the moment.

Here's another problem. We are evolving into a “post-truth” culture. It's defined by the **Oxford Dictionary** as, “*reflecting a world where objective facts have become less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion.*” I could argue that **President Trump** actually personifies the post-truth movement. He shared his philosophy with **Billy Bush**: “*You just tell them and they believe,*” when Trump would lie about his ***The Apprentice*** ratings. He's constantly trying to convince Americans to believe something he says is true - regardless of the

evidence. His claim about the turnout for his inauguration is an obvious example. He insists more people showed up for his inauguration than for **Barack Obama**'s when photos clearly show the opposite is true. The *New York Times* estimated a record turnout of 1.8 million people for Obama and just one third of that for Trump. "Alternative facts" begin to hold more weight than actual facts. The arrival of social media and the emergence of fake news, especially when used as a political weapon, give post-truth its power. The denial of facts is becoming an epidemic. Climate change deniers, anti-vaccine advocates and evolution skeptics are leading this movement. Fake news is the propaganda pathogen of the information age. It's ironic that those screaming "fake news" the loudest are those mostly feeding the fire. Why every newscast in the country - local, cable, network, digital – isn't doing a regular "*Fake News Fact Checker*" segment is astounding to me. I'm not just singling out Donald Trump. Calling out every source of misinformation is just as much our job as delivering accurate information. You wanna earn some trust for your anchors in viewers eyes? Report the misinformation with facts supporting the truth.

Look. This is the essence of journalism. All of us who shuffle through the ranks of local news eventually drink the Kool-Aid. We begin to believe that we are working for a purpose bigger than ourselves – for Journalism. For Truth. When journalism inevitably jumped from local newspapers to local television, we inherited the core principles of any good journalist – integrity, impartiality and a search for the truth which was handed down from our print forefathers. We believed that any broadcast journalist worth his or her salt should never make more than \$45,000 a year – simply because *we're not in this for the money*. And God forbid if we should find ourselves producing or anchoring a show that, completely by accident, becomes a bonafide hit – well, we've violated those core principles we were supposed to protect and, essentially, sold out.

Bullshit!

Frankly, I don't see myself – or call myself – a journalist. Not that I'm opposed to being one or being called one. I am a TV producer – whether that TV is in your living room, in the palm of your hand or streaming on your laptop. News anchors, reporters, writers, photographers and news directors, they're the true journalists. Producers like me are the conduit through which their journalism flows to the viewers via a carefully strategized TV show. It's the producers' job to make their journalism interesting, engaging, and watchable. I produce *television* first, *news* second. That is exactly how you produce a hit TV newscast.

Someone has to be the right-brain creative force among the left-brainers that dominate modern newsrooms. That's not to say that I violate any of the rules of journalism in the process of getting a show on the air. I'm not some sleazy shyster who will sell my soul to **Nielsen** and throw out all journalistic principles for a tenth of a ratings point. I don't produce tabloid news and I don't showrun programs masquerading as



news with no moral or ethical compass. *I was raised Catholic for christsake!* I have guilt issues! So consequently, I work within the parameters of the principles of journalism to attract the eyeballs that get the ratings that allow the journalists to tell their stories.

And I have a solid track record in doing just that. I've produced local newscasts at **WSAZ** in Charleston-Huntington, **WLWT** in Cincinnati, **WBNS** in Columbus, **WDIV** and **WJBK** in Detroit, **KTLA** in Los Angeles, and the hybrid local news format *Eye Opener* in Chicago and Dallas. I've executive produced on the network level, at *Good Morning America/Sunday* and *World News Now* at **ABC News** in New York, and I was the VP of News for **E! Entertainment** and its global operation via *E! News Live*. I started up the 24/7 "live" **Fox Sports** network **TVG** which earned an **SNL/Kagan** valuation of \$3 billion in my third year. I was Head of Television for **Merv Griffin Entertainment** where my news background came in handy producing the **PAX** court docu-drama series *Second Verdict*, and I also EP'd *Lisa Williams: Life Among the Dead* for **Lifetime** and *Merv Griffin's Crosswords* in worldwide syndication.

I've also authored several books and written for the *Huffington Post*. I should warn you; I write quickly. I do so to keep that pesky "editor" inside my head from activating and blocking my ideas from the page. I quote **Ray Bradbury**, "*In quickness, is truth.*" I may jump from idea to idea throughout this book only because I have a lot to share with you. My success in producing personalities has mostly been with lighter morning show formats. Consequently, my examples tend to be light and loose and not always appropriate for more "newscast of record" formats at 5, 6 & 11. But have no doubt:

- ❖ **My techniques can be adapted for use in *any* newscast in *any* daypart. Success lies in how you produce your personalities – and how you pick, package and present your content. I show you how to do all of that.**

There are several dozen videos which can be accessed while reading this book. They're all available on one webpage and are clearly labeled. I can't guarantee some won't be moved or taken down without my knowledge, but I will keep the page as up-to-date as possible.

A word now about **Covid19**. This virus has thrown the local news industry for a loop! Presenting news in the age of Covid requires social distancing between all the talent, many of whom may be anchoring from their basements. Social distancing is the complete antithesis of what I advocate for with lighter, personality-driven formats. I want the “family” together around “the kitchen table”. And social distancing simply doesn't allow this for health and safety reasons. So oftentimes, a socially distanced show looks like a Zoom call – with family members each in their own box. There are often awkward pauses and people stepping over each other when they talk because of audio delays, but the “feeling of family” can still be achieved even if your screen begins to appear like the show open of *The Brady Bunch*. Hmm... maybe Brady producer **Sherwood Schwartz** figured out something about presenting “family” in boxes long before Covid forced us to revisit his way of producing family! While I am writing this book during the Covid outbreak, this is NOT a book about producing your personality-driven shows in the age of Covid. Most of what I discuss can be produced between talent “in boxes”, but the virus will eventually dissipate and we can get back to the family altogether at the kitchen table. That's the ideal.

Incidentally, I use the words “anchor”, “talent” and “host” interchangeably throughout this book – all referencing the person or people leading a show. I use the word “personality” quite specifically – referencing specific talent who have achieved a higher level of authenticity.

My enthusiasm is contagious. My passion is empowering. And the proof of the pudding is in the profit. I am honored that you are reading this. And I'm jazzed to share with you what I've learned from my first 15,000+ hours of live news I've produced.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name "Jay". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial 'J' and a cursive 'ay'.



CHAPTER ONE

...LIKE NO ONE'S WATCHING

Local news isn't rocket surgery. It's simply television. It's taking engaging personalities, putting them on camera, and having them tell stories – compelling stories that are sometimes funny, sometimes tear-jerkers, oftentimes tragic, but always relevant and authentic. That's it. Do that on any platform, and an audience finds you. Every time.

I know this to be true. I produced a newscast that - completely by accident - became a massive “hit show.” No journalism-focused, integrity-driven news producer would ever equate their local newscast with the likes of a “hit show.” I certainly didn't. But then a pattern developed. I had another hit show. And still another. I always thought hit shows were scripted, prime-time network comedies or dramas like *Seinfeld* or *This Is Us* or even reality and game shows like *American Idol* or *Who Wants to Be A Millionaire?* Those are hits. Who would ever label a lousy, little, local newscast a hit TV show?

❖ THE KTLA MORNING NEWS

The two-hour *KTLA Morning News* (*KTLAMN*), which I was lucky enough to start up from scratch, create, staff, and showrun from 1991 to 1997 in Los Angeles, became the highest-rated local morning newscast in, well, the history of local morning newscasts – that according to **John Reardon**, former President & CEO of **Tribune Broadcasting**. But it didn't start out that way. This was a local, independent station airing old reruns of *The Brady Bunch* five days a week at 7AM. A lot of viewers were pissed off when Greg, Marcia and Peter were replaced with Barbara, Carlos and Mark.

❖ THE PERSPIRATION PHASE

Phase One of our start-up newscast was our Perspiration Phase. It began on July 8, 1991 when we hit the air. **Barbara Beck**, recruited from a Miami station, and **Carlos Amezcua** discovered in Denver, were in





news anchor mode. They were reading the prompter, tossing to reporters **Eric Spillman** (imported from Vegas) and **Michele Ruiz** (from New York) on their daily live remotes, checking in with weatherman **Mark Kriski** (from some godforsaken town in Canada) and heading up to *SkyCam5* for **Jennifer York** (from New York) with traffic. All of our talent were unknowns in Los Angeles. Most of them couldn't pronounce *La Cienega Blvd.* or the city of *San Pedro*. Everyone on-air was polite and professional. It was exactly what you'd expect of a local morning newscast just finding its bearings. No more, no less.

At the six-month mark, few viewers at home were tuning us in. The ratings were #hash-mark city. We were all sure the show was going to be canceled. Management was not happy – but – there for the hand of grace, they gave us *the space to find our place*.

✠ THE DESPERATION STAGE

Then came the beginning of Phase Two – the Desperation Stage. The news wheel we'd been running on like caged hamsters wasn't working. Arguably, our show looked just as good and was as competitive as any local morning newscast in a Top 5 market, but something was missing. The anchors felt it. I felt it. **Lenn Goodside**, our director, felt it.



What happened next was either deliberate or completely unintentional – I can't remember which. We began to break rules. We began to bust out of our comfort zones.

We basically said, "*What the fuck!*"

The anchors began anchoring the show like no one's watching.

I began producing like no one's watching.

Lenn began calling the shots (literally) like no one's watching.

We found the courage to take some on-air risks never attempted before on a live, local TV newscast – because – what did we have to lose? No one was watching.

We were now doing the show *for ourselves*.

Eventually, the anchors just began talking to each other. They developed an irreverence sitting together at the “Altar of News,” the revered news desk, like a bunch of kids misbehaving in church. While one anchor was reading a news story, the other would get caught on camera reading a newspaper with his feet up on the news desk, completely oblivious to what’s happening on the show. They played the “underdog” card, comparing our lousy, little, local newscast to our direct competition, *Today* and *Good Morning America* and all the money those shows threw around. They read policy memos from the front office on the air – or bitched about the latest mandate to reduce



the company's FedEx bill. They just swallowed airtime like it was their play toy.

I got a call one morning at 4AM in the newsroom from **Sam Rubin**, a Hollywood reporter I'd seen on a **Joan Rivers** talk show. He'd been watching the show at home and saw an opportunity. *"Why don't you put me on to report some Entertainment News."*

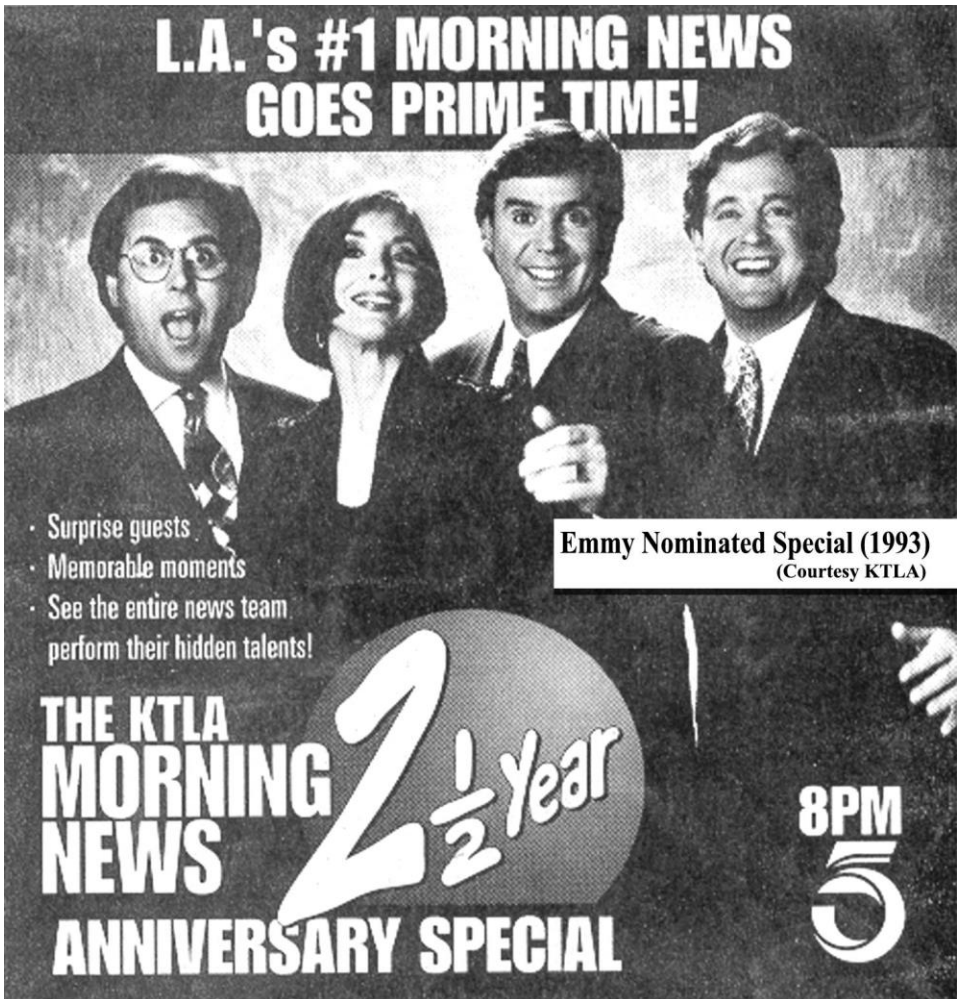
Well, what the hell! Can't be any worse than what we've got now. (That wasn't exactly what I was thinking, but you know what I'm talking about!) So, Sam joined the team. And with Sam came a host of celebrities we began booking as guests on the show. Fortuitously for us, it wasn't just *any* celebrities. There was a big mouth **Don Rickles** who complained about not getting paid to appear; a love-sick **McLean Stevenson** who was hitting on Barbara (in fun); and **Richard Simmons**, nearer my God to thee, *RichardfrickingSimmons*, who just didn't give a shit and did whatever the hell he wanted to do on-air. They completely shed any semblance of decorum (especially Richard in those trademark shorts), holding us and the shows hostage to their headliner hijinks. It was all happening right before our eyes.

For me, the toughest part of this evolving show was "letting go." As the producer, I'm responsible for bringing the show in on time. I'm responsible for getting important stories on the air. I'm supposed to be steering this **Titanic**. But the anchors, well, I suppose there was a mutiny, and they took the wheel. I had to learn to give up the control I was used to owning and turn it over to them. I fought it for quite a while. Really hard. I was in their ears wrapping them up constantly:

"Gotta go."

"We really have to move along!"

"You guys need to wrap."



“Carlos, please shut them up and move to the next story.”

“Page A15 – ‘Looking Ahead’ is dead.”

“We gotta keep moving guys”

“Please wrap, we gotta hit the 8 o’clock open on time”

On and on. I tried every tactic. Begging, pleading, yelling, guilting, bargaining. And reluctantly, acceptance. I went through the seven stages of grief right there in their IFB's.

Acceptance came after Barbara did something on-air that I will never forget. She looked straight into her close-up camera while talking – as if looking directly at me - and she pulled out the IFB in her ear! She was sick of hearing me wrap her over and over again! I was enraged – for about ten seconds. Then I realized we've got something good here. Just chill. My battle with “time” would become an everyday issue. I had to get commercial breaks in. I had to cover the big stories of the day, viewers wanted their weather and traffic, and we had lots of guests and segments that were regularly “teased”. So “gotta go” and “you're holding the show hostage” were always my go-to catch phrases, but I also realized how valuable the spontaneity of the show was to its success, so I made peace with never having enough time!

Lenn and I were constantly having to adjust to their on-air antics. I was still over-stacking the shows because, as a producer, you're terrified you're not going to have enough content to fill the hour. Trust me, that was never again a fear on *this* show! I was killing stories left and right – to give them more air time in the two hours – to keep this “work in progress” progressing. That's when the *Control Room Paper Wad Wars of 1992* first broke out. We were throwing away so many paper scripts per hour in order to accommodate their on-air shenanigans, that we started crumbling them up and whizzing them at each other while on the air. The control room floor was regularly caked in paper wads for the next six years or so.

As a rule, I was now going into the show 20-minutes light. That basically means I was missing 20-minutes of content needed to fill the full hour. But no worries. All their ad-libbing, their unplanned moments, surprise guests – all the stuff that viewers eventually embraced about the show would easily eat up the missing time.



✠ THE INSPIRATION PHASE

This was our transition to Phase Three – the Inspiration Phase. By this time, the show was really finding itself. Once we realized that this accidental format had legs, it was up to all of us to feed the beast – to keep it going. The show was a far cry from the serious newscast we initially had set out to produce. It was really watchable now. Our news coverage was solid. We never missed breaking stories. The anchors had truly evolved into compelling personalities. Director Lenn began shooting the show like a talk show rather than newscast style – meaning he would cut, cut, cut the cameras with the conversation – the close-ups just slightly closer-up than the old network style close-up every other show used. He'd linger on some shots just a skosh longer than normal. He never missed money shots like Vice President **Dan Quayle's** surprise when he didn't realize he was on camera, or Barbara's face being stripped of makeup by an over-affectionate puppy. The accidental *Signature Segments* we began doing were fascinating – like using the superzoom on the chopper camera to peer into the windows on the upper

floors of downtown offices buildings to watch people at work. We'd fly over the breathtaking estates of Beverly Hills and Bel Air and try to guess who lived there. And there was *Filthy Backyards* where we looked at all the junk in people's backyards trying to figure out what the hell that stuff was. There were all kinds of dancing on the set, in the newsroom and in the field long before **Ellen Degeneres** came along. But despite the proof that we were creating a really engaging show, the ratings didn't reflect that.



☒ THE SATURATION PHASE

At least not until the final phase. Phase Four commenced unexpectedly on February 12, 1992 – our ninth month on the air. It was a rainy day in L.A. Assignment editor **Toni Molle** called me in the control room. She was hearing unconfirmed reports of some serious flooding in Ventura County, 70 miles north of us. The only way to check it out would be to send *Skycam 5*, the news helicopter which was used for traffic coverage

every morning during our two-hour show. Now keep in mind, when it rains in Los Angeles, the freeways and surface streets are like ice skating rinks – car sliding everywhere from the oil and other engine fluids that had built up on the pavement. Rain is automatically the lead story. So, sending the chopper 45-minutes away was risky. If a big accident happened in L.A., we'd have no coverage. Toni and I ultimately decided to take the risk. And as I will show you over and over again, only with risk – comes reward.

Forty-five minutes later, we were “live” on the air with stunning, exclusive, first footage of flood waters racing through a Ventura County campground. News Photog **Martin Clancey** followed the surge actually pick up an empty RV, carry it downstream underneath the Ventura Freeway overpass where it was obliterated, its remains washed out to sea. We saw a rescue firefighter hugging a tree, trapped amid the muddy, raging waters. We spotted campers stranded on top of their vehicles with no escape. Our chopper pilot, **John Tamburro**, willing and able to make some rescues himself, was told to standby while Ventura County firefighters attempted rescues with their motor boats. This was, without question, the most jaw-dropping breaking news footage I had seen thus far in my career. And it was ours exclusively. The weather had closed in, keeping our competitors from getting their choppers over the area for hours. We sent **Eric Spillman** up with the satellite truck for his ground reports. Word spread of our live coverage and viewers by the thousands found us on that day with our kick-ass breaking news coverage.

► **VIEW VIDEO #2 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

This was our Saturation Phase. Viewers found us for the breaking news. They stayed for the personalities. Soon after, every day without fail for 14 consecutive sweeps periods, we beat **Matt Lauer & Katie Couric** on NBC's *Today*, **Charlie Gibson** and **Joan Lunden** on ABC's *Good Morning America*, and whatever doomed incarnation of the **CBS**

Morning News was airing at the time. By no means did I achieve this alone. I had amazing bosses including **Nick Van Hoogstraten**, **Joel (Mr. Tickets) Tator**, **Mark Sonnenberg** and **Steve Bell**. I had the on-air dream team of Barbara, Carlos, Mark and Sam (among many others) – names you may have never heard of but are legendary among Angelenos - and a staff of some 50 sleep-deprived co-workers. Once the format just sort of found us, and each of us was able to define our individual roles, we became a motivated, stimulated, empowered and completely in sync morning monster.

► **VIEW VIDEO #3 HERE:**
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You say, “*So, what? That was 25 years ago.*”

✦ THE SECRET SAUCE

True. The accidental “secret sauce” was first mixed together back in the early ‘90’s, but I’ve had amazing success repurposing that sauce ever since - two more hit shows for Tribune, another with the creation of *E! News Live* and I even put a smidgen of the sauce in two prime-time reality shows I created and executive produced. I sat in the KTLA control room overseeing four “live” hours, five days a week, 52 weeks a year for 6 years as the show expanded to four hours (currently, it’s on for 8 hours in the morning - 4AM to Noon!). I earned a Master of Arts degree in television producing at the *University of KTLA* - the hard way – I didn’t study it – I lived it. I could write a book the size of the Bible on the biggest buzzword in the industry right now - *authenticity*. The *KTLAMN* defined authenticity – something every TV host and news anchor is desperate to personify these days. I made hundreds of mistakes. I got lucky countless times. I took lots of risks – some paid off – others didn’t. I experimented and jerry-rigged and explored and scrutinized. Every element in that show - the news coverage and story selection, the ad-libbing and unplanned moments, the outrageous and possibly illegal uses of the telephoto lens on the news chopper, the

signature segments and surprise guests, the camera cuts and show pacing, the teases and the commercial break schedule – every piece of the program, no matter how insignificant, was tinkered with until it clicked with the personality *of* the show – and with the personalities *on* the show. All four hours were fiercely formatted. Each individual hour – *The KTLA Morning News - Early Edition* (6-7AM), *The KTLA Morning News* (7-9AM) and *The Morning Show* (9-10AM) had a unique, fluid and ever-changing template. The template was the starting point in the morning when I began stacking the shows – and the first thing I’d do was violate every rule of that template. The irony is - when you watched the show, you’d think it was completely free-form, no format whatsoever, it just ebbed and flowed at the whims of the on-air team. I have well-earned lines on my forehead attesting to the fact that this ebbing and flowing was stressful as hell in the control room – and not nearly as whimsical as it appeared on the air!

► **VIEW VIDEO #4 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book



✠ MONSTER MONEY

Let me translate this “success” for you in cold, hard cash. In the first two years of the *KTLMN*, Barbara, Carlos, Mark, and Sam made an average of roughly \$80,000. I know – I hired them. (I don’t think I’m violating any confidences here). OK, so \$80k was a nice chunk of change in the early ‘90’s as an anchor on a lousy, little, local morning show in Los Angeles, right? Then.... *wait for it...* by year three, they’re all up in the \$750,000 range. That is not a typo, *seven hundred fifty thousand fricking dollars!* A zero was literally *added* to their salaries! The show was such a massive “hit” that paying our anchors those truly outrageous sums to stay together as an on-air team was certainly in the station’s best financial interests. My salary doubled, then tripled by the third year – of course, so did the airtime we all had to fill as we kept adding additional hours. I was making more bank than I’d ever imaged any local station would pay a lousy, little, local news producer. The station was printing money – to the tune of tens of millions of dollars a year.

I suspect I’ve got your full attention now. And yes, I know what you’re thinking. You assume I’m exaggerating the dollar amounts to make a point.

You anchors are saying, *“That was just a fluke - No station is going to pay me that kind of money today!”*

No. They won’t. Not if you continue pulling in the miniscule number of eyeballs you’re pulling in. But what if, after some format tinkering, some risk-taking and some attitude adjusting, you begin to double, triple, even quadruple your ratings? What if the news open rolls one day and you’re suddenly anchoring a “hit” TV show? What if an audience finds *you*? It’s entirely possible! It happened to me! When you capture eyeballs, the dynamic changes. Now the question becomes, *“How much will it take to keep you?”* For talent and producers alike, we’re only as

valuable as the audience we generate. There's lots of money in local news – when you find it – you'll be fartin' through silk!

**Just A Few Of The Reasons
Why The KTLA Morning News
Is #1 For The 14th
Consecutive Sweep!***

Carlos Amezcua
Gayle Anderson
Barbara Beck
Mark Kriski
Jim Newman
Sam Rubin
Michele Ruiz
Eric Spillman
Jennifer York
The Car Dudes
...not to mention the
entire staff and crew!

Congratulations!

5 MORNING NEWS

Courtesy KTLA



NEWSBEAT

CHAPTER TWO

THE “HIT” FACTORS

The so-called “secret sauce” of the *KTLAMN* wasn’t all that much of a secret. It was right there on the screen, every day, for all to see. I’m going to spend a big chunk of this book showing you the techniques, the “hit” factors that were in play, the psychology on the screen that you really don’t notice unless you look close and study. Like I said, all these things just happened in front of me. What I’ve done here is to break down the elements for you to see how they all come together. Once we had a hit show, we had to learn fast how to *keep* it a hit show. And when I moved on to other opportunities, I was able to repurpose what I learned from the *KTLAMN* and make it work with a new cast of characters in an entirely different environment. Each show evolved into its own, unique personality that was compelling to watch, had winning ratings and made lots of cash for the company.

During the success of the *KTLAMN*, I’m aware of more than one TV executive-type who would fly to Los Angeles, stash themselves in a hotel room for several days, and watch our show from beginning to end, taking copious notes on every element – and then take it home and try it out on their show. We hosted guests in the control room from stations

in Germany and Sweden who wanted to see what we did first hand. Everyone wanted to “borrow” the format and make it successful in their own local markets. Some succeeded with spectacular victory – some failed in the flames of defeat.

Your success is laid out right before you here with the six “Hit Factors” that need to be in place. I’m going to list them here and go into details on how to put them to work for you in the following chapters.

HIT FACTOR #1

ALL IS RIGHT WITH THE WORLD

Viewers who watched us every morning put their faith in us. When they turned us on and saw Carlos, Barbara, Mark and Sam goofing around and having fun, it told viewers that “all is right with the world”. In other words, the world didn’t end overnight while they were asleep. Violating that trust can have serious consequences.

HIT FACTOR #2

LEFT BRAIN/RIGHT BRAIN SYNC

I’d had a realization that sort of crept up on me over the years. Back in college, *Northern Kentucky University*, right across the river from Cincinnati, I majored in TV & Film, minored in Psychology. Very little of what I learned about TV from those classes had any practical applications in the real world. The *only* thing I remember from my Mass Media 101 class was that this classmate of mine, a guy named **George Clooney**, always showed up *sockless*. I could never understand why someone wouldn’t wear socks inside their shoes – until I remembered he was born in Kentucky. But boy, what my TV classes lacked, my psychology classes made up for in spades!

TV is an industry that attracts a lot of insecure people. Lots of co-workers are high maintenance. I've encountered the best of them and the worst of them. There are the screamers, the chair throwers, the criers, the divide and conquerors, the anchorwoman who always turned the opposite way when anchoring on a blue-screen set, and the manager who scribbled things in permanent marker on news set pieces to make a point – essentially that he was the undisputed boss. And the backstabbers! Holy Texas, don't underestimate the backstabbers like I did! I once even acquired a true sociopath for a boss in my TV travels – not a psychotic killer by any means, but a pathological liar who just couldn't help himself, he lied about absolutely everything. He's definitely a dude without a conscience.

I've been able to successfully navigate my way through many professional situations and personalities with my handy little psychology education, but the breakthrough moment for me came when I discovered the disconnect between the left-brain higher-up types supervising the right-brain lower-down types like me. Because of our opposite personality types, we essentially speak different languages and take different paths while trying to achieve the same goals. I'll share with you what I learned later in Chapter Three.

HIT FACTOR #3 **PRODUCING PERSONALITIES**

Anyone with a fourth-grade education can *read* a teleprompter. But it takes a true personality to *communicate* – whether you're imparting information, sharing stories or evoking emotion. If you're a news anchor or a weather person or a reporter or a host of some kind – and not imparting, sharing and evoking every single time your face graces that camera, you're not a personality. You're

a news reader. The average news reader in this country makes \$37,000 a year and is as easily replaced as a roll of toilet tissue.

I've been hearing for decades how the days of big-name, highly-paid newscasters are long gone. The *Daily Beast* recently had an article about the sexual harassment scandals that swallowed up Matt Lauer, **Bill O'Reilly**, and **Charlie Rose**. It postulated that those guys are the last of their breed because the *Today* show and Fox News are doing just fine without Lauer and O'Reilly.

Those days over? Couldn't be further from the truth!

The article asserts that **Megyn Kelly** is the last big-name talent to get an eight-figure salary as she's failed to attract an audience on the third hour of *Today*.

Such a load of crap.

The problem with the Megyn Kelly debacle is not *Megyn Kelly*. It's with the boneheads at NBC who thought she was worth \$69 million dollars over three years. It was *their* mistake, not Megyn's. Megyn Kelly could never draw a sizeable *Today* show audience for one very simple and obvious reason. It's the same reason **Katie Couric** can't *keep* an audience – not on the *CBS Evening News*, not on her daytime talk show and not at *Yahoo*. I'll detail that reason for you in upcoming chapters, along with why so many TV executives overpay for talent - because they have absolutely no idea what to look for when hiring them.

HIT FACTOR #4

PRODUCING, PICKING, PACKAGING & PRESENTING

Producers no longer produce. They process data. If you observe a producer in the newsroom, his face is glued to the computer screen the entire workday. If you observe a producer in the control room,

her face is frozen to the computer screen throughout the entire show. She doesn't even watch her own show as it's airing! What's that about? These days, when a producer starts his shift by logging on to his computer, the first thing he sees is a template of his rundown. His job – in his mind – is to fill the empty template slots with data. A house fire voice-over here – a stabbing VO-SOT there. As you'll see in a later chapter, a line producer's computer skills are far more important – and far more valuable to his employer (news director) than his “producing” skills – because the entire news production *lives or dies* on his coding abilities.

How you choose the stories to cover, how you package them, and ultimately how you present them will determine your newscasts' success or failure. Relevance is more relevant than ever. With shrinking attention spans, the minute a viewer watches a newscast running a story that has absolutely no connection to them, they're gone. The baby boomers have been referred to as the “me” generation for their self-involved qualities, but it's the younger generations that have begun owning the term. It seems the younger a viewer is, the less time we have to grab them and hang on to them. Relevance – or the act of making a newscast relevant – begins and ends with producing, picking, packaging and presenting.

HIT FACTOR #5 **SIGNATURE SEGMENTS**

Debbie Downer and *The Church Lady* are signature segments for *Saturday Night Live*. *Celebrities Read Mean Tweets* is a signature segment on *Jimmy Kimmel*. *Where in the World is Matt Lauer* was once the staple signature segment for the *Today* show. When you watch one of these shows, you kinda hope your favorite segments or “characters” are coming up. You won't see *Debbie Downer* anywhere but on SNL. It's exclusive content you can't get anywhere else. And that's the point. Viewers have to come to your show to see their favorite segments. *Signature Segments* work just

as well on local newscasts. I'll show you some of those I've used quite successfully coming up in a later chapter.

I always laugh under my breath when I see the network morning shows and evening talk shows battling over celebrity guests. Everyone's desperate to book the A-listers. A-listers, for the most part, are extremely dull interviews. Booking guests is so *not* about the guest. It's all about your host(s). Not many producers and bookers seem to get that.

With “hit shows”, opportunities abound. If you're not paying attention, you are missing opportunities. When your show throws you a bone, you gotta bite. I'll show you how I recognize these opportunities and capitalize on them.

HIT FACTOR #6 **TALK SHOW DIRECTING**

Except for a few times in college, I've never directed any kind of TV show. But there's one easy way I can tell a good director from a not-so-good one. If I'm watching the line feed in the control room, the main monitor that goes to air, I'm a happy camper. But if I find myself starting to look at the individual camera monitors because I'm not seeing what I want to see in the line monitor, then we have a problem. There are places in every newscast where the director simply must push the override button on the automation and “call” the show the way a talk show is directed – the cut, cut, cut of cameras as they follow the conversation of the talent on-screen.

I have had many ugly arguments with lazy directors whose idea of a great show is one that hums along like clockwork to the pre-programmed automation. That, my friends, is a left-brain director – the exact archetype of a director these automation companies had in mind when they wrote their software. Someone who's not going to disturb the flow of the show with any overriding artistic license.

And so many directors are happy to oblige. Their job is easy and totally mindless.

That is never acceptable on my show. I insist on a director who *controls* the automation rather than a director who is *controlled* by the automation. It's not just about overriding automation – it's about overriding mediocrity.





CHAPTER THREE

ALL THE WORLD IS WATCHING

A personality-driven morning show is a different beast than network affiliate morning shows you see in most markets. If you turn on your local NBC, CBS or ABC station in the morning, you're going to encounter a pair of news anchors, a weather person and a traffic reporter. Each has their own presentation area throughout the studio and there is very little interaction between them. Their news format is essential a wheel:

- Quick First Forecast
- Quick First Traffic
- News
- Weather
- Traffic

Rinse and repeat over and over again. With newscasts computerized and automated, the exact format with the identical scripts that air in the first hour are moved into the following hours and repeated verbatim. The thinking is that most viewers only watch a newscast for ten minutes or so, so no one will be the wiser. And sadly, it's true. There may be polite banter during tosses, but the newscast is all business from beginning to

end. The shows are full of flashing banners and pop-up animated slogans like “First Forecast” and whooshing sound effects that reflect the show’s quick, no-nonsense, sterilized pace. If that’s your preference for how your news is delivered in the morning, great! Knock yourself out.

But personality-driven newscasts begin and end with the personalities. You watch for them – first – then you also get your fill of news, weather and traffic. There are lots of laid-back moments and lots of laughter. The show is often background noise while people go about getting ready for work, fixing breakfast or getting the kids off to school. Their attention comes and goes throughout the morning. The bottom line is - viewers are reassured when they turn our show on that the end of the world didn’t happen overnight. All is right with the world cuz our hosts are having some fun and joking around. And that’s exactly the feeling you want viewers to have on personality-driven newscasts.

Until...

Until breaking news hits. Viewers put their trust in these anchors. If our guys are having a good time and the viewer should change the channel to see a competitor covering a breaking story that we either missed or chose not to cover, we have broken that trust with our viewers. Honestly, there were dozens of times on one of my shows when things were really going well. The talent was “on” and the show was firing on all cylinders. Then I’d get a call from the assignment desk saying, for example, that **Michele Ruiz** and her crew have just arrived at the scene of a double homicide in Tarzana. Damn! Part of me wanted to stay with what we were doing because the show had energy and things were gelling. But the undisputed number one rule with this personality-driven format is this:

Personalities are rockin’ until breaking news comes a’knockin’.

A breaking story or a severe weather event eclipses everything else we do. The giggling goes away and those anchors turn on a dime to report a breaking story. Period.

I've been very lucky in finding on-air talent who had personality-potential or were already true personalities, but were also damned good at covering breaking news stories. There's nothing worse than having a talent who's a great personality but freezes up when he or she has to switch into serious newscaster mode – or vice versa. The biggest concern I hear is from some talent who fear their credibility will be ruined if they're seen showing some personality. In other words, they simply don't want to laugh on-air! Seriously! I have never seen an on-air type destroy their career simply because they expressed some authenticity, had some fun, showed some vulnerability and, consequently, caused viewers to fall in love with them. It's an unfounded fear.

Unless...

✠ THE PETER JENNINGS EFFECT

Unless you're a network reporter. Nowhere was this problem more acute than at **ABC**. When I was brought in to executive produce *Good Morning America Sunday*, my marching orders were to lighten the show up and create a more personality-driven format like we'd done at KTLA. I could invite any reporter or correspondent on my show at any time to cover a story "live" or join us on set. Anyone. From anywhere in the world. But once word got out that we were changing course and doing a lighter format, no one would accept my invitation.

I was flabbergasted. Why were so many reporters turning down opportunities to appear on *GMA Sunday*? One reporter finally pulled me aside.

She said, “If we come on *GMA Sunday*, let loose, have a little fun, or do a light piece, **Peter Jennings** is going to see that. And he would never let us appear again on *World News Tonight*.”

Wow! Every reporter and correspondent were desperate to cover stories for the network’s flagship newscast. It was what they lived for. Reporters were constantly jockeying for position, fighting over stories, and finding an EP who would bankroll the cost of covering their story. And things truly were cut-throat at ABC – not just for reporters, but for anchors, producers and executive producers as well. Those details are best saved for another book.

❖ FREELANCE FREE-FOR-ALL

So yes, I get it. From then on, I only hired freelance reporters to cover stories for *GMA Sunday*. My go-to guy was **George Ciccicone**. He’d worked at **WKRC** when I was across the street at **WLWT** in Cincinnati. He is brilliant at tackling lighter stories. No one could do a better “horse exorcism” piece than George! He saved my ass many times on that show.

The take-away here is that breaking news and severe weather trump everything else. In my years of producing personality-driven newscasts, I’ve learned that viewers are very forgiving of a lot of things that happen on “live” unscripted formats. They understand that anything can happen. They “get it” when technical errors occur. They empathize when our talent goes out on a limb and are willing to be vulnerable in their storytelling. But they’re generally unforgiving if we were to break that sacred trust by putting the brakes on breaking stories.



CHAPTER FOUR

LEFT-BRAIN, RIGHT-BRAIN SYNC

You've heard the biology about people being "left-brain" (L-directed thinkers) and "right-brain" (R-directed thinkers). Medical science has proven through brain scans that we are not hard-wired to use one side of our brain more than the other side. One side is not more active than the other. The biology of left-brain/right-brain is a myth. However, psychologists have proven that the metaphor of being left-brain or right-brain is alive and well because it perfectly describes the way different personality types actually think.

✠ MR. SPOCK – LEFT BRAIN

It's been said that business leaders (including station group CEO's), lawyers, civil engineers, accountants and computer programmers commonly have dominant personality traits such as logic, analytical thinking, objectivity and things like quantifying results (whatever those are). If you are a left-brain thinker, you are more scientific and look for rational explanations. You see through the lenses of everything being either black or white. Think of it this way. First Officer **Mr. Spock** of

Star Trek – he’s totally left side of the galaxy. *He’s into chess, for christsake!* Spock is all about logic. He can’t help himself.

☒ CAPTAIN KIRK – RIGHT BRAIN

Conversely, politicians, actors, athletes and, I strongly suspect some TV producers, are classified as right-brain thinkers. They’re the creative types who don’t see things as black or white but as all shades of gray. They’re emotional, intuitive, risk-takers, thoughtful and objective. Back to my analogy, the captain of the **U.S.S. Enterprise, Captain James T. Kirk**, is a right-brainer. He’s an explorer, a risk-taker, a rebel.

A direct quote from Captain Kirk: *“Risk is our business. That’s what this starship is all about!”*

His passion and emotion for his starship are so strong, they allowed him to resist the evil, mind-controlling spores on the **Federation** colony of **Omicron Ceti III**. Remember that? When his crew returned to the ship completely controlled by the spores, Kirk got pissed off – so fricking angry that he discovered expressing violent emotions somehow destroys the power of the evil spores. Spock didn’t figure that out. His left-brain ass was completely at the mercy of the spores.

Kirk and Spock complement each other in their leadership and command of *The Enterprise*. Spock’s weaknesses are Kirk’s strengths. They both have the same goal: *“to seek out new life and new civilizations”* – they just boldly go about it differently – which leads to the plots that make *Star Trek* a classic.

Star Trek Quotes & Characters Copyright 1966, Paramount Pictures/Viacom

That same balance has to be found in the newsroom and in the corporate culture if your newscast is going to be a hit. Judging from what we see across the local news landscape, the balance is way off – strongly tilted to the left. There are so many primarily left-brain layers of management

making the calls, that any surviving right-brain creativity is crushed long before it hits the newsroom – much less the air.

✠ **THOUGHT PROCESSES**

Left and right brainers need to understand the thought processes that are involved with their opposite-brain counterparts. Take a look at how left and right-brainers think and behave in different ways:

THEY THINK DRAMATICALLY DIFFERENTLY

LB: *analytical & objective* | RB: *random & subjective*

THEY MAKE DECISIONS DIFFERENTLY

LB: *logically* | RB: *intuitively*

THEY USE DIFFERENT TERMINOLOGY TO SAY THE SAME THING

LB: *profit & ratings* | RB: *reward & winning*

As you can surmise, there's a clear and present "disconnect" in the way lefties and righties communicate, define goals, measure success and connect with co-workers. Additionally, business is a left-brain pursuit – while the art of television is more the domain of right-brainers. You can see how people like me, a right-brain showrunner who talks in shades of gray, might have difficulty relating to left-brain CEO's and other successful company leaders who view everything as black or white.

That's why left-brain company leaders rely on focus groups and research and studies – because those studies provide tangible evidence that the decisions they make are the right ones. For right-brainers, there are no results or studies that will support my gut instinct. I can't quantify for you why one anchor will draw an audience while another won't. I

can't provide my left-brain boss with verifiable proof. I just feel it. My left-brain counterparts are going to have to trust my intuition.

✦ THE CONCEPTUAL AGE

There will come a time when managers on every level of the local news industry begin to recognize how valuable creativity and innovation are to reaching their business goals. According to **Daniel H. Pink**, author of the **New York Times** bestseller *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*, computers are taking over more and more white-collar, left-brain jobs. If those jobs aren't being done by automation, they're being sent to Asia where left-brain jobs, in growing numbers, are being outsourced. Pink, whose book was named *Best Business Book of 2005* by **Fast Company**, posits that creativity will be the competitive difference between commodities as we exit the *Information Age* and move into the *Conceptual Age*. He believes that companies which can move beyond function and engage the senses of its customers will be the standouts. That includes adding a narrative (story) to a product, focusing on the big picture – not the details, going beyond logic to trigger emotion, intuition, and humor. If you apply that thinking to *our* product, a newscast, producers should be telling stories (storytelling is another big buzzword these days in TV news) and producing emotionally compelling television.

Embracing creativity gives companies a distinct competitive advantage. Creativity was a priceless commodity for the *KTLA Morning News*. It had a huge “creative advantage” over its market competition.

✦ CREATIVE ADVANTAGE

Wanna discuss creative advantage? One of my favorite stories of our KTLA creative process comes from March of 1993. I arrived on the KTLA studio lot in Hollywood at 2AM like always. As I lived a good distance away, I had already spent half an hour on the car phone with assignment manager Toni Molle discussing possible story ideas for Eric

Spillman and Michele Ruiz, our morning reporters. The only local news of any interest was the city of Anaheim would begin work on a new carpool lane on the Orange Freeway today. That story has zero relevance to anyone outside of Orange County so it was a “pass” as a live remote. Nationally, we could rehash yesterday’s developments involving **President Clinton** trying to spark the economy with a stimulus package. Spillman could do the “coffee shop” report, getting live reaction. Um, “pass”. Once arriving in the newsroom, I skimmed the news wires, looking for that needle-in-a-haystack story the other stations’ producers won’t search hard enough to find.

✠ HUGGING

And there it was. A study (I can’t remember the source) that discovered proven ways to add years to your life. *Hmmm*. Reading further, it reveals one of the best activities people can do to live longer is to “hug” other people. Hugging lowers levels of the stress hormone cortisol among many other health benefits. Married couples tend to live longer than singles because they hug more frequently. I headed over to the assignment desk to get Toni’s take on the story. She thought it was a cool third or fourth block “live shot” for Michele.

I countered, *“Hang on. Everybody wants to live longer. Everybody wants to remain healthy. Here is a medically proven way to extend your life. Who’s gonna change channels during this report? I say we give it to Spillman and we lead the 7AM with it!”*

Toni, recognizing that look I get when I make up my mind, said something like, *“OK...whatever!”*

That was Toni shorthand for, *“Yes! I support you 100% and will stand by you even if it means joining you on the unemployment line.”*

Toni and I were on the same page in our out-of-the-box thinking. She’s the perfect yang to my yin. She would throw out an idea, I would

counter, she would stick to her guns, and then one of us would take it to the next level.

Like when I made this suggestion: *“We have Spillman go out on the street and try to get strangers to hug him ‘live!’ Yeah, baby!”*

I think Toni’s response was something like, *“OK, you get to sell this idea to Spillman!”*

Shorthand for, *“I’m totally on board!”*

Eric Spillman is an aggressive, multiple **Emmy**-award winning breaking news reporter who’s been with KTLA since he joined the *KTLAMN* in startup mode back in 1991. I’m proud to say he is one of my discoveries. He never just stands still on a live shot. I remember very clearly on the resume reel he sent when I was hiring reporters, he was sliding down some escape tubes or slides or something that a company was testing as an emergency exit from office buildings in case of a fire. He didn’t just *walk the talk* – he *slid the slide*. And he drank our Morning News-flavored Kool-Aid on day one! He was all-in with where the show was going and he played a huge role in its ultimate success.

By the time Spillman arrived in the newsroom, Toni had already chosen the airport as the live location for his hug-a-thon. Now for my expert persuasive and motivating sales job. Here’s how you do it. Take notes:

“Dude,” I said. “It’s either hugging strangers at LAX or visiting your favorite coffee shop in Studio City to talk with people about (dramatic yawn) the stimulus plan. The decision is in your hands!”

Spillman was in!

The first “live” hug was incredibly awkward. It was a priceless Eric Spillman moment. Some woman just arriving in L.A. from Boise, Idaho

wasn't too keen on hugging a perfect stranger on live television after a grueling two-hour flight. But one by one, the hug-ees began to lighten up. Eric began encouraging people around him to hug each other. Back in the studio, Barbara and Carlos were goading Eric to try approaching various characters they could see around him... that shady-looking guy with the cigarette, or that woman in the red jacket.



“How about that cop, Eric?” I distinctly remember Barbara egging Eric on.

By the end of the first live hit, every viewer watching wanted a hug from Spillman. The camera guys in the studio began embracing. A cutaway shot to the newsroom via the newscam showed the **Angry Newswriters** (as we called them) stepping away from their keyboards to hug each other. I think I was even seen hugging director Lenn Goodside via the control room cam. “Hugging” became an event on this particular morning – rather than just another old live shot discussing the latest findings in a study.

Look at the succession of events:

- 1) We nail down an original idea (hugging).
- 2) It builds when I suggest we have Eric actually hug people (instead of *just* reporting the findings).
- 3) Toni adds LAX as the backdrop so plenty of people will be around.
- 4) Eric not only gets hugs but gets perfect strangers to begin hugging each other.
- 5) Barbara & Carlos get involved from the set daring Eric to approach this person or that one.
- 6) The camera operators in the studio, the Angry Newswriters in the newsroom and those of us in the control room join in.

That's how the pieces just fall into place when your staff and crew are all in-tune with the vision of the show. Yes, theoretically, I could have orchestrated every scene from that symphony myself, but with an established vision of what the show is, everybody was already in concert. It just happens.

✦ POST-HUGGING AFTERGLOW

Now, here's my favorite part - the post-script to this story: Our competition, KTTV, the local **Fox** station which just started up its own local morning newscast, led its 7AM newscast with a live report on reaction to the stimulus plan. Very predictable. Very left-brain. But at 8AM, what do you think happened after they saw our 7AM lead? They yanked their live reporter off the stimulus story and now had her hugging people! No lie. At noon, KNBC led their local newscast with hugs! And at 5PM, both KNBC and KABC were hugging! Let me explain why this happened:

→ Because we (KTLA) led our show with hugging

- Because we owned it and sold it so well
- Because we took a risk and went with something less obvious
- Because we were the #1 show in the market

We gave the other stations' left-brain producers the tangible facts they needed to put the hugging story in their newscast, "*Well, KTLA led with it at 7AM & 8AM...*"

Those producers could now justify to their bosses that this right-brain story idea was valid because their competition not only covered it but led with it. We gave them permission to do a right-brain story they never considered doing until we led the way. And that's classic left-brain producing – not acting on something until the competition does it first. It's much safer that way.

I am – in NO WAY – suggesting that beginning tomorrow, you lead your “newscast of record”, your local 5PM, 6PM or 11PM newscast, with a story in the same vein as the hugging story. You do and it will fall flat on its face. The stories you choose to present – and how you choose to present them come with countless variables that make your newscast completely different from any other newscast. I address those variables in Chapter 11.



CHAPTER FIVE

PERSONALITIES

As I moved along in my career, I began to recognize that I excel in two areas of TV news - the first is in finding, mentoring, and producing personalities. I'm not referring to newsreaders or prompter-jockeys, but true *personalities*. In addition to the *KTLMN* team, I've been fortunate to have worked alongside some of the best news *personalities* in television.

PRESENT PERSONALITIES

They include **Robin Roberts, George Stephanopoulos, Charlie Gibson, Bill Ritter, Anderson Cooper, Chris Cuomo, Ryan Seacrest, Sam Donaldson, Dick Shapp, Larry Potash, Giuliana Rancic, Barry Pinter, Claudia Simon, Lisa Williams, Sunda Croonquist, Dana Tyler, Bob Orr, Mort Crim, Greg Wolf, Ty Treadway and Jerry Springer**. Some of these you know. Some you may have never heard of. Each is their own individual character.

✦ ROBIN ROBERTS

I loved producing Robin Roberts on *Good Morning America Sunday*. Having a sports background, she didn't have the "news pretense" that anchors often have. She was cool and down for anything.

When I watch Robin now, I get so frustrated with the way she's produced and directed. On the current incarnation of *Good Morning America*, Robin gets maybe one or two close-ups in an hour. That's obscene for a lead host. The show is so rushed there's no time for her to just talk to viewers. It's a parade of comings and goings and often she's relegated to nothing more than traffic cop.

✦ GEORGIE GARDNER & KARL STEFANOVIC

A couple of favorite news personalities are a few people I've never met. First are **Georgie Gardner** and **Karl Stefanovic** of Australia's **Nine Network Today** show. These two are the best it gets. Georgie stepped into the co-host role after **Lisa Wilkinson** left the show. When all three were together, the show was just outstanding. I would watch and feel myself getting envious because it was firing on all cylinders so flawlessly – they'd reached the same peak we had during the *KTLAMN* days.

► **VIEW VIDEO #5 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

✦ MELISSA THEURIAU

Then there's **Mélissa Theuriau** of **M6** (the highest paid news anchor in France). She anchors the evening news. She's a furnace of warmth. I don't understand a word she says yet I'm still in awe. That's how authentic she is! It's true – she is hot. But much more importantly, she's warm!

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #6 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

✠ ROSANNA SCOTTO

Locally, there are some good examples of shows producing their talent perfectly - again, mainly in the morning because evening newscast are still trapped in that “seriousness” mode. Check out **Rosanna Scotto** on *Good Day New York*. I don’t know her, but I love this woman!

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #7 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

✠ LARRY POTASH & ROBIN BAUMGARTEN

Larry Potash and **Robin Baumgarten** on the *WGN Morning News* are world-class examples of well-produced *local* news personalities – people who jump off the screen. I’ve known Larry for years but have never gotten the chance to meet Robin. WGN was a sister station to KTLA so their show started up shortly after the success of the *KTLAMN*.

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #8 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

✠ TONYA FRANCISCO

In another clip from *WGN Morning News*, watch how reporter **Tonya Francisco**, through sheer use of her personality, makes it very clear that it’s cold outside!

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #9 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

There's another former local news anchor I want to talk about who had hit newscasts at 6 & 11 on WLWT in Cincinnati – simply because he was allowed to reveal his personality in all its shades and colors. That's where my TV career began. Imagine little Ray the news intern, dressed up in his Sunday best, answering phones and making beat calls in the crappy basement of an old Elk's Lodge in downtown Cincinnati in 1983. The station, then owned by **Multimedia**, was a years-long number 4 loser (behind old sitcom reruns). News Director **Bob Yuna** was brought in to make some changes just before I arrived. Bob recognized some undiscovered talent in a young man who had recently held the position of Mayor of the city. His name was **Jerry Springer**.

✠ JERRY SPRINGER

Jerry had been a councilman, then the mayor and then ran for governor of Ohio. He lost the primary and began doing commentaries on **WEBN**, the cool AOR radio station in town. Bob heard Jerry on the radio and immediately hired Jerry to do commentaries on **Action 5 News** during its newscasts. These weren't the yawn-inducing types of editorials station managers used to do at the end of '70's newscasts. Jerry's commentaries were relevant, insightful, and very well thought out. His daily segments nudged the needle a bit in the ratings. Yuna then promoted Jerry to co-anchor alongside **Norma Rashid** ("Normer" as Jerry calls her). Jerry's promotion to news anchor was the lead story all over town.

News directors come and go and WLWT was no different. Yuna was out, **Tom Kuelbs** was in. Kuelbs built on the Jerry & Norma team with strategic changes to the way stories were told, presented and packaged. He replaced under-performing reporters with well-known Cincinnati personalities. People like Top 40 DJ **Pat Barry** doing weather, former **Bengals** wide receiver **Chris Collinsworth** as a sports contributor, Civil Right leader **James Meredith's** wife **Judy Alsobrooks** became a general assignment reporter along with **Lauren Chesley**, daughter of well-known Cincinnati attorney **Stan Chesley** who had handled cases

involving the **Pan Am Lockerbie** terrorist attack, the **Bhopal** gas leak tragedy in India and the **Beverly Hills Supper Club Fire** which killed 165 local tri-state residents who came to see **John Davidson** perform. Tom revised how stories were chosen and reported, how the newscasts were presented and promoted, and ultimately how he launched the renamed *News 5* from worst to first in less than a year.



Norma & Jerry (1984)
(Courtesy WLWT)

Jerry took the town by storm – not because he could read a teleprompter, but simply because the station allowed him to be himself. How did they do that? Jerry continued doing commentaries during his newscasts. He covered news with the impartiality of a newsman, and then at the end of the show, he'd give you his thoughts about the big story of the day. Unheard of! A huge risk for WLWT – and a huge payoff. I go deeper into the idea of using commentaries to jump start ratings a bit later.

► **VIEW VIDEO #10 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

Forgive me for sounding “**Disneyesque**”, but those first two years - my cherry-popping introduction to the world of local TV news - was utterly magical. To be so young and on the ground floor of a number three news operation that suddenly takes off like a runaway freight train was a game changer for me. I watched Tom Kuelbs produce Jerry into a personality. I saw how he tweaked our news coverage, how he packaged content, how he reinvented the concept of sweeps series into franchise-building power packages, how he scrapped an ultra-high-tech NewsMat set and replaced it with a toned-down look that didn’t compete for the talent’s attention but complimented them. I saw how he shot his talent. I was this know-nothing intern getting a first-class education on how to create a hit show. I was ultimately hired on as a writer and then producer. And when I left, I had graduated from little *WLWT-News Five University* magna cum laude.



Looking at personalities would not be complete without mentioning three people I’m sure you’ve comes across during the last few years.

They are news *makers*. Their personalities were so defined and distinct – shining through even in the short soundbites that hit the air – that they became viral sensations.

✠ SWEET BROWN

Remember **Sweet Brown**, the woman who woke up to get a cold pop, thought someone was barbequing, and then, Oh, Lord Jesus, found her apartment on fire? *Ain't nobody got time for that!*

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #11 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

The passion she shared while telling her story made her a **YouTube** Sensation. She's someone you cannot forget.

✠ ANTONIE DODSON

Same with **Antonie Dodson**, who raked up 64-million views as he tells the story of how his sister was nearly raped.

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #12 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

✠ NOAH RITTER

And finally, there's the “apparently kid”, little **Noah Ritter**...

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #13 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

33-million views! Why did we, the news media, go nuts with these three whose stories originally aired in local news pieces? Simple. They're genuine, unedited, 100-percent authentic personalities. You can spot them a mile away. People are drawn to them. True, you might not want

them anchoring your newscasts, but the sheer volume of views they attracted clearly proves they’ve got something that captures eyeballs. When was the last time your local news story raked in 33-million views? It’s a fair question – and relevant as well – as TV news transitions to the internet.

PAST PERSONALITIES

Personalities have been coming into our homes since the invention of radio. When television came along, the addition of the video image often magnified the personalities who graced its screen. There were quite a few legendary local TV news personalities to grab audiences – here are a few of my favorites:

BILL BONDS

Bill Bonds, *Channel 7 Action News*. He was the king of Detroit TV from the late ‘60’s to the mid-90’s on ABC affiliate **WXYZ**. He was beloved as the hard-drinking, foul-mouthed, hairpiece-wearing, blue-collar everyman in a rank and file union town. After the **Gennifer Flowers** revelation, he asked presidential candidate **Bill Clinton** during a nationally-televised debate: “*Are there any more smoking bimbos in your closet?*” And have you seen his direct and unflinching interview with Utah Senator **Orrin Hatch**?

▶ **VIEW VIDEO #14 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

ANN BISHOP

Next check out **Ann Bishop**, *Eyewitness 10 Nightbeat*, who dominated the Miami market at **WPLG** for 10 years. She was hell in heels. She would look you right in the face and call you a liar if you happened to

be a politician guesting on her newscast. I couldn't track down some of the legendary clips, but this gives you an idea:

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #15 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

✠ AL SCHOTTELKOTTE

Then there's **Al Schottelkotte**, "The Voice of Cincinnati," known for his forceful on-air delivery. His WCPO newscasts were such big hits that they bore his name: *The Al Schottelkotte News at 6 & 11*. He owned the Queen City from 1960 to 1982.

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #16 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

I grew up watching Mr. Schottelkotte. I clearly remember his coverage of a tragic breaking news story in Cincinnati – and one thing he said in particular that I still recall nearly 40 years later. I told the entire story once in my blog:

📖 A THOUGHT ABOUT AL SCHOTTELKOTTE

PERSONALITY PRODUCER– The Raymond J Brune Blog; Dec. 6, 2013

I still remember vividly that December night in 1979. **The Who** was to perform a concert at Cincinnati's Riverfront Coliseum. But before it started, eleven fans waiting to get in were crushed to death when the coliseum doors finally opened. All the concertgoers had "festival seating" tickets, which meant it was a free-for-all for them to race to the best seats. Opening the doors resulted in a stampede as everyone clamored to get through.

What I remember most about that night is number-one-rated Cincinnati news anchor **Al Schottelkotte's** statement in the midst of all his “live” coverage chaos.

"I've just been informed that my son, who was at the concert, has returned home safely."

Wow! I was a junior in high school then but I remember thinking how ballsy it was to say that. To personalize a story back then, in any fashion, was just not done and that's probably why it stood out to me. Schottelkotte was a Cincinnati fixture. He was the only local news anchor that I know of whose name was the actual title of the newscast - “*Sssssix O'clock in the tri-state. Time for the Al Schottelkotte News.*” I mentioned I grew up watching Al - watching him, but not really seeing him. From the moment he said “Good evening” to the tease into the first break, ***you never saw Al's face.*** Every story he aired was covered with film footage of local or national news stories. Every day without fail. And between every story was the dancing nine, an early attempt at graphic animation of the Channel 9 (**WCPO**) logo. The nine would flip on screen from the left one time, next time from the top - silently. Sound effects were still a few years away! It sounds kinda silly today but at the time, it was so cool - and state-of-the-art.

Al was famous for acquiring every high school yearbook from every school in the tri-state area. Each time someone died, whether killed in a car crash or crushed at a Who concert, up came their high school yearbook photo. Any time someone was involved in a crime, whether victim or perp, up came their high school yearbook photo - every time without fail. I literally remember getting my freshman high school photo taken and thinking, “God, I hope this picture never shows up on the *Al Schottelkotte News.*” No joke.

I spend a lot of time talking about "personality-driven" newscasts. And in a way, Al was a pioneer in that. Don't get me wrong. His newscasts were 100-percent rock solid hard news. But the news and the style in which it was presented was so identified with him that there simply would have been no show without him. If that's not building a show around a personality, then I don't know what is.

Fast forward from The Who concert to a month or so later. **WKRP In Cincinnati** was a hit sitcom at this time and it aired an episode following its characters reacting to **The Who Concert** tragedy. At the very end, beloved station manager Arthur Carlson is in the radio booth talking with nighttime DJ Venus Flytrap. He says:

"There's been a lot of talk about setting up a commission to look into what happened here. That isn't going to be just talk, this town's gonna do it. Ah, this is a good town, Venus. We're responsible people here." MTM Enterprises/20th Television

A simple sentence. Yet a stirring, heartfelt message.

Fast-forward to this year. One teacher is killed and three students are critically injured in a (hypothetical) school shooting at a local high school. Imagine your local Cincinnati station covering this story. And when bringing the coverage to a close, your anchorman or anchorwoman looks into the camera, with both sorrow and pride, and says something along those same lines:

"Our hearts are broken tonight. That a school shooting like those we've seen around the country could actually happen here reminds us that Cincinnatians are not immune to the problems our

country faces. The debate about easy access to semi-automatic rifles will continue – along with how to deal with the mental health crisis that's gripping the nation. I know you share my sentiment when I say this is a good town - we're responsible people here. We've got to do something. Tomorrow I'm going to announce a series of town meetings we'll be organizing with local, state and federal leaders to see where we go from here. But tonight, WXXX is holding a vigil on Fountain Square to remember the teacher we lost. I'm going to be there. Alicia Anchorwoman will be there. So, will most of the staff from our newsroom. We hope to see you there as well. Good night for now and God bless all of us."

That moment of humanity, of going one step further, of recognizing tragedy and yet offering a glimmer of hope is what bonds a news anchor to their viewers. Most news anchors probably couldn't pull this off. It would be out of character for them. It might be awkward. Maybe station management wouldn't approve. But for the few who *get it*, who understand how to reach an audience, it's a priceless moment of genuine personality – and WKRP showed us the way.

I wonder sometimes if my high school yearbook picture is still on file at Channel 9...

A quick postscript: I happened to speak to one of Al Schottelkotte's daughters, **Mary Jo**, a year or so ago (Al had six daughters and six sons). She had read my post on-line and wanted me to know that when Al announced on-air that his son was safe that night, it was accidental. Someone on staff handed Al a note while he was on-air, letting him know his son was safe. In all the breaking news chaos, Al accidentally read the note on the air instead of reading it to himself.

An accident I remember all these many years later. That's the incredible power of live television.

✠ **ARLENE FRANCIS**

Arlene was already a household name when she appeared live on NBC's *Home* in 1954. She was a regular on *What's My Line?* - the *Who Wants to Be A Millionaire?* of its time. She had also hosted the variety show *Talent Patrol* and the game show *Who's There?* But it was *Home* that made Arlene a beloved star among the women of America. The show was an unqualified success with millions tuning in every weekday morning.

Arlene had "that certain something" that made audiences gravitate to her. Airchecks of *Home* are few and far between because the show was live and aired before that good 'ole thing called videotape was invented. Watch a few minutes of *Home* and see if you aren't completely beguiled by this woman who captivates right through your black & white screen. This clip is the first half-hour from the episode that aired Monday, March 25, 1957.

► **VIEW VIDEO #17 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

In 1960, Miss Francis was asked to write the book *That Certain Something: The Magic Of Charm*. This is very important - what she called "charm" back then, I call "warmth" today. Here are some of the things she describes as "contributing to a charming aura":

- ❖ Charm is inextricably connected to good grooming and outward attractiveness
- ❖ Learn how to walk with an 'uplifted carriage' and a sense of grace
- ❖ Don't pull your girdle down every time you get up

- ❖ Smile often
- ❖ Apply makeup artfully to enhance one's best features
- ❖ Wear classic, comfortable clothing selected for its elegant simplicity from an upscale store
- ❖ Speak in a 'well-modulated', controlled and quiet voice
- ❖ Charm is self-deep and one must actively develop one's best self
- ❖ The TV camera has an X-ray attachment, it pierces, it penetrates, it peels away the veneer. It communicates the heart and mind of a woman and makes crystal clear the fact that the only charm is genuine charm, the charm that emanates from a person who is completely true to herself.

That Certain Something: The Magic of Charm
Julian Messner, Inc; Copyright 1960

Arlene's advice for enhancing your charming aura applies as much today as it did back then. She basically states that the camera never blinks - and the camera can expose a phony from a mile away.

Arlene's feminine grace and utter glamour permeated the atmosphere of daytime TV like a fragrance. She was a founding *femcee* whose exacting standards I still measure female talent by more than sixty years later.

UP & COMING PERSONALITIES

I'm always on the lookout for talent who have so much personality potential! These are my top 6 choices of the local news people I'd love to work with in the future:

- ✓ **Stephanie Simmons**, KHOU, Houston
- ✓ **Jennifer Mobilia**, WHEC, Rochester, NY
- ✓ **Tricia Mackie**, WXIX, Cincinnati
- ✓ **Vinnie Politan** at *Court TV*
- ✓ **Mikea Turner** at WUSA, D.C.
- ✓ **Trevor Ault** KOIN, Portland

I think all six in this group are going to take off. You heard it here first!

NEAR-MISS PERSONALITIES

On occasions when news managers realize they need star talent, they seem to think the only way to *acquire* a personality is to *hire* a personality – someone who’s already established.

✠ MEGYN KELLY

On the network level, that’s what led to the whole **Megyn Kelly** debacle. NBC paid her a fortune to host the third hour of *Today* – without doing its due diligence. Here’s the article I wrote that was published in the *Huffington Post* a week before Megyn’s September 25, 2017 premiere on NBC. It succinctly sums up the problems she and NBC experienced on the third hour of *Today*.

A COLD SWEAT FOR NBC’S MEGYN KELLY The Huffington Post, September 18, 2017

The news industry is twitterpated about Megyn Kelly’s heavily-hyped morning debut next week on hour three of NBC’s *Today* show. TV executives are anxiously using words like, her “*credibility*” and her “*transition*” from right wing Fox bombshell to morning “*personality*”. Megyn herself has said she wants her new show to make a “*human connection*”. But let me be brutally honest here. NBC’s \$17-million gamble has a snowball’s chance in hell of paying off. Here’s why:

Megyn has two forces conspiring against her. First, unlike Fox prime-time where older men make up the majority of her viewers, Megyn must appeal to women in the morning. Producing personalities and shows that draw women in - is an

art form unto itself – and it’s a world apart from producing for men. Megyn is going after moms and minorities. Problem is, she’s nothing like her morning viewers. She certainly doesn’t look like them (which isn’t her fault), she doesn’t live like them given the fact that she makes approximately \$16,974,507 more dollars a year than the average single mom watching does, she doesn’t dress like them in her Rodeo Drive designer duds, and she’s far more educated and world-wise than most of them. Megyn must get women viewers to *choose* to watch her *despite* all of those differences. That ain’t gonna happen. I’ve produced local, cable and network morning shows most of my career and I can tell you with absolute certainty that female viewers are unforgiving, petty and outright vicious when it comes to choosing who they will watch and who they won’t on TV. I’ve seen it countless times in my own living room, in my offices, and in many a newsroom. Women, voluntarily, are very vocal about the women they can’t stand on TV. I’ve likened it to this analogy: female viewers recognize only two types of female hosts on television – those they admire and would want to be friends with, and those they suspect would steal their husband in a New York minute. Unfortunately, my analogy isn’t PC or HR-compliant – but it’s dead on. The majority of those viewers, in my opinion, would most likely put Megyn in the latter category. If they’ve seen her on Fox News during all the Trump hoopla, I’ll bet they put her in that category a long time ago. Now let me say this. I’ve never met Megyn Kelly. I have absolutely nothing against her or NBC. And in fact, I wish her well. But I *have* met countless numbers of women who are nothing if not brutally blunt about their feelings toward TV hosts – and if a host rubs viewers the wrong way, the channel is instantly changed.

The second and more important force conspiring against Megyn in the morning is the very reason those viewers would mistrust her. She doesn’t come across as *warm* - plain and simple. All \$17,000,00 dollars comes down to something as simple and

uncomplicated as *warmth*. Viewers aren't consciously aware of this warmth – but they feel it – and conversely, they feel the lack of it. Warmth is a feeling of intimacy and affection between the personality and the viewer. It's the absence of a façade. It's a casualness that radiates from the TV screen. An on-air personality can't fake it. Either they have warmth – or they don't. For whatever reason, technical or atmospheric or psychological, Megyn's natural warmth does not get absorbed by the studio camera, electrified by the circuitry, transmitted via cable, satellite and over-the-air, and delivered intact or even magnified to TV screens at home. It's just not there. I'm not saying Megyn is not a warm person, certainly her husband and kids would disagree. What I am saying is that, through no fault of her own, her warmth doesn't connect with viewers via television - and where there's no warmth connection, there's no human connection. When the camera doesn't deliver warmth, the personality appears cold.

Lots of TV and film talent face this problem. Look at **Anne Hathaway**. There are legions of so-called "Hathahaters" according to the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Some have said it's because she comes off as "so affected and actressy". Nope, in my opinion, it's the missing warmth thing. That opinion also extends to **Nicole Kidman**, **Sean Hannity**, **Piers Morgan** and even **Katie Couric**, who I'll get into momentarily.

The majority of TV executives simply cannot identify a talent who exudes warmth from one who doesn't. That's why there's a plethora of warmth-impaired TV talent on the air. Consultants are clueless to warmth because it's something that can't be quantified and displayed on a spreadsheet or in a PowerPoint presentation. I'd be fascinated to know the names of the consultants who gave NBC a thumbs-up on hiring Megyn and review their research that proves she's a sure-thing. The empirical flaws in the practice of focus groups doesn't separate

the warm from the warm-impaired. Focus groups and research are the tried and true career-saving excuse for TV executives who spend millions on a talent, only to watch them crash and burn. “*Well, the research said he was warm!* That’s why so many executives spend millions of their company’s cash on research in the first place. It’s a proven ass-saver.

The inability of executives at NBC to recognize the missing warmth-factor could be a costly error for the network. Yet it’s not the first time network suits have overlooked the importance of warmth. I wrote this same article several years back when **Disney** announced it was giving Katie Couric her own talk show. Katie, I feel, also has a warmth deficiency. I stated at the time her show wouldn’t see a second season for that very reason. It did, in fact, go on to a second season, but only because she had a locked-in, two-season deal. When that expired, so did her presence in daytime.

Telepictures made the exact opposite mistake when they created **Anderson Cooper**’s talk show. They took a warm host – a guy who’s a campfire of warmth – and had him covering the cold hard facts of cold hard news stories – *in daytime*. They scrapped that failing format in his sophomore season. Instead of letting Anderson carry the show himself, producers brought in loud and annoying and warmth-lacking co-hosts who diluted his warm presence – and the show was predictably canceled. At that time, I suspect Anderson underestimated the power of his own presence and apparently did as he was told – to the detriment of his show. I produced Anderson for a few weeks when he filled-in on ABC’s **World News Now**. My show was the first time he sat in a network news anchor chair – and he was nervous. I’m sincere about his warmth, but he took it to new extremes by sweating through his clothes during the show. He had to change his shirt during nearly every commercial break. He wasn’t just warm. He was burning up!

Warmth is worth billions. Just ask **Oprah. Robin Roberts** is a cashmere blanket. I produced Robin back in the late '90's on GMA's weekend shows and viewers could feel her embrace via the impossibly tight close-ups I insisted she be shot on. That warmth is diffused now on the current incarnation of GMA simply because the producers don't know how to produce her and shoot her, and there are far too many gadflies on set (I'm not referring to you, **George**). And then there's Matt Lauer. Early on, his excess warmth overshadowed Katie's lack of it, which is why *Today* was successful in the early '90's. But it wasn't enough for many viewers who began turning to the local morning shows like mine. Katie actually helped my show beat the big three networks every morning!

Which begs the question: *Can a talent like Megyn Kelly be produced* to be warm? I've attempted it twice, both times without the support of management – and without the freedom to take risks with the talent (and the franchise) and just as importantly, without the talent being 100-percent on board. Both were miserable failures. That said, NBC claims to be very supportive of Megyn and her show. I hope they realize it's not extravagant, overbearing sets and the hottest celebrity guests and exotic, live remote locations that will attract viewers. Your money bought you Megyn, but it won't buy you a rating. That's on Megyn's shoulders now - squarely. The producers will need to take some serious risks with the *Today* franchise – and Megyn herself will have to leap far out of her comfort zone if she has that snowballs chance in hell of not coming across as cold.

I'm on pins and needles. My warmest wishes to all of them.

✦ KATIE COURIC

I mentioned an article I wrote about Katie Couric above. Here it is from back in 2011 – I think it’s important to reprint because it goes further into the “warmth” issues. This was five months before the premiere of her daytime talk show.

📺 AUDITION YOUR TALENT WITH PUPPIES

PERSONALITY PRODUCER - The Raymond J Brune Blog; April 11, 2011

Nobody will say it, at least publicly, so I will. **Katie Couric** will not be the savior of daytime television. She will not be "THE NEXT *Oprah*". Her talk show will be cancelled after its first season. This is not a guess or a prediction. It's simple fact - proven over and over again. Katie, like a parade of former news people turned-talk-show-hosts before her, including **Jane Pauley**, is missing one simple TV ingredient that will prevent her from conquering daytime - warmth. Viewers just don't connect with Katie. (*Joan Lunden's* talk show also failed, but not for a lack of warmth, but for a lack of highlighting warm moments by the producers). It's an intangible you either have on the air - or you don't. I'm not saying Katie or the others are not "warm" human beings. I'm saying any warmth they exude does not survive the digital conversion process that beams the TV signal into our homes and is decoded onto our flat screens. I've learned through years of producing talent that you can manufacture "on-air presence" through all kinds of tricks here and there, but you cannot manufacture "warmth". You just can't. Why **Robin Roberts** emanates warmth and Katie Couric does not is something I can't explain. It's certainly something I, as a right-brain producer, am very good at identifying in on-air talent - who's warm & who's not - but it's something I can't quantify.

You may say, "Well, how do you explain her success on the *Today* show?" Her success there was two-fold... she had **Matt Lauer** sitting next to her (he exudes warmth compensating somewhat for Katie's lack), and *Today* was the "best" of the three truly lousy network morning news shows at that time. *Today* went on just fine without her after she left for **CBS**. And last week's stunt by *GMA* proves that Ms. Couric is not the superstar news and TV talent she's made out to be. When **ABC's GMA** had her fill in for **Robin Roberts** who was vacationing, they assumed they'd attract millions of eyeballs who used to watch Katie away from *Today*. Didn't happen, even though **NBC** countered by having **Sarah Palin**, ah, sort of host *Today* along with having a "very important" announcement by **Ryan Seacrest**. I don't think either Palin or Seacrest get any credit for *Today* holding on to its viewers last week. **NBC** viewers just didn't find Palin annoying enough to switch. And if they did switch, I suspect they switched to a local morning show rather than the **ABC** or **CBS** morning shows.

Please understand I have absolutely nothing against Katie Couric. I've never met the woman. I don't know any relevant "inside info" that would sway my opinion of her one way or another. I did compete against her. My show, the *KTLA Morning News*, did kick her show's ass in the early 1990's because my female host, **Barbara Beck**, was a hug-your-puppy warmth machine. But if I was going through a hundred or so demo reels and an unknown Katie's was one of them, I'd pass... like I have on so many others. Katie's just not warm on air. And all of **Disney's** money and promotion and high-powered executives in corners offices can't manufacture that for her. **Walt Disney** recognized warmth. **Hayley Mills** was so warm he put two of her on screen at the same time to capitalize on it (*The Parent Trap*). He even managed to make his cartoon characters bubble over with warmth. Name one of the seven dwarfs who wasn't endearing (warm). The glaring exception in his catalog of

characters was **Alice (in Wonderland)**. Alice – the animated character - had no warmth. Zero. Audiences didn't root for her. They didn't care about her Wonderland adventures. No warmth = Box-Office flop.

During the last 5 years, nobody seemed interested in what Katie had to say on the *CBS Evening News* or on *60 Minutes*. Why are viewers expected to flock to her in droves in daytime to hear her point-of-view now? I find it sad that the networks all tried to "woo" Katie to bring her talk show to them during secret meetings in February of 2011 at the **St. Regis Hotel** in Manhattan. Wait - the networks wooed HER? She just caused **CBS** to lose tens of millions of dollars when they plopped her in their anchor chair. Shouldn't *she* be doing the wooing?

Katie will never be more successful than she was, what, ten years ago, on *Today*. There were enough elements in play to sustain her even though viewers didn't necessarily connect with her. Those elements are long gone. Katie's on her own in daytime. I suspect no one at **ABC** actually sat down and watched some video of Katie before presenting their winning woo. I suspect no one viewed her subjectively, without all the hype and agents' adjectives and millions of dollars swirling around in their heads. Did they audition her? Certainly not! However, I suspect if they were to audition her - and put her on a set with a bunch of puppies, they'd see more clearly that the warmth just isn't there. (*Hmmm, auditioning talent with puppies. I'm going to try that.*) And that's why millions upon millions of dollars are thrown away year after year on potential daytime hosts who fail to deliver. Because left-brain network executives can't discern warmth from wit - and don't even watch the talent on-air before shelling out obscene amounts of money.

Viewers, on the other hand, can and do.

So, it looks like *acquiring* a personality by *hiring* a personality isn't very cost-effective, is it? I think NBC and Disney will back me up based on their very expensive learning experiences. That's why I prefer to produce my own personalities – to find people with potential that I can mold and develop and blossom into their own - right there on the air. In the next chapter I go through the steps that will show you some of the subtle ways personalities work their magic on camera.





CHAPTER SIX

PRODUCING PERSONALITIES

I'm often seen in studio, just outside of camera range. It's important, especially early on, that the anchors realize they are not alone out there and that I'm on this journey with them. If something doesn't work, they're not going to get scolded for taking a risk. These are my starting points when working with talent:

✠ STARTING POINTS

- ⇒ I push them out of their comfort zones ever so slowly.
- ⇒ I remind them over and over, "*I have your back.*" If something doesn't work, tomorrow's another show.
- ⇒ I give them permission to experiment without fear of failure. Some things work. Some things don't. The more things don't go as planned on the air early on, the less afraid and more skilled they become at handling "in the moment" situations.
- ⇒ I teach them how to interact with each other on camera. It's not as easy as it looks.
- ⇒ I allow them to laugh without fear they'll lose their credibility. Laughter is emotion. Viewers are drawn to emotion on TV. They want to be "in on the joke".

Along with those starting points are the 12 areas I've identified that a talent needs to master in order to develop into a personality. It's not as easy as just saying, "Be yourself." There's so much more that goes into the process of being authentic.

12 AREAS OF EXPERTISE

PERSONALITIES MUST MASTER

1) FLIRT WITH THE CAMERAS

KTLA's Barbara Beck is an expert at this. And frankly, I don't even know if she knows she's doing it or if it just comes naturally to her. She's aware of which camera is hot every moment she's on-air – and she consistently alternates eye contact with viewers and the talent on set. She makes the audience feel part of any conversation. She brings viewers in on conversations they may have missed during a break. She subtly flirts with the cameras – I'm not talking about flirting in a sexual way but just like we all do when talking to each other in normal conversation. That's why viewers so easily connect with Barbara.

2) BE "IN THE MOMENT"

Your attention has to be focused on what's happening *right now* – not about the next story you have to read. You must capitalize on opportunities that are presenting themselves *here & now* – rather than worrying about if the prompter's in the right place or how much time is left in this segment. When something unexpected happens on the air, embrace it – don't try to erase it!

3) GO OFF PROMPTER

Ad-libbing and talking like you do in normal conversation is much more effective than reading word for word off a prompter. The prompter should eventually become an annoyance to you



instead of an essential tool. If you're lucky enough to still have someone operating your prompter for you – train *them* to follow *you* instead of you following them. I have been known to deliberately jam the teleprompter on occasion – forcing the anchors to talk instead of read.

4) TAKE RISKS & SEE REWARDS

Taking risks does *not* mean bungee jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge. Small, calculated risks are much more effective. As an example, Barbara Beck was reporting live from the 48th floor observation deck of the Transamerica Building in San Francisco one morning. No memory of why she was there, but while she was reporting, she had a cup of coffee in her hand.

When she finished, Mark Kriski, the KTLA weatherman who was the “wild card” of the bunch, jumped in to give Barbara a challenge.

“Barbara, I’ll give you five bucks if you pour your coffee over the side of the building. C’mon, five bucks is in it for you...”

Without saying a word, Barbara quietly walks over to the ledge, looks down below to be sure there would be no innocent bystanders affected, turns back to the camera with a sly smile, and then pours her coffee over the side of the building.

All she uttered was, “*Oops!*”

The cameraperson then walks over to the ledge and points his camera down to show the coffee landed on a balcony below. It was a classic, almost voyeuristic moment. The viewer at home thinks, “*Shit, I can’t believe she just did that.*” Mark took a risk. He essentially hit the ball into Barbara’s court. She hit it out of the park by pouring the drink over the side. Imagine if Barbara had said, “No”. What a letdown and a lousy TV moment. Kudos to Mark for taking a risk, and kudos to Barbara for rewarding us (the viewers) and for being in the moment.

► **VIEW VIDEO #18 HERE:**
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Let me point something else out here. I have no memory of the story Barbara was reporting on that day. Not a clue. And neither do viewers. They don’t remember lead stories and news packages for the most part (hugging is an exception). But they sure remember Barbara pouring the coffee over the side of a skyscraper. That’s a memorable moment that endears your talent to your viewers.

5) MIX IT UP WITH REAL PEOPLE

A quick story from my *Eye Opener* newscast in Chicago. Out getting man-on-the-street interviews one day, **Adam Lee Campbell**, known as ALC, came across a rather large woman who was getting around in a motorized wheelchair.



He asked her the question he was asking everybody else, *“What’s going good in your life?”*

The woman had no real answer. She mumbled a bit but couldn’t think of a thing that was worth sharing.

Then, out of the blue, ALC asked her, *“Would you mind giving me a ride on your wheelchair?”*

The woman smiled broadly and then nodded, ALC carefully jump aboard, and they did loop d’loops around the sidewalk. A brilliant, unplanned, completely random moment.

As they were spinning, ALC asked again, *“What’s going good in your life?”*

The woman replied this time without hesitation, *“I got a friend that I love. He’s riding with me on my lap!”*

The essence of an emotional moment. ALC briefly came into this woman’s life and simply made her smile. Viewers were smiling.

6) TELL STORIES

There are lots of ways to tell stories. It’s tough in a 75-second package because the standard track-bite-track-bite-standup format doesn’t lend itself to good storytelling. And the window of time between when you shoot a package and when it airs is so small, it’s a real challenge to craft a story that’s informative as well as emotional and told in 75-seconds. Investigative and feature packages that run a bit longer are the best vehicles for packaged storytelling.

I think one of the most effective ways to tell a story is to simply have your anchor tell it – no tape, no sound, just your anchor on a close-up talking to the camera. I have used that technique countless times.

Another effective way to tell a story is live from the field. KTLA’s Eric Spillman is a pro at reporting what’s happening in narrative form, walking from location to location, pointing somewhere, opening something, touching something else... all the while “live”. You don’t always need tape and a cop soundbite to tell a story.

I’m going to go out on a limb here. Far out. That’s what I do...but I want you to come with me this time. I am going to tell you about the most awesome, most well-told, most compelling breaking news story I’ve seen in months. This story didn’t air on a local newscast, it aired “live” on Facebook. It’s the storyteller that you may have problems with.

► **VIEW VIDEO #19 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

If you are skipping over the video, don't! Watch it – right now! The report is by self-described “citizen reporter” **Rhoda Young** of Norfolk, VA who took it upon herself to cover a house fire using just her smartphone, her attitude & colorful language, and her truly authentic storytelling technique. I came across her report – and was mesmerized.

I'm going to assume you watched it. And I'm going to assume you are appalled that I would point this out as an excellent example of storytelling. I'm sorry to tell you, but it is. This woman, who had no business being at the scene of a housefire, takes over. She finds the homeowner, soon discovers that he (allegedly) started the fire, and watches as he's cuffed and taken away. Some of her phrases are priceless as well as endearing:

“Let's get the house sprayed down with some water”

“WAVY News Ten please tune in” - an excellent jab to the local station who wasn't covering this fire.

“That's your house? Oh, God bless you”

“Everybody stay clear, we got electrical wires comin' down”

“I need to get this street blocked off”

“Call Virginia Power, shut off the power”

And my favorite...

“The house is fully engorged!”

The fact that she was shooting using her smartphone vertically rather than horizontally, which usually annoys the hell out of me, worked in this situation. C’mon, admit it - this is truly the most compelling coverage of a nickel & dime house fire you’ve ever seen! Had Rhoda brought me this story at a local station – you bet I’d seriously consider airing it in all its glory (bleeping the profanity). And I’d seriously consider hiring her freelance as a true “citizen reporter”, covering non-fatal spot news stories like this one in her own, unique storytelling style. Think about it. Her little, lousy house fire story captured millions of views. How many viewers watched your last house fire live shot?

If that shocks you, good. It’s meant to. Because this is what we’re up against whether you want to face it or not. Regular Janes and Johns can cover news stories now with their cheap technology as quickly and efficiently as we can - and air them on “live” platforms like Facebook and Periscope. When it’s done by someone who’s personality jumps off the screen like Rhoda, it’s hard to turn them away.

7) TELL PERSONAL STORIES

On GMA, I once had Robin Roberts interview an ABC correspondent about a story she had just returned from shooting – a reunion of southern families whose ancestors once owned slaves. Robin began sharing how her ancestors were slaves, how that affected her personally, and how not all black people feel they need an apology for slavery. It was a very sobering moment. Robin’s story was extremely emotional and unquestionably

personal. She didn't have to share it. We all feel a bit closer to her simply because she did. Make your stories personal.

8) JUST GO THERE

On *Eye Opener Dallas*, we found one of those “crazy studies”. Instead of just reading the story, **Ty, Neeha, Kevin** and **Hilary** were experimenting with the findings of that study right there at the anchor desk. It proved to be a memorable moment. Notice, too, how Ty “bookends” this moment later in the show by referring back to it. It's kind of a running joke that played through this episode and “rewards” viewers for sticking around throughout the show.

► **VIEW VIDEO #20 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book



9) ALLOW MOMENTS TO PLAY OUT

Sometimes you must ignore your instincts. Sometimes when something is happening “live” you've just got to let it play out.

Perfect example: KTLA’s **Sam Rubin** was interviewing **Howie Mandell**. Sam had just finished talking with **Richard Simmons** in the previous segment.

Sam asked Howie, *“What’s it like to follow Richard Simmons?”*

Howie replied, *“I don’t want Richard Simmons following me!”*

The studio erupted into a tidal wave of awkward laughter.

Then, Howie spotted Richard standing off camera, and quickly added, *“I mean that in a nice way, no, I meant that in a nice way.”*

Richard appeared very pissed off. He walked from off stage into camera range and confronted Howie. *“What have I done to you? I walked into the green room, I offered you a bagel, I hugged your mother. What’s the problem?”*

Now at this point, my instinct would have been to cut Richard off, turn back to Howie and try to move on with the interview – because things had really gotten uncomfortable. But fortunately, Sam did not do that. He just sat quietly and let the scene play itself out. Because of Sam’s silence, Howie jumped in hoping to calm Richard down – and his silly response did just that:

“There is no problem, Richard. I love you. I love you. I’ve got my wife watching and probably that’s the end of my marriage, but it’s you I love.”

Another eruption of laughter in the studio. Richard then stormed off camera in mock anger. We knew he was just playing to the camera. But that was a much better and more natural way for this unplanned scene to end. Sam attempting to break up the

conflict (even if it was just mock conflict) would have fallen flat. He was wise to allow things to play out.

10) GANG-BANG INTERVIEWS

Nearly every interview I have my on-air teams do is done, crudely titled, *gang bang style*. It took National Security Advisor **Colin Powell** to teach me that lesson. Here's the story:

We had booked General Powell as a news guest on an early episode of the *KTLAMN*. He was going to come on, talk about his new book, and discuss his role in *Operation Desert Storm* in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Barbara and Carlos were doing the interview at home base. They were sitting in the middle of the set. Weatherman Mark Kriski was not involved in the interview and was sitting off-camera in the far left chair and Powell was sitting in Entertainment host Sam Rubin's chair on the far right. Barbara and Carlos were asking questions about the war, about strategy, and Powell was answering in a typical, talking-head, official capacity. Mark was sitting over there quietly, but apparently, he was getting bored. As I told you earlier, he was the "wild card" on the show – God knows what to expect when he starts to speak.

And speak he did, interrupting the interview with his own question. "*General Powell, excuse me for interrupting, but I was just curious if you are a 'regular recipe' or 'extra crispy' kind of guy?*"

You could hear a pin drop in the studio. Deafening silence. Carlos and Barbara were unable to form words.

In the control room, I think I uttered something along the lines of, "*Dear Sweet Jesus, is this really happening?*"

Time really does slow down in moments like this. In what seemed like slow-motion, I reached for Carlos and Barbara’s IFB buttons but was at a loss for any words of wisdom to impart.

General Powell, while taken aback, didn’t seem to miss a beat, *“Extra Crispy all the way!”*

A thunderous roar of laughter that registered on Caltech’s Richter Scale could be felt from the studio to the control room. We were all so terrified of what the General’s reaction was going to be that we totally forgot one key fact - he’s human, just like the rest of us. He loved the question! On his long book tour, no one else had the balls to ask him such a question! It was refreshing as hell.

The final half of the interview was dramatically different from the first half. Mark had broken the ice.... Or maybe the General did. That question, while completely out-of-the-blue, impertinent and seemingly misplaced, totally grounded and humanized our guest (and our hosts). It knocked Carlos and Barbara out of their “news mode”. Everyone began talking to each other – authentically. It was a watershed moment for me. Nearly every interview we did since then involved Carlos, Barbara, Mark and Sam together talking with the guest(s) – all mics open. Each brings their own authenticity to the interview. Gang-bang interviews have become the rule rather than the exception at every show I’ve went on to produce since. It’s essential that personalities who work so closely together learn to master the art of conversation and be able to assert their personality in an interview (as Mark did) without robbing their co-hosts of theirs.

➡ ON A SIDE NOTE...

While on the subject of Mark, I want to bring up a side point. Mark had become the “wild card” on the show –

all his own doing. It just sort-of happened. And it served us well for those 8 years or so. However, more recently when I'd occasionally turn on the show at home, I've noticed Mark no longer throws out those wild zingers when the opportunity presents itself.

Instead, he now says something like this: *"I could say something right now... but I'm not going to. I'll just keep it to myself."*

Do you know what that is? Do you know why he says that now without even realizing it instead of "going there"? It's because in the 30-year history of the show, after Carlos and Barbara and director Lenn, me and Joel and Caroline and a few other managers departed, the replacement producers they brought in are *left-brainers*. Mark's "wild card" right-brain comments are no longer acceptable because left-brain producers don't see them as having value. They view them as an interruption to an interview like the one with Colin Powell, not a prized contribution that adds authenticity to the show. They (metaphorically) beat Mark over the head every time he said something "off the cuff" until finally, he just shuts down. Instead of "taking a risk" and "going there", he just utters something like, *"I could say something right now but..."*

That's how a once vibrant show with personalities jumping off the screen begins to lose its luster. The right-brain rhythm is replaced, bit by bit, story by story, talent by talent, with left-brain logic. And poof – the magic is gone.

11) GIVE & TAKE

Give and take is simply and successfully playing an on-air game of verbal tennis. When your co-anchor hits the ball to you, you must always hit it back. You don't allow the ball to just fall lifeless to the floor – metaphorically speaking. I once produced a talk show hosted by two standup comedians. **Sunda Croonquist** would hit the ball to **James Harris** who was always ready to return her big serve. Their trademark close of the show was Sunda saying:

“You can take the girl out of Jersey...”

And James would jump in with:

“...but you better put her back.”

When your co-anchor asks you how your weekend was on-air, you don't just reply with, *“Fine. Now on to our top story.”*

That's dropping the ball.

12) GENUINELY LIKE EACH OTHER

You know, I used to think it was vital that the on-air team genuinely like each other – like the cast at KTLA did. I don't believe that anymore. I once stepped into a cesspool of vial and vindictive anchormosity between an on-air team of maybe six people that was so ripe with rage and repulsion that I would never believe it possible if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. In the newsroom, there were doors slamming and persons crying, backstabbing and side-taking, secret meetings and tattletaling. It was like nothing I had ever seen in my career. Ever. But holy shit, when that “on air” light came on, you'd think these people were life-long BFFs. I was astounded at how flawlessly they executed this charade. I examined those airchecks with a

microscope looking for cracks in their camouflage. No cracks. And this was a hit show!

I suppose *Area of Expertise #12* is a suggestion rather than a requirement. Either genuinely like each other – or genuinely fake it.

Producing personalities is a time-consuming process. It's a lot of talking. A lot of aircheck watching and saying things like, "*What if you did this...*" and "*Next time try saying that...*". Oftentimes, I will sit right next to an anchor on the set as they're live on the air. I do this for two reasons. First, to make the director shoot around me. Ask **Scott Hecht** about directing *Trackside Live* on the set of the **Fox Sports** network **TVG**. I often stood right between the two anchors on set so he could not shoot them on a 2-shot. I hate 2-shots. He had to shoot them on close-ups and cut, cut, cut the cameras to follow the conversation. He told me it was the most innovative way anyone had challenged him as a director. I sit next to talent because I want to remind them I have their back and that I'm in this with them. Plus, we can have conversations about trying this or that during packages and breaks. There's only one downside to this method of talent producing. I once pushed a little *too* hard, I made the anchorwoman cry as she asked me, "*Then why did you hire me?*" Not my intention by any means - I had to get someone fast to replace her on set and placed an emergency *1-800-FLOWERS* order. Don't try this at home!

✠ POOF-READ YOUR SCRIPPS

One more thing for on-air types. Don't become overconfident in yourself. The #1 trap anchorpeople fall into after a year or two on the job – they stop prewf-reading their scripps. I know, I know, I sound like a nagging old housefly. But on the countless things a anchorperson can do to hurt they're on-air proformance, deciding to skip pre-redding their scripps before the show is the one that always. Weather it's typos, unpronounceable names, strange formatting on the prompter, forgotten

words or. I can name half a dozen new anchors I watch on a regulated basics who clearly do not pre-read their.

I know how anchors operate. Marry times they come back from dinner too late and have to get into maskup and just don't have time to proofread their scripts for the 11PM. And please underestimate, I'm not talking about actually sitting down at a keyhole and changing words or sentences here or there to put the words more into their like own voice. I'm talking about simply pre-reading the script as they are ripened and separated from the printer – no recites required. Many anchors deciding they'll pre-read each block of scirms in the brake just before they airing. Don't happen. They end up shooting the breezeway with the floor director or answering tweets and the scripts go unattendance. On average, an anchor can read three out of for scripts cold – without screwing up. But it's the fourd one, the one written by the new freelance righter – or the one that had the really long word that got broken up into too lines of the prompter – that gets 'em. Many time it's just overconfidence. *"I've been doing this for years. People live me! Viewers'll forgive a few screw-ups how and then."*

Now, I realize the alternating isn't always desirable neither. Some anchorpeople take the compete opposition approach and re-write every single ward of every single story they reading on air. I suppose, as a producer, I should rejoice in their willingly to be involved in the writing prosecution. As someone who has written enough nudes to fill 15,000 hours of air-time, I can tell you it irks me to no end when I am still constantly re-written. Granted, I am not Shakespearean. But I can write a story about a fire in an element school in a factual, yet constricting manner, using proper American English grammor- employing short, declarative sentence – no tricky words or tongue twisters – and no surprise unpronouncing names. Any questions?

Andersin Coupre once shared me the most valuable peace of advice I could never pass on to you. He said, -quote- *"should yous boss call you*

in, remind him that Covfefe.” And they nearly doubled his salary with those 3 majic werds!

Let me end by being clearing up about one thing. I don't care if whether you're **Walter-fricking-Croncast**. If you as a news anchor stumble threw a script on-air, the fault liars with you. Period. End of stor. Now let's go out there and make TV hickory!



AND J. BRUNE
IG TUNA™

CHAPTER SEVEN

PRODUCING, PICKING, PACKAGING & PRESENTING

In 1987, **Bill Vance**, news director at **WBNS** in Columbus called me into his office. I produced *Eyewitness News at Eleven* with **Dana Tyler** and **Bob Orr**. We were a solid number one and as, sort of a perk, he was sending me on a trip - to Marion, Iowa of all places. Marion is the home of **Magid**, the consultant people – to producer school!

Keep in mind, during the '80's and early '90's, I'd never worked with consultants. Most local stations either didn't have consultants or if they did, the producers never met with them. Also, during this time, no one from corporate ever came to any of the local newsrooms I had worked in. There was no corporate VP in charge of news. In those days, the news director really did make all the decisions that affected the station's newscasts. So, having never worked with a consultant, I didn't really know what to expect.



✠ PRODUCING SCHOOL

When I got to Marion, I was joined by maybe 30 other local news producers from stations around the country. It was a classroom setting if I remember, and the Magid people spent a lot of time showing us airchecks of stations that were really breaking away from the traditional ways of producing local newscasts. I was in seventh heaven! Seriously.

They showed examples of ways to write stories differently. They had news anchors who rose above newsreader status and really establish themselves as a presence in their newscast.

✠ BILL BONDS – GIRL SCOUT COOKIES

For example, they showed a clip from **Bill Bonds**, the WXYZ Detroit anchorman I would soon find myself competing against at WDIV. Bill was doing a story - or rather - *not* doing a story about Girl Scout

Cookies. I had never seen this originality or approach on local news – it was brilliant!

► **VIEW VIDEO #21 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

What you see there is excellent television. First, the writing with the twist about how he can't promote their cookies. Next, the close-ups throughout – and the cutaways to co-anchor **Robbie Timmons** and close-ups of the cookies. And finally, the 5PM anchor, **Rich Fisher**, running into the shot and stealing the cookies at the end. Local news just wasn't done like that! And tragically, some 32-years later, it's still not at most stations!

I was captivated by what I saw.

Then they presented a clip another station aired of a family of ducks crossing the road. Seriously. A news photographer happened to capture a mama duck and her four baby ducklings as they crossed a busy road – with cars stopping every which way to avoid hitting them. Once across the road, the mama duck hopped up a curb to safety. Duckling numbers one, two and three hopped up as well. Duckling four was having problems. He just couldn't seem to make the leap up onto the curb. He tried. He hopped, but not high enough and fell. He tried again, attempted to hop, but failed again. And again. And again. Finally, mama duck hopped back down to the road and using her beak, pushed duckling four up onto the curb, before joining him and the three other ducklings there – and the family went on its way.

Again, excellent TV. No storyteller needed. The video says it all. Granted, in this day and age with YouTube and viral clips, this video doesn't sound all that amazing, but it was – simply because it was a different way to tell a story that no stations at the time were doing. Who would even have considered that a story to go to air? I give Magid kudos for what I learned at their producer school back in 1987. I left there

excited – and with a whole new way of looking at how I approach story presentation in my newscasts.

Fast forward to now. Today's young producers have never been shown things like how Bill Bonds wrote a newscast. The duck story now would just be some 25-second voice over without natural sound, and the director would likely cut out of the video before duckling four makes it on the curb. Producers aren't taught how to write solid news copy, how to showcase their anchor team and how to tell a story using graphics and videos. Producers don't produce anymore. They process data. It's not their fault. They load tickers, configure text and graphic overlays, they post content to the station's website, they create playlists and edit video, and they code – they're constantly coding sequences to ensure events are triggered at the right time in the right place on-screen for their lousy, little left-brain, local newscasts. No one teaches them how to produce a newscast – just how to process one.

Let's dig a little deeper into the elements of a hit show: producing, picking, packaging and presenting.

PRODUCING

Despite those responsibilities, most of today's producers have never actually worked alongside a showrunner who actively *produces the people* working on the show. Sure, (s)he meets with the assignment desk, but as far as interacting with anchors, reporters, writers, directors – well, everything's right there on the rundown – it's all in the computer - what do we need to talk about? Today's producers are mediocre writers at best. It's not their fault. They've just never been taught how to write. That skill is not as valued as their computer expertise, so getting the show on the air – or more precisely, getting all the data coded correctly is more immediate and urgent than writing a lead story with alliteration or irony or flair. The technical aspects of the newscast are more precious than the editorial aspects – and that's troubling.

I recently told a producer he should go out into the studio during every couple of breaks to talk to the anchors, to reassure them, to schmooze them, to keep their energy up.

“Why would I need to do that?” was his oh, so naïve reply.

Let me add this - not to brag – but to demonstrate that I can hold my own “programming” a newscast against the best MIT graduates you can throw my way. I was a thorn in the side of newsroom software giant **NewStar**. I could jam the teleprompter at will – whenever I wanted the anchors to stop *reading* and begin *talking* to each other. I had keyboard shortcuts that copied, pasted and stacked stories from one hour into another. NewStar once had to rewrite its software and redistribute it to all its paid clients after I showed one of the reps how I created a “user” named “???” which allowed me to access the emails, private files, and accounts of every staffer at the company. Boy, was he pissed when I showed him that! I’ve stacked on **iNews** and **Opus** and I kick serious ass when cutting complete one-hour shows on **Adobe Premiere** and **Final Cut**. My point is: I have the computer skills of today’s young producers. Why don’t they have my producing skills?

Bottom line – building newscasts on **ENPS** and the others I described are basic, entry-level skills for a producer these days. They should not be viewed as a producer’s biggest asset – the technical expertise overshadowing the editorial expertise. And yet they are.

I laugh every time I come across a job ad saying “*we don’t want a stacker and timer*” because in this day and age, that’s exactly what producers are – no more no less. Is there still such a thing as a writing test for job applicants anymore? Remember how producers and AP’s and writers had to take some news wires stories and rewrite them for broadcast television? It that – still – a thing? Hello? McFly?

➡ ON A SIDE NOTE...

If you're not in the habit of watching newscasts in other markets (they're easily streamed) and checking out their formats, their talent, their producing style, how do you expect to stay competitive in your own market? If you like something they're doing, adapt it to your own show. When I was at WLWT, a competing anchor at WCPO, **Pat Minarcin**, was an exemplary writer. His approach to a story, his style, and his delivery were peerless. When I moved on from Cincinnati, I borrowed some of Mr. Minarcin's style and made it my own. That's just what you do.

PICKING

Of the thousands of decisions a producer makes daily, choosing a lead story for the newscast is probably the most important one. The lead is tricky because it can either suck viewers into the show or turn them off. In addition, the lead is almost always subjective – there is no right or wrong lead. It's a judgment call. I use three sets of criteria to help guide me toward the best lead, based on all the stories I have available to me. The first is my Lead Filter:

☒ LEAD FILTER

- ✓ Is it new?
- ✓ Do we have visuals?
- ✓ Do people care?

The lead filter narrows down my options. Ideally, the perfect lead has all three elements – it's new, you have great video and it's something a

wide range of people care about it. Usually, most lead stories don't have all three. So, you've got to weigh your options. And be aware, you can't possibly choose your lead story until you know what all the options are. You as the producer need to talk with your assignment desk team and scan all your news sources - whether it's your network affiliation's news service, CNN, the **AP** wire and all those cool niche websites you go to in hopes of finding unique stories. Never delegate this job to someone else on the staff. You should always be the one to skim through as many news sources as possible – not only for the lead, but for the kicker and the stories you put in the show *simply because they make for good teases*. I can't stress how important it is that you are armed with a long list of possible stories. When one falls out for any number of reasons, you've got backups ready. You should also be saving lots of evergreen stories for a no-news day.

Once I find a story with the most checkmarks on my Lead Filter, I then check the old gut instinct. If it feels right, do it and don't over-question it. You've got to use your *news judgment* but you can't ignore something I call *views judgment* – you want all those people watching the show leading into your newscast to stay tuned – based on your expert teases that aired during local breaks. Using news judgment alone can mislead you into the wrong lead and cause you to lose a good chunk of your lead-in.

Another key consideration is whether the story is local. That's a given for me anyway. Local almost always wins out. Here's the regional priorities hierarchy for my lead stories:

REGIONAL PRIORITIES

1. Local (Non-Spot News)
2. News for Everyone
3. National
4. International

By “local” I am not talking about spot news stories. Shootings, stabbings, minor fires and other nickel and dime crime is not going to suck viewers into a newscast. It will turn off everyone except the people in the neighborhood where the spot news story took place. “News for Everyone” is a very good option for a fallback lead. NFE is simply a story that affects lots of viewers but doesn’t fit into a specific region, such as “*researchers have found a new drug that kills cancer cells without destroying surrounding tissue, offering hope to millions of cancer patients*”. Depending on the details of this story, it could easily be built into a lead story because it’s relevant - cancer touches everyone’s lives – whether you have it, your mom is being treated for it or a close friend just died from it. Getting reaction from local hospitals or cancer specialists or patients is quick and easy – and the whole shebang can be put together and fronted by a reporter if need be. NFE doesn’t need to be just health stories. There are all kinds of subjects that fit here. The recent story of **Bank of America** backing down and dropping its new ATM fees could be a solid lead because everyone has to pay those fees – and in this rare instance, the consumer wins. So, sell it as a rare win for consumers! I, as a viewer, would much rather get that information first than the shooting of a crack dealer on the east side, which has absolutely no effect on my life whatsoever. Categories for NFE include Health, Money, Entertainment, Tech, and Travel.

I am almost universally opposed to leading with an international story. Producers who regularly lead international are either a) lazy, or b) fearful for their jobs. The bottom line is, most international stories turn local viewers off simply because what’s going on today in Cairo “*has absolutely no effect on my life whatsoever*”. You say, “*Yes, but it’s important*”. I reply, “*Important to whom?*” That “who” always wins out.

Let’s look at some international stories listed on a past CNN feed:

- Cairo Protesters
- Russia Slams America’s Sanctions on Iran

- Pakistan U.S. Ambassador Quits Over Memo
- 7 Missing After South Korean Ship Sinks
- Turkish Prime Minister Tells Al-Assad To Step Down
- Mexico's Military Seizes \$15 Million
- South Africa Passes State Secrets Law
- International Prosecutor Arrives in Libya

The networks will lead tonight with Cairo. Guaranteed. And the simple fact is, viewers who want all the details of the protests in Egypt know to watch the networks because network news covers international stories in detail. Viewers simply do not tune in to local newscasts for details on most international stories – unless it's truly a huge story. So as a news producer, I would advise you to put Cairo, Russia and maybe the Turkey stories into a quick international roundup segment lower in the show. Those stories deserve no more than :30 seconds each – or viewers will begin to turn. It's a fact. And for God sake, don't tease them. Who's going to sit through a break to hear about any of those stories?

Some producers lead international because they think it's "safe". "Leading with Cairo is important because Egypt is getting a whole new government and the protestors played a major part in changing their country's future... blah blah". In their minds, their news director can hardly say they made the wrong lead choice because Cairo is such a big story, so how can they possibly call a producer out for leading with it? I could. It's a story whose details are better left to the networks. The only element this story hits on the Lead Filter is #2, good visuals – not great visuals, but good. So, in this instance, there is a slight possibility that it could lead a show – but if the only reason a producer leads with it is because "it's safe", then they've made the wrong choice.

The final step I take in choosing a lead is:

✦ SUBJECTIVE OPINIONS

1. People in The Newsroom
2. What's Trending

I always ask the news anchors, the assignment editor, and the reporters coming back with stories their opinions on a good lead story. Let me make this clear – *I* always make the decision on what my lead story is – always – but I ask my coworkers' opinions in the newsroom because a) they may see something I don't, and b) it's important for them to feel included and have a say. But frankly, 99-percent of the time, I ignore their opinions and do what I want. I'm the producer. It's my prerogative. Asking other people's opinions is not a sign of weakness – or a sign that you don't know what you're doing – it's a simple courtesy to other people involved in the show. Obviously, you want to follow the progress of your reporters throughout the day so that the stories they're coming back with are what you're expecting. There's nothing worse than seeing your reporter's lead story on the air – and it's not even remotely close to what you were told it was.

Another important step is to simply observe. Oftentimes, photogs or PA's are gathered around a TV monitor in the newsroom watching something. If it's getting that kind of attention, it may be worth considering for a lead.

A good way to know you've succeeded is when you're on air and the T.D. or audio guy (if you still have them) reacts in a positive way to what you're airing. Those guys are so jaded that getting any kind of reaction from them is a good sign you've got the right lead.

And finally, see what's trending – what are the top searches on Google? This is a vital resource as it gives you instant access to what millions of people are searching for on-line. Usually, it's nothing more than the latest celebrity hijinks, but occasionally it points you to a good story.

PACKAGING

Once you sell your lead story to your anchors, you need to sell it on the air to your viewers. I prefer to refer to this as “packaging”, whether it’s a lead story, a signature segment or showcasing a reporter. For hard newscasts, I usually insist on writing the lead story because I know exactly how I want to sell it. You can do the same or hand it off to someone else – just make sure they know what you’re going for and which selling points to highlight. Writing the lead, or any story, for that matter, has got to grab viewers immediately.

✠ SELLING THE LEAD

There are four things I consistently make sure my lead-in accomplishes quickly – with a minimum of words:

1. The first sentence should grab viewers’ attention
2. The second sentence establishes relevance
3. The third sentence updates viewers on any backstory
4. The fourth line tosses to the video or live remote

As an example, here’s how I’d script a lead-in to Devils Night in Detroit:

VO OUT OF OPEN:

AN ORGY OF ARSON ACROSS
DETROIT TONIGHT –
COUNTLESS HOUSES ARE
BURNING RIGHT NOW -
MANY MORE ARE MERE
ASHES.

NAT SOUND FIRES &
FIREFIGHTERS

(NAT SOUND FULL)

ANCHOR ON CAMERA

GOOD EVENING. YOUR HOME COULD BE A “DEVIL’S NIGHT” TARGET OF ARSONISTS AND VANDALS – WHO TAKE TO THE STREETS EVERY YEAR ON THIS EVE OF HALLOWEEN.

REVEAL REMOTE

ANNE THOMPSON IS “LIVE” ON THE EAST SIDE IN A NEIGHBORHOOD HIT ESPECIALLY HARD.

Also keep in mind, your lead story is not always your lead “tease” as well. Many times, I won’t tease the lead story at all, but use those teases for more tease-able stories lower down. In those 10PM and 10:30PM newsbreaks I used to write in Detroit, I often did not tease the lead story so as not to tip off the competition what we’re up to. Not teasing the lead doesn’t mean you don’t have faith in the lead story. It’s a strategy move that often makes sense for tactical reasons.

ROSEANNE

You will also have to live with your lead story choice, sometimes long after the show is over. At WDIV, one of my most “infamous” 11PM lead story choices was **Roseanne Barr** singing the national anthem at a **Padres** game in 1990.

It was an obvious lead. She grabbed her crotch and spit and sang off key and generally dishonored the song and its patriotic meaning. She pissed off a lot of people. It was new, we had great video, and even **President George Bush** commented on how unpatriotic and un-American it was – all right there and ready for the 11PM lead. I make no apologies. The

news director and the anchors were 100-percent behind me & Roseanne for the lead story.

Keep in mind there are always people around you who have an agenda. One of the other anchors on staff surreptitiously began calling a columnist friend at the **Detroit Free Press** – who began trashing our 11PM newscasts regularly in his TV column. This is the kind of bullshit you can sometimes encounter when you produce right-brain TV. You have to rise above the noise and not lose your focus. I have no regrets! We were just ahead of our time! And the **Associated Press** awarded us best newscast for it.

When you finish reading this book, you'll notice I did three things every good writer should do – especially on a newscast:

- Tell them what you're going to tell them
- Tell them what you have to tell them
- Tell them what you told them

Told 'ya.

✠ EYE OPENER CHICAGO

Every local newscast starts the same: Two anchors on a two-shot tossing to a live remote off the top with an insert donut, followed by a Vo-bite, then a package with an on-set reporter, Vo wipe Vo, ad infinitum. You know it's true. When I started up *Eye Opener* in Chicago, I tried a different approach. *Eye Opener* was a morning show that aired for all the Tribune stations in the group that did not have its own local morning news. The show was originally planned to be called *Eye Candy*, an anchorless format with sweeping and cinematic news coverage, minimal voice over and motion graphics galore. I was recruited by **Lee Abrams**, Chief Innovation Officer, to start up the project. The fact that the new Tribune would embrace creativity to the point of having a Chief Innovation Officer was a major reason I took the job. Lee, in my

opinion, is a creative genius. He created the AOR radio format, he co-founded **XM Satellite Radio**, and he brought true innovation to *The Chicago Tribune* and to the broadcast stations. I was honored he had chosen me. Long story short, two weeks into rehearsals of the show, the upper management at Tribune, including Lee, had all been swept away. A bunch of temporary management was installed. It was decided that *Eye Candy* is dead and *Eye Opener*, with anchors, will take its place.

First hire was **Kirby O'Connell** as our main host. Kirby is a total character. During auditions, she would read news stories as well as anybody else who was auditioning. But it was the down times that caught my attention. When I would talk to her or give her some direction, her voice would naturally drop an octave and she would become her funny, sarcastic self. When she turned back to the camera, her anchor voice would return along with a serious anchor disposition. The lower-octave Kirby is who I wanted on air. That's who I got.



Next up was co-host **Adam Lee Campbell**, known on-air as ALC. He was hired initially to be the voice of *Eye Candy*. When *Eye Candy* went away, it looked like ALC would have to leave as well, until on a lark, I put him on camera with Kirby. He was also in anchor-mode when the cameras rolled. So, I deliberately started an argument with him. I knew him well enough by this time to spar with him until he left defensive mode and moved into offensive mode. There it is. When offensive mode kicked in, and I turned him down a few notches, we had ALC!

✦ REALLY BAD ACCENTS

ALC is a character. He naturally fell into the role. Simple example – he was reporting on how the English rock band **Oasis** was planning a new CD but that the **Gallagher Brothers** were not getting along and the whole project was in jeopardy. ALC switches into a rather horrific English accent as he ad-libs details of the fight, the clothing line, the drinking and the lawsuits the brothers filed against each other. I don't know the first thing about Oasis nor do I care to, but ALC's performance kept me as a viewer totally engrossed in the story while also feeding the fans of the group with details surrounding the new album.

► **VIEW VIDEO #22 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

Outstanding! A different approach to simple storytelling. We “packaged” future stories in a similar way – with ALC sporting all kinds of bad foreign accents.

With ALC in place, I needed one more host. I wanted tri-hosts to move away from the Barbie and Ken show all the local stations do. Auditions were scheduled for later in the week, but we had a rehearsal planned. I needed a stand-in. So, as I walked toward the set, I passed the desk of our intern, **Sean Dowling**.

“Sean, would you like to fill in as the third host?”

You’re way ahead of me! Sean became the third host. Funny and exuberant, racy and raunchy on occasion, he was the perfect Moe to Larry & Curly (Note to Millennials: Google “**Three Stooges.**”) Another “accident” that could have turned into a missed opportunity if we didn’t keep our eyes open.

The set was built in the basement of the Tribune Tower. It’s where the old Chicago Tribune newspapers were actually printed but had been converted into industrial-themed office space. We were on a balcony overlooking the place and it appeared as though that office space was a giant newsroom. On the opposite side were floor to ceiling windows with a view of downtown Chicago which we could use as needed. It was a very unique space which provided us with an upscale and hip on-air look.



✠ A HIT IN HOUSTON

In a few weeks, we began airing on **KIAH** (CW) in Houston. We were live-to-tape as we shot the show the night before. When it aired, KIAH would produce live, local news cut-ins. This was a test run to see how our show would be received against **KTRK** (ABC), **KHOU** (CBS), **KPRC** (NBC) and **KRIV** (Fox). We competed against all the local stations from 6-7AM, the affiliates then went to the national morning shows at 7AM, leaving us competing against the local Fox newscast and the network morning shows. In eight weeks, we tied the other stations, in ten weeks we beat them in the P18-49, P25-54 and P18-34 demos. In May of 2011, just ten weeks on the air – three people no one ever heard of in Houston are beating the local and network newscasts. Proof that personality trumps all.

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #23 HERE:**
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✠ NEED TO KNOW

For this show, I decided to pre-package a lot of the news load. Our top stories were sold as *Need to Know*, a 2-minute anchor-tracked package that was wrapped in animations, music and soundbites. Those packages were heavy on “*News for Everyone*” stories, things of interest to women, maybe a tech story and the viral everyone will be talking about today. A second pre-packaged piece airing later in the show was called *NewsStream*. We would also package *Trending* and *Entertainment* stories as needed – which would air between stories the anchors would present live. And of course, because we were pre-taped the night before, stories likely to change would be left for updates in the live, local cut-ins.

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #24 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

The show was also heavy on *Signature Segments*, very unique ones. We also had on-set guest interviews and experimented with all kinds of content for social media platforms.

Packaging a lot of the show's content really allowed us to stand out from the local and network competition. No other newscasts that I'm aware of packaged stories like this, so we looked fresh and innovative – and viewers got a reasonably high story count as a result. That's one example of ways to package your content.

✦ TEASES

Teases often need to be packaged as well. You need a strategy when you stack the show – placing certain stories in lower blocks to keep viewers through the breaks. Commercial breaks are disastrous for ratings. All viewers are automatically conditioned to mentally tune out the minute they hear that tease music begin to play, with the anchor saying something along the lines of "*Coming up...the latest trend in swimwear. Stick around.*"

Teases are the lifeblood of any newscast. In fact, I would go so far as to say that teases are actually *more important than the actual news stories* that are in the show. And the sad truth is not every writer or producer was born with a knack for writing killer teases. I'm not going to get into specifics about tease writing here, but I think this story from my days at WDIV Detroit sums up my approach:

✦ L.A. LAW

On Thursday, May 3, 1990, I was preparing for the 11PM newscast as usual. Our lead-in that night was *L.A. Law*, the #1 NBC program which also happened to be one of my personal favorite shows of all time. About 9PM, a story crossed the AP wire about an actor who had committed suicide. **David Rappaport** was his name. Born with the genetic condition dwarfism (he was 3' 11"), he was often typecast in

bizarre, sometimes silly and demeaning roles. On *L.A. Law*, he had been cast as the infamous Hamilton Skylar, an aggressive defense attorney known as "Mighty Mouse". In a recurring role, he would often try cases against **Jimmy Smits'** character, Victor Sifuentes, who was well over six feet tall.

On reading his obit, I was initially stunned because I loved this guy's character. It was well-fleshed out and he played it to the hilt. I confess I was also excited that this story fell into my lap in the November sweeps on the same night *L.A. Law* airs. I escaped back into business reporter **Jennifer Moore's** office, which I'd always do when I began to write my teases, because I needed complete concentration and no distractions. I wrote the 10PM and 10:30PM updates as well as the pre-open which is the tease at the top of the show, right out of the *L.A. Law* credits.

Each tease led with some semblance of:

"A familiar face you know and love on L.A. Law tragically commits suicide. The story straight ahead on the Nightbeat".

While it may just be semantics, I am very conscious of not lying or even stretching the truth in teases because as a viewer, I get pissed off when a tease says one thing and then the story says another, invalidating the tease and making me wait around for something that was not delivered. I didn't want to give anything away, so I did not use tape of Rappaport in the tease. I made sure only to refer to him as a "familiar face" since in fact, he was not a *star* of the series. I know... *semantics*... but I can live with it.

Mort Crim taped the 10PM and 10:30PM teases as usual, his big booming, classic anchorman voice capable of shattering glass. He could make a tease about **Barney the Dinosaur** sound like the world is coming to an end. Sure enough, just after the 10PM tease aired, the



phones started to ring. Keep in mind, these were the days before the Internet. No one could just go on-line to search for the information they wanted. But with the phones ringing, I knew I had sparked a lot of interest among our *L.A. Law* watchers. Same thing at 10:30PM. More calls. All is going according to plan.

Finally, 11PM comes around. I'm in the control room, Mort and Carmen are on set, the pre-open hits and they again read a tease about someone from *L.A. Law* committing suicide. But it wasn't our lead story. No way. It wasn't even in our first block. Or our second block. I kept it well into our third block, past the second quarter hour mark where it could have the greatest effect on our ratings. Finally, Mort revealed the story about Rappaport committing suicide and how he was suffering from depression.

Obviously, David's death was a tragedy. No question. But his death was also newsworthy. As a fan of *L.A. Law*, it's a story I as a viewer would certainly want to know. Dropping it deep into the show is not something

I'd normally do. In fact, I kinda felt guilty (*there's that old Catholic guilt!*) making viewers wait so long for the story. But hey, that's the game, isn't it?

The next morning, I got a call at home from news director **Carol Rueppel** who was elated about the overnights! The 11PM newscast had scored a 19-rating, a huge number even in those days.

The takeaway from this is that producers constantly have to be on the lookout for tease-able stories. That story fell right into my lap, and had I not been paying attention to the fact that our lead-in that night was *L.A. Law* and here's a story sure to grab the attention of *those* viewers, it could easily have become a missed opportunity. On the other hand, if WDIV was a CBS affiliate, the story would not have been newsworthy to my viewers – and I would not have even run it.



With Jennifer York, Gayle Anderson & Caroline Comport (1994)
Courtesy: Craig T. Mathew/Mathew Imaging

PRESENTING

I really get a kick out of presenting stories in unexpected ways. Unique ways of putting together otherwise run-of-the-mill stories allows you to inject some right-brain thinking into your show. Try this on for size:

Occasionally as news reporters or special projects producers, we set out to right a wrong. Perhaps a young mother abandons her autistic daughter because the government will no longer provide special daycare services – and the child is a danger to the woman’s other children. We interview the mother and perceive her and her daughter to be the victims. We interview state or federal mental health care bureaucrats only to discover their hands are tied. We interview the dedicated workers at the special daycare centers to find they are understaffed and can’t keep up with the growing demand for their services. We come back to the newsroom and what have we got? What do we put together for the 6PM?



✦ E.N.G

What I just described was the plot in an episode of a 1990’s nighttime soap, *E.N.G* centering around the lives and loves of newsroom staffers at a local Toronto TV station, CTLS Channel 10. It’s a Canadian series that ran for five seasons. As you’d expect, most news events depicted in the episodes are over dramatized, highly improbable and schlocky (and I *loove* schlocky dramas). **Art Hindle** played Mike Fennell, the morally righteous News Director, **Sara Botsford** portrayed drama queen Executive Producer Anne

Hildebrandt, **Mark Humphrey** was the hunky chief photographer Jake Antonelli, Anne's secret lover until (Spoiler Alert) he hooks up with the sleazy office slut, reporter Terri Morgan, in the woods at the company picnic – the most provocative sex scene I've ever seen on broadcast television! Terri was so malevolent; her husband was once suicidal after losing his newsroom job. He told her he wanted to kill himself – she handed him a .357 Magnum. Bang! **Victor Garber** played the station owner in the last two seasons of the series who eventually bedded Anne until (Spoiler Alert) she hooks up with Fennell in the series finale. I ran into Victor a few years ago in L.A. and he was quite surprised that I didn't want to talk to him about *Alias*, or *Titanic* or *Godspell* or the tons of other films or shows he's appeared in... I wanted to talk about E.N.G.

He actually said, "*Did you really enjoy that show?*"

And my answer was, "*Absolutely. It's my life - on TV.*" Well, except for that picnic scene.

I want to explore with you a scene from an episode that pleasantly surprised me. It's how writer **James Blacker** ultimately presented the above scenario on Channel 10's newscast. A very right-brain solution to a story that otherwise wouldn't have made air. Quick setup – the host is Jane Oliver played by the amazing **Sherry Miller**. If Jane were real, I'd hire her in a second as she is warm and growing quickly as an on-air personality (even though in a previous episode, her Audience Polling Ratings flat-lined). Sherry, ironically, was a real-life news anchor at *Global Television* in Canada before taking this role. Jane is a former weather bunny who finally got her own show, a light and fluffy personality show – but she wanted to do some serious reporting even though she's never been a reporter. She covers all the angles in this autism story and comes back with nothing she considers air-able until the left-brain Fennell has a rare right-brain moment and gives her some superb direction.

What resulted on-air was a brilliant way to present a story that doesn't really have an ending. It's an idea I will gladly "borrow" if the opportunity ever arises.

► **VIEW VIDEO #25 HERE:**
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Here's what Jane says right out of the show open:

"Hello, I'm Jane Oliver. A few days ago, on Channel Ten News, we ran an item about a 12-year-old girl who was abandoned by her mother. Then I found out the girl, Evelyn Vail was autistic and that her mother had acted, not out of cruelty or neglect, but out of desperation. I was shaken by what I saw. And I went on a crusade – find the bad guys, use this show to expose them and shame them into making amends. But I discovered there were no bad guys – at least, not the kind I was looking for. Mostly, what I discovered was my own ignorance. I also discovered something about autism and about the many men and women who have been dealing with this issue in a compassionate way long before I arrived on the scene to set them straight. I set out to help Evelyn Vail and her mother...and I failed. But it was a voyage of discovery, a voyage which began and ended with Marnie and Evelyn. And when we come back, I'd like to tell you what we learned along the way."

E.N.G – Season 4, Episode 4 – "Heart of the Matter"

Written by: James Blacker

Copyright 1992, Canadian Television, Alliance Communications Corporation

(Episodes of E.N.G are often available on YouTube.)

Notice how the story became about *her* discovery, *her* ignorance, *her* failing? That's what *producing personalities* is all about. Some of you are going to argue that the story shouldn't be about her but about Evelyn. There should be no "reporter involvement". How can I say this politely? You're wrong. Jane is going to tell me (the viewer) a story –

she's going to bring me along as *she* desperately tries to help Evelyn and her mother, but along the way, *she* finds out that the system is underfunded, understaffed, etc. So, in essence, the story is told *through* Jane's eyes – from her admittedly flawed perspective. Even though the drama series didn't actually produce the package of the story Jane is going to tell, I can promise you Jane's story would have an impact far beyond what typical Channel 10 beat reporter Dan Watson would have brought back – sterile, just the facts, and b-roll of the mom crying. Let's be realistic – there's no violation of journalist principles here. This is storytelling in its most authentic form.

✠ YOUR OPEN TEASES

How do you open your morning newscast? Let me guess. Video of that overnight fire, wiping to that avalanche caught on tape, wiping to the footage of a dolphin giving birth? Music is urgent, your talent is breathless and graphics are flashing all over the screen. Yep. You're producing that pre-open tease exactly as *Walk Away Joe* tells you to do it. If you're producing a personality-driven newscast, Joe, aka your news consultant, is dead wrong. Here's why.

On my shows, the first thing viewers see is the talent – and the first thing they hear is the talent's name – because quite simply, that's who they're tuning in for. Putting your talent's name (spoken) and face together is vital to establishing name recognition in this day and age when most opens are covered with compelling video. You know who had the highest name recognition on the KTLA show? Traffic reporter **Jennifer York**, simply because Carlos, Barbara or Mark tossed to her a dozen times a day for traffic. “*Here's Jennifer York*”. “*Let's go to Jennifer York!*” “*Breaking News – Jennifer York is in Skycam 5!*” Repetition = recognition!

News opens don't run 10 seconds anymore as this supposedly gives viewers an opportunity to channel surf. I've watched so many morning newscasts that don't name the talent either verbally or even with a font.

It's an oversight. And a bad one. My last five newscasts have all opened the same way – because my format works. But if you watch more closely, each open is different because these pre-teases immediately set up the “tone” of the show – the “attitude” – along with setting up your talent.

✠ THE KTLA MORNING NEWS

Let's begin with *The KTLA Morning News* in Los Angeles. Not only do the anchors say their names, but the open that follows reintroduces them. Repetition = recognition.

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #25A HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

It wasn't flashy or trashy. It just did the job introducing your talent by name – on close-ups, previewing all the talent and the stories that are coming up, and setting the tone.

✠ E! NEWS LIVE!

E! News Live wasn't, technically, a morning show, although I produced it with many borrowed elements to help emphasize the talent. This open has some flash, some trash, and so much more:

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #25 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

OK, I admit, this one ran a little long. But as you can see, we used every A-lister possible in the teases to grab the younger viewers. The hosts' names were each heard twice, they were on-camera at the top, and video teases were included. Again, that open spoke volumes about the attitude of this show.

✠ EYE OPENER (CHICAGO)

This next open, from the Chicago edition of the nationally syndicated *Eye Opener*, wreaks of attitude.

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #25C HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

Here's a second open from that show – where we become a bit saucier with our language. Be aware that the Chicago version of *Eye Opener* was pre-taped and posted, which allowed us to add in the bleeps:

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #25D HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

✠ EYE OPENER (DALLAS)

The revamped Dallas version of *Eye Opener* wasn't as snarky as its Chicago sister, but far more playful. Every show takes on a different life of its own based on your family of talent.

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #25E HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

✠ GOOD MORNING AMERICA SUNDAY

And then there's *Good Morning America Sunday*. This show was an experiment from beginning to end because the weekday version was very prim and proper and 100% serious – and we were expected to follow suit. The first thing I did was insist the anchors refer to the show on-air as *G-M-A Sunday* versus *Good Morning America Sunday*. The weekday anchors always said the loooooong name of the show. These teases were scripted more as a discussion of what's coming up rather than bam, bam, bam, tease, tease, tease. We were still in the process of

lightening up when this open aired and as you'll see, **Bill Ritter** is totally game:

► **VIEW VIDEO #25F HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

Geez, I actually flinched just now watching this when Bill dropped that cup! He got me all these years later! We hadn't gotten to the point of cutting to closeups on the talent yet during the open tease. That came in later weeks. And FYI, weird factoid: there was a union guy who got paid to do nothing but babysit the fireplace. Whenever we used it, the fire code required a sitter!

✠ YOUR TAKE-AWAY

In a lot of respects, these opens would be considered old-fashioned. And that's why they seem to have an appeal to morning viewers. The focus is on the *personalities*, not so much the *content*. Local and network prime time shows are all about splash and flash anymore, and "personality" gets lost in the process. As an example, I can't identify a single star on those *CSI* shows because the opens have been ditched and the star's names are lower third fonts during the first act. So, a name and face are never married together in my mind. When I look at the Prime-Time Emmy nominations, I have to Google the names because no face comes to mind when I just see the name. And that's not good for **Shemar Moore**'s Q-Score.

The open teases for a personality-driven format must accomplish three things:

- a) identify your talent both visually and verbally;
- b) establish a tone or attitude for the show, and
- c) tease the viewer into hanging around to watch;

I would urge all, producers to experiment with open teases – not just settle for those format variations above. Any one of us could one day stumble upon a brilliant new way to open our shows.

✠ THE UNDERDOG

Back when the *KTLMN* first hit air and the anchors began to loosen up, they would present themselves and our show as the “underdog”. **Underdog**, my millennial friends, was a 1960's cartoon superhero whose brand was, “*There’s no need to fear – Underdog is here!*” He was, sort of, the canine version of **Superman** for the Labrador set. His heroics were often done to impress his love interest, **Sweet Polly Purebred**, who could never commit. Everyone loves the underdog, which is why the series ran for more than a decade. But an underdog is just as essential and relevant in the realm of TV news. And I learned this first hand.

In Los Angeles from 7-9AM, we were “David” up against the Goliaths of *Good Morning America*, *Today* and (a lesser Goliath) *CBS This Morning*. The **LA Times** called us “*the little show that could*”. Because we did. We faced off with the three major networks for a slice of the LA morning viewing audience. And on a daily basis, we felt the pressure. We couldn’t book the A-lists guests that the networks did. We didn’t have the million-dollar network set, or the expensive designer clothes that they wore. And early on, we didn’t have the ratings and we certainly didn’t have the mentality of a “winner. We were, clearly, the underdog. And we felt it every morning.

Along with feeling it, we kinda announced it. Barbara, Carlos, Mark and Sam would point out our shortcomings as compared to the network shows. They would read the latest memo about why we could not provide a car service to deliver any guests to the studio. They’d even discuss when a celebrity would cancel their appearance on our show because they got a better booking from one of the networks in New York. These announcements, along with the occasional complaints

about what they were getting paid as compared to Katie and Matt, clearly defined us in the viewers' eyes as the underdog. Like the incredible success of the *KTLAMN*, taking on the role of the underdog was not something that we planned. It's not something we discussed in a conference room and then brought to air. It just happened. It was another "happy accident". And it was a key factor in propelling us to a solid number one against the networks.

Malcolm Gladwell, a writer for the *New Yorker* and author of bestseller *The Tipping Point*, recently wrote a book called *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits and the Art of Battling Giants*. In it, he looks at how we tend to exaggerate the strengths of the favorite (*Today Show*) and underestimate the strengths of the underdog (*KTLAMN*). That's something we certainly did on a regular basis. The one line he wrote that struck home with me is,

"Underdogs win more often than we think because their limitations force them to be creative. David couldn't get close enough to Goliath to slay him with his sword, but he could be deadly from a distance – with his slingshot."

That's the concept that hit me like a ton of bricks because it's exactly what we did – without realizing it at the time. We "slingshot" our path to success. We played up the strengths we had that the nets didn't: the personalities of our cast of characters; the local news that we could provide that the nets couldn't touch; an aerial view of L.A. traffic; and most importantly, an acquired "*we don't give a shit attitude about what the networks are doing – we're doing our own thing.*" We were "deadly from a distance" and didn't even know it. We were forced to be creative.

It's important to note here that there comes a time when you can no longer get away with playing the role of the underdog. Into our third or fourth year of success, things began to slip onto the air about how one *KTLAMN* host played golf with **Tom Hanks** the other day, or how another just bought a very expensive car. Or the real estate section of



the *LA Times* announces one of the hosts just bought a big house in a posh neighborhood. The *KTLAMN*, once David, had now become Goliath. And I think there was some backlash from viewers who heard and saw things like this on the air and began to realize that we're no longer the humble upstart they became fans of several years ago. Now we, too, were on a million-dollar set and the hosts had become larger-than-life local celebrities, and we began to have more in common with those evil network shows that we had once distanced ourselves from. And again, this just happened. We didn't discuss it. And perhaps we should have. In hindsight, I realize what a misstep that was – sharing too much about the fruits of our success with the viewers. Some viewers, who once identified with Barbara, Carlos, Mark, Sam and the others, were now beginning to feel alienated from them because "*those guys on TV have celebrity friends and expensive cars and I'm still the same simple CPA from Pacoima.*" That sentence was never uttered by anyone, but I suspect that's how some viewers felt.

The takeaway from all of this is that presenting yourself in the role of the underdog is one strategy to attract viewers to the show. But the underdog role has a limited lifespan. The changing fortunes of time directly affect how viewers perceive you and the show. It's a double-edged sword. Underdog may be saving the day one minute, but in the next, Sweet Polly Purebred may have moved on.



CHAPTER EIGHT

SIGNATURE SEGMENTS

Let's face it. Every local station these days has access to the same stories as its competition. The only exceptions to that are unique content a station generates from an Investigative Team or from its field reporters and producers who generate exclusive material. That's why *Signature Segments* are so essential. They allow you to take those same stories every station has access to – and produce something unique.

Most newscast producers make a half-hearted attempt at best to create signature segments. Oftentimes, they do nothing more than create a title - *Around the World in 60 Seconds*. They slap on a countdown and read three or four "headlines" in a minute. *There, you have your fricking signature segment, Mister Ray*. Not exactly. Two problems with that segment. It's not unique - lots of stations do something similar. And secondly, the countdown clock is a really bad idea as viewers are drawn to watching the clock rather than the headline video. No one's going to say, "*Gee, I gotta watch Action 3 News cuz I love that world headlines in 60 seconds thing they do...*"

Signature segments are just as important for “news of record” newscasts as they are for lighter formats. The majority of shows I’ve produced are morning formats, so my examples will be coming from those shows. Here are some of them:

✠ NEWSREEL

Here's a unique approach I suggested we try on *Eye Opener* in Chicago that allowed us to take some average, everyday stories and showcase them in a unique and memorable way.

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #26 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

The "Newsreel" became a favorite among viewers and we used it daily. Funny story, one of the bosses I inherited after the company changed management sat me down and said he doesn't like the *Newsreel*. “*People are spending thousands of dollars on high def TV sets and stereos and surround sound systems and we’re giving them what looks like vintage film!*” Translation: left, left, left brain.

✠ GOSPEL OF TWITTER

Another example. A producer was messing around in the green screen studio with some ideas for how to present celebrity tweets. He had a gentleman on camera reading some tweets, but nothing really clicked. I noticed the guy had a black shirt on, so I took a piece of paper and turned it into a white collar that a priest would wear (*told you I was raised Catholic!*) Thus, *The Gospel of Twitter* was born.

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #27 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

✠ WRENCH THE HANDYMAN

Someone once (jokingly) accused me of putting a segment in the show that they felt was “pandering” to our female audience. I replied, “*No, I’ll show you obvious and blatant pandering*” – and ***Wrench the Handyman*** was born - featuring **Eric Coak** as our hunk of steel.

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #28 HERE:**
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✠ TALKING ABOUT THE COMPETITION

Something that was never done on *any* newscast back in the early ‘90’s was referring to the competition. OMG! They simply didn’t exist. No newscast would *ever* refer to a competitors’ show for *any* reason! It just wasn’t done. Until one morning on *The KTLA Morning News* when our entertainment guy **Sam Rubin** did it. I still remember how stunned I was that he actually mentioned the ***Today*** show. Not only that, but he, indirectly, was encouraging viewers to turn to ***Channel 4*** to see this guy who’s anchoring the *Today* show at that moment. I think I actually fell off of my chair in the control room! How would I ever explain this breach of news protocol to my boss who most certainly is watching. Here’s what happened:

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #28A HERE:**
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Holy shit! I truly thought I was going to be fired. But instead, it was *The KTLA Morning News* violating another rule of TV news. In this case, it was Sam telling our viewers an “inside secret” about one of *Today*’s anchors. Viewers love that *inside stuff*, when someone tells them something that *puts them in the know*! C’mon, admit it. You want to know who Sam was referred to, don’t you? I honestly don’t remember or I would certainly share this fascinating information with you. But since that day, our competitors were fair game. We talked about *Today*,

GMA, the *Fox* show openly, without a second thought. The, of course, Sam had to take things one step further. Out on a “live” remote once, he actually attempted to sneak into the *KCBS TV* newsroom on the air:

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #28B HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

The local Fox morning show, *Good Day L.A.*, made a huge blunder in handling celebrity guest **David Cassidy** – which we called them out for big time on-air. I’ll save that story for the chapter on booking guests. I find it fascinating how breaking the rule about never referring to the competition was a major taboo at the time, but now, it’s done all the time on all kinds of show formats.

✠ PARODIES

When I ran *E! News Live*, we often parodied popular shows – like this cold open making light of *The Bachelor* - who happened to be a guest on that day’s show.

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #29 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

✠ MOVIE REVIEW

Do local newscasts run movie reviews anymore? They would if they were presented like what producer **Stephanie Glenn** and reviewer **Myreah Moore** came up with for *E! News Live!*

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #30 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

✠ WHO WOULD YOU DO?

Survivor alum **Jeff Varner** got my attention when we sent him to Hollywood Blvd. for some man-on-the-street and he returned with an outrageous segment.

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #31 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

✠ SATELLITE TOUR SPYING

Some signature segments just accidentally happen on the air. At KTLA, we often did satellite interviews with celebrities. These are called satellite tours where every five minutes, a celebrity talks to a different host in another city - a quick way for them to promote their new project throughout the country. We did a satellite tour once with **Matt Lattanzi**, an American actor who was starring in an Australian soap opera. He was coming to us "live" from Australia. The interview went nicely as planned, but once it was completed, the director in Sydney left the picture and audio on the bird, so we just kinda took it and continued to watch what they were doing "between" interviews. This is a perfect example of "voyeurism TV", and we made it a regular segment whenever we did satellite tours - until studios caught on and insisted directors put up bars and tone between live interviews.

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #32 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

✠ WINDOW SHOPPING

At KTLA one morning, I was looking up at the feed monitors. I noticed the photographer in the chopper had directed his camera to people working on the top floors of the **U.S. Bank Tower**. That's how *Window Shopping* became a classic Morning News Signature Segment.

► **VIEW VIDEO #33 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

Aside from “live” bumps, there are amazing uses for your chopper throughout your local newscast. Don’t talk to me about how much it costs! If it’s up in the air, use it! Experiment.

☒ **CODE ONE-THOUSAND**

Since my intern days at **WLWT** in Cincinnati, we have called stories that our newscast “must cover” as *Code One-Thousands*. These are stories that the General Manager or station group ask its newsrooms to cover, usually to promote the company’s involvement in a charity or a cause. For example, Channel 2 may sponsor the *March of Dimes*, so your boss wants you to include a 30-second VO of a march happening downtown today in support of the event. Code One-Thousands are a fact of life in any newsroom, and I, like you, used to hem and haw about them because they’re usually dull and always momentum killers in a newscast.

That was then. Now, I welcome Code One-Thousands. Here’s why. At **KTLA**, our boss asked us to promote the fact that the syndicated comedy series *Cheers* was premiering on our channel at 11pm week nights after the late news. Yuck. I told Sam Rubin, our entertainment guy, that this assignment was all his! This Code One-Thousand was coming out of his time, not my news hole. What he, our director **Lenn Goodside** and the crew put together flabbergasted me! I had no involvement and never even saw what they created until viewers at home saw it. Check it out:

► **VIEW VIDEO #33A HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

That is brilliant! It was a win-win for everybody. The station manager was delighted because *Cheers* was promoted in a memorable way.

Viewers loved it! And Sam, Lenn and the crew got to use some imagination to turn a “chore” into a compelling signature segment. Trust me. I actually looked forward to future Code One-Thousands and all the possibilities in how to produce them.

 **MAILBAG**

And one final *Eye Opener* Chicago segment. A simple twist on a classic.

▶ **VIEW VIDEO #34 HERE:**
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CHAPTER NINE

BOOKING GUESTS

Booking guests is a little understood art that I've had lots of time to practice, because between **KTLA** and *E! News Live*, *GMA Sunday* and *World News Now*, I've pretty much had every notable name in Hollywood & New York in studio, on-set for interviews.

RICHARD VS. NICOLE

Let me go on record as saying - best celebrity guest - appearance after appearance - hands down, **Richard Simmons**. I would book Richard Simmons over, say, **Nicole Kidman**, every time - hand to God. Let me explain.

Richard has all but disappeared from the entertainment industry these last few years. And that's too bad – he's exactly the type of guest a show producer wants because with him, “anything goes”. Richard "gets it", big time. He doesn't need to be produced. When he's "on", he's the **Energizer Bunny**. Now, I have nothing against Nicole Kidman. She seems to be a nice woman, very beautiful, but, I'm sorry, a dull interview. There's not a lot of warmth coming from her on-camera in

my opinion. But the EP's of the 3 network morning shows would sell their grandmother's souls to book a star like Nicole Kidman on their shows. Why? Simply because she's A-list. Not because she's a great interview – she's not. She brings nothing to the show. She doesn't engage your host(s), she's completely predictable and the interview will be exactly what you'd expect it to be. No one has to step out of their comfort zone during an interview with Nicole Kidman. And that's why the morning network shows are so tired. Richard, on the other hand, is a wild card. Who knows what the hell is going to happen when you set him loose in your studio?



The key to booking an interview guest is not who the guest is – but how the guest will showcase your talent. It's all about *your talent*, not the guest. Think of it this way. Viewers have watched Barbara and Carlos for more than a year. They've shared experiences with them like covering earthquakes and wildfires, they cheered for them when they won Emmys, and they've laughed with them during the many crazy adventures they've had on trips around the world. Now they hear the

tease, “*Coming Up Richard Simmons returns to the morning news with a major announcement. Stick around.*”

You, the viewer, are thinking, “*Today, their interview guest is Richard Simmons. That dude is crazy! I saw him last time he was on with them. How is Barbara going to deal with him when he’s running loose on the set while she’s trying to present the news? Is Carlos going to sweat with Richard to the oldies? I bet Mark will have the balls to ask Richard if he’s gay.*”

Notice in my scenario (of what I’m sure is going through your mind), your questions are all about how Barbara and Carlos will be affected by Richard. How *they* will react to him. How *they* will deal with him. The original *KTLAMN*, when you get right down to it, was essentially a live morning show about four news characters and their daily misadventures on TV. I know that sounds blasphemous to Journalists, but let’s face facts. People watch people. People deliberately turned to Channel 5 to watch Barbara and Carlos. What’s so bad about Barbara – the Journalist – walking through the rubble of an apartment complex that collapsed in an earthquake? You experience that tragedy with her, through her eyes. You experience the emotions that she’s experiencing. That’s storytelling at its finest.

✠ DUMPING DAVID CASSIDY

I want to move on to a story about a guest we had on the *KTLAMN*, who we didn’t book, didn’t invite, didn’t plan on – he just showed up. The KTLA lot is located at Sunset Blvd and Van Ness. At that time, KTTV, the Fox affiliate was literally across the street from us (where the high school is now), but its entrance was buried in a bizarre location that caused many people to become lost because it intersected with the Hollywood Freeway ramps and there were overpasses and dead-end streets and all kinds of confusion. KTTV had just begun airing *Good Day L.A.*, a light morning show that was modeled somewhat after what we were doing.

We're on the air. It's about 7:10AM. I get a call in the control room from Toni Molle at the assignment desk.

“David Cassidy is at the gate.”

“Well, c'mon get happy,” was my immediate response.” *He's not booked on the show, what's the deal?”*

“I think he's supposed to be a guest on the Fox show but the limo driver brought him here instead,” Toni said. *“Should I give them directions to Fox?”* she asked, kinda frazzled from all the goings-on at the assignment desk.

“No! No! No! Bring him in, escort him into the studio ASAP,” I said with a devious smile that Toni could read on the phone.

“Uh Oh! OK!”

Moments later, David arrived in the studio. He hadn't aged a day since he played Keith Partridge on *The Partridge Family*. I went up to him and introduced myself.

“David, I think there's been some kind of mix-up. You're probably booked to be a guest on the Fox morning show, but since you're here, we'd love to put you on air for a few minutes to chat you up. We won't make you late for your other interview, OK?”

“Absolutely,” David replied. *“Can I just get a few dabs of makeup first?”*

While a production assistant was leading David to makeup, I had a quick pow-wow with the on-set hosts, Barbara, Carlos, Mark, and Sam during a commercial break.

“Look, Cassidy is here by mistake. He was supposed to be on Good Day L.A., but the limo driver mistakenly brought him here. Let’s put him on. Let’s talk about how we kidnapped the competition’s celebrity guest and have some fun with it”.

“Cool, let’s do it!” Carlos said turning back to the camera as the show returned from a break.

Moments later, David returned to the studio and was led on-set. He was promoting his appearance in ***Blood Brothers*** if I recall correctly. He was up for anything. The hosts had a field day, taunting *Good Day L.A.* with: *“Hey Fox, missing someone? Looky who we got... your guest du jour...”*

They talked about *Blood Brothers* and other things and we then sent David off to keep his appointment with Fox. It was a fun diversion, a little jab at the Fox competition, and perfectly harmless, right?

The phone rings again at about 8:15 AM.

“David Cassidy is back at the gate,” Toni said before I could even say “Hello”.

“What’s the deal?” I asked sensing another opportunity.

“Apparently, Fox refused to put him on their show since we already had him on ours.”

I could not believe how Fox totally missed an opportunity - and then threw one right into our lap.

“Please! Escort him to the stage ASAP!”

I could barely contain my excitement. I told the hosts through the IFB (their earpieces) that we had a surprise guest coming to visit them

momentarily. Right on cue, David returns to the studio, the audio guy mics him up, and David walks out on set.

“They dumped me! Do you believe it? The Fox people wouldn’t let me on their show,” David said in mock astonishment.

“Oh my God” Sam said as he then went on to explain to the viewers that because we had hijacked David from *Good Day L.A.*, they refused to put him on their air, so David returned to us.

It’s was great TV!

Barbara consoled David, *“You’re always welcome here”*. He was, and he became one of our favorite return guests.

The viewers got to hear the behind-the-scenes drama that led to David being kicked off of Fox. Now, allegedly, the producer at Fox sent an intern out to meet David at the loading dock. This said intern told him his invitation to *Good Day L.A.* had been rescinded. Ouch! It was so comical it couldn’t have been planned. Sending a poor intern out to do a producer’s dirty work! Shame!

Bumping guests from shows was a common practice on the late-night talk circuit. Same thing happened on *GMA*, *Today* and *CBS Mornings*. If an A-list guest was booked on, say *Today* to promote his new movie, he would not also be booked on *GMA* because *Today* already had him. That’s all fine for those shows, but these are two rinky-dink morning shows. It was just idiocy for Fox to refuse to put him on. They could have had a field day talking about how the “evil” KTLA show tried to steal their guest, etc. Nope. Left-brainers were in charge over there.

Producers need to act on these types of opportunities when they’re just handed to you! We couldn’t have scripted a better series of events. David ended up appearing *twice* on the Number One morning show in L.A., rather than making a single appearance on the low-rated *Good*

Day L.A. Hmm. Maybe that was his strategy all along... Well played, Cassidy. Well played.

A few years later, I ran into David backstage at my friend **Roch Voisine**'s concert in Las Vegas. We laughed when we first saw each other as neither of us will forget that screwball morning. He was a great guy. R.I.P. Dude.



✠ JERRY SPRINGER'S BAGGAGE

As I've told you over and over again, always, always build your interviews around your talent. The interview the *Eye Opener Dallas* team did with **Jerry Springer** is a perfect example. *The Jerry Springer Show* was the daily lead-in and the daily lead-out of *Eye Opener* on most of the stations that carried us. We were sandwiched in between. So, it was a natural to book Jerry as an in-studio guest. He was promoting his talk show and he was also spreading the word about his

GSN game show, *Baggage*. I produced this segment for the show since I've known Jerry for years. I decided to have them all play a mini-game of *Baggage*, where Jerry must figure out **Brooke, Kevin and Oliver's** baggage. This allowed Jerry to have some fun and it also allowed viewers to get to know a little bit more about our hosts. Following that game, we had Jerry give us his "*Final Thought*" about his visit to *Eye Opener*. Of course, the "Final Thought" is a signature segment on Jerry's talk show, so I wrote a fun one for him with Brooke, Kevin and Oliver as his targets:

▶ **VIEW VIDEO #35 HERE:**
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Jerry was a great sport. It's so vital to keep your family together at "the kitchen table", and when guests, like Jerry arrive, he joins everyone at "the kitchen table". Notice how Brooke, Kevin and Oliver were active participants in the segment. It showcased them as much as it did Jerry. Everyone, especially the viewers, walk away winners.

✦ **GOOD MORNING AMERICA SUNDAY**

I've given you two examples of guest segments that were home runs. Now, I want to tell you about a risky guest booking that did *not* lead to a reward. Again, you've got to take risk even though they don't always pay off. Right?

It went down on *Good Morning America Sunday (GMAS)*. I had been hired by ABC from KTLA to essentially turn their shows into lighter formats along the lines of the *KTLAMN*. The plan was this - my first stop was the #1-rated overnight show, *World News Now (WNN)*. I would then move on to *GMAS* and then onto the weekday GMA. After six months at WNN, I was moved to *GMAS*. My anchors were **Bill Ritter** and **Willow Bay**. They'd been hosting the show for a while, a typical mostly-serious newscast. We had one hour of airtime a week, I think from 7-8AM Eastern on Sundays, but it aired throughout the



country at different times in each market. The biggest obstacle I faced was the fact that we were only on-air once a week, so we didn't get a lot of opportunities to try things out and consequently, change was very slow in coming. I think by the fifth or sixth show we hit a stride.

But that soon ended when Willow announced she had accepted a job at **CNN**. I would miss her – and the progress we made. And I would miss the weekly Sunday green room facetime I got with her husband, **Bob Iger**, who went on to become, what, the most powerful man in the Western Hemisphere? Every week after Willow's departure, we would have talent from all over the company fill-in as co-host with Bill. One of them came from ABC-owned **ESPN**. Robin Roberts.

I cliqued instantly with Robin. She was up for the looser format we'd been producing and she had the best and most capable co-anchor in Bill. The pair did several shows together including one on **Super Bowl Sunday** where we had a tailgating party in the studio, complete with a

vintage station wagon, food galore and singing sensation **Billie Myers** performing her hit, ***Kiss the Rain***. Bill and Robin were throwing a football around in the studio – it was, by far, the most relaxed of any GMA show done up to that point at the network.

The following Sunday's show also went well. There was one teensy issue though. I had Bill sitting on the counter of our kitchen set doing a tease. The following morning, I was called on the carpet. "***These are ABC News anchors. You can't have them sitting on kitchen counters!***" Got it. No more kitchen counters.

SOY BOMB

The following Wednesday, CBS televised the *40th Annual Grammy Awards* which were held at **Radio City Music Hall**. That particular show is infamous for one unscheduled performance that happened during the telecast. As **Bob Dylan** was performing *Love Sick*, a guy jumped on stage, ripped his own shirt off, and began wildly dancing right next to Dylan. This dude had the words "***Soy Bomb***" painted on his chest. Dylan continued to perform, seemingly unphased by the spectacle. This guy was on stage for 35-seconds before being removed by security. It was scandalous and all anyone was talking about the next day.

I had a brilliant idea. Let's track down Soy Bomb and have him race onto the GMA set Sunday morning during the opening of the show, cause a diversion, and then head off. We'd then talk with him later in the show about why he did what he did at the Grammys. OK. Robin and Bill were on board, and so was ABC News correspondent **Robin Young**, who would be next to them on the couch (our kitchen table) when all this goes down.

The news open rolls, Bill welcomes Robin back as a guest co-host for another week, and then suddenly, some weird industrial music is heard as Mr. Bomb runs on stage with a boom box. He's wearing pink pants

and a sheer cape-type thing with his chest exposed underneath and a feathery boa around his neck. Two big blotches of fur are attached to his face.

OK. A little bit bizarre, but let's... let's... let's... let it p p ppplay out.

Mr. Bomb is carrying a plate and stands between Robin and Bill, saying nothing. He just begins eating some white stuff off his plate. Robin figures out he's eating soy. When Soy continues to say nothing, Bill jumps in explaining that Soy, his real name **Michael Portnoy**, is the guy who disrupted the Grammys this past week and he's a performance artist. Later in the show he's going to explain what performance art is.

OK. Around this time, I can feel my face flushed red. My sphincter is tightening...

Bill then invites Soy to sit down on the couch next to Robin Young.

OK. I'm as good as fired. I just know it. I am not going to survive this.

At this point, Robin Roberts turns to Bill and says, "You brought me back for this?"

OK. My life begins flashing before my eyes.

Once Soy was safely seated on the couch, I slowly began to recover. Robin and Bill had moved on to teasing what's coming up in the show, and Mr. Bomb did not appear to be planning any of the nefarious activities that were racing through my mind during the longest segment I ever experienced in my TV career.

By the time we got into the first news package, I was horrified. This had to be the most heinous two minutes of live television ever produced. That's how I was seeing it.

Fortunately, *GMAS* did not air “live” in New York City. It aired an hour later on tape delay. So, my only consolation was that my bosses didn't see it...yet. In a moment of panic, I had everyone do a revised first block “live” at the top of the next hour, covering up that soggy soy mess that so bombed on our air.

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In retrospect, it was no big deal. Robin and Bill handled it beautifully, they were complete pros, and yeah, it was a little bit weird, but it wasn't the end of the world I had imagined. I suppose my biggest fear, after being chewed out for the kitchen counter thing was, holy shit, there's no way I'll get away with this one. Never heard from my bosses. Robin and Bill blew it off as no big deal. I soon realized I was watching the segment, not through my eyes, but through the eyes of others at the company who didn't like the lighter approach I was brought in to produce. Case closed.

Just don't ask Bill about our other risk-taking adventure, “Vacuum Boy!”



CHAPTER TEN

PRODUCING SOCIAL MEDIA

Stations across the country are desperately trying to incorporate social media into their newscasts in a bid to capture a younger demo. In promos, they promise a newscast “LIKE YOU’VE NEVER SEEN BEFORE” – “DOING NEWS IN A BRAND-NEW WAY” – “THIS AIN’T YOUR DADDY’S NEWSCAST.” The clichés keep comin’! Problem is the stations simply don’t know how to deliver the goods.

The Fox station in Philadelphia tried and failed.

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #36A HERE:**
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“This is a totally interactive local newscast!” No. Not even close.

The **Scripps** stations tried in 2014 with *The Now*.

- ▶ **VIEW VIDEO #36B HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

Actually, it's hashtag [#bomb](#). I spend a full chapter on the failure of the Scripps franchise *The Now* a bit later. Here, I want to focus on its social media faux pas. Despite its “super-secret”, web-scraping technologies and promises to “interact with us”, the Scripps shows failed in Denver, Kansas City, Phoenix, West Palm Beach, Cincinnati, Detroit, Cleveland and Tampa. I applaud the station group for attempting to break with convention and try its hands at invention. But with any experimental TV show, you don't go out of the gate announcing to the world that your brand-new show is going to be this, and this, and this. When it hits the air, and your producers are unable to deliver what was promised in those over-the-top promos, your failure is magnified.

Scripps should have nixed the promises and the promos and just started to integrate social media elements into their CURRENT shows. You don't do a week or two of rehearsal shows. You gradually add in the new elements to your daily “live” show. Sure, rehearse the new format off-air so the staff and crew get an idea of the new look and feel. But only by doing it “live” every day, by making mistakes and discovering what does and what doesn't work is the show going to find a unique identity. News Directors and General Managers want big premiere shows that reveal the new set, the sleek graphics package, and the cool new social media elements. But viewers don't get all that hyped up about the launch of a new newscast. So, make it a soft launch. Once the show finds its legs on-air, then switch to the new set and the new graphics package and the new name. Scripps should have started its *The Now* show on just one station, tinkered with it, succeeded and failed with various social media elements, and only then, when you've defined the show on-air do you show the other stations the format you've tested and made work in one market it, and adapt it to all the other stations in the group.

PROBLEMS WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

Here are some of the issues I suspect those producers discovered when going unprepared with a social media driven newscast:

- First – quite simply, much of the CONTENT on social media isn't all that interesting. A lot of the PEOPLE on social media aren't all that interesting. And a lot of those people's OPINIONS aren't all that interesting.
- Second – social media posts usually aren't news, and there are no filters on social media. Your on-air talent and producers are incapable of filtering out the massive amount of misinformation, the fake news and the opinions masquerading as fact simply because it's coming in so fast from all sides. So, producers have a policy decision to make:
 - a) ignore, censor or delete any posts with unverified facts, photos, videos or memes and only air OPINION posts – or
 - b) air any facts, photos, videos or memes that come along that are G-Rated – regardless of what's true and what's not.

Station lawyers are going to recommend the former.

- Third – assuming you follow your lawyer's advice, a parade of "safe" opinion posts doesn't make for great television.
- Fourth - **Facetime, Skype** and other apps allowing unvetted viewers to join your newscast "live" on-the-fly in any meaningful way are simply out of the question because you can't control the content they contribute UNLESS it's pre-taped and uploading user-generated content – which goes against all your promos promising "live", "as-it-happens", "up to the minute" coverage.
- Fifth – social-media-driven shows require a lot of flexibility by the producer, director, and talent. They require the producer to throw away the rundown when called for and go with the ebb

and flow of the content coming from social media. Unfortunately, automated newscasts with robocams and a budget-optimized control room staff don't allow producers to be flexible. They just don't. So, producers are "trapped" into following their rundown and only inserting social media elements when they are formatted in the show, NOT when it makes sense to engage social media, because the automation doesn't allow flexibility.

- And Sixth – social media scrapers like **Dataminr**, **HopZop**, **SocialFlow**, **News Whip Spike**, **BuzzSumo**, **CrowdTangle**, **TweetDeck** and **Storyful** are fine at alerting you to the buzz surrounding *Saturday Night Live* comic **Pete Davidson**'s latest suicide threat on **Instagram**. They're not so trustworthy predicting and/or determining what is an actual news event. A while ago, one of the above websites warned me of a potential ACTIVE SHOOTER inside a resort hotel in Las Vegas. A collection of aggregated tweets compiled by the service INDICATED A POTENTIAL THREAT. What is a producer supposed to do with that? More importantly, what is YOUR young, inexperienced, coding-focused line producer going to do with that information? I had the desk make some calls but otherwise ignored it – despite the fact that, in theory, social media is indicating there's something going on at a Vegas hotel – and that's what this show is supposed to be – all the UP-TO-THE-MINUTE social media that EVERYONE'S TALKING ABOUT. Do you go with it? Of course not! So, you simply cannot deliver on your promise for as-it-happens social media because you can instantly verify its accuracy. But once your millennial producer, the one you hired cheap after advertising for candidates who had two years' experience, gets ahold of that information, you're screwed. Your station is going to be retracting an active shooter report that never happened. It's that simple.

So where does that leave us? We've put so many restrictions on ourselves as to what we can and cannot report, what technology (Zoom, Skype, Facetime) we can and cannot include in the newscast, and what our automated staff can and cannot handle that this social-media-driven show is being driven right into the ground.

What's the solution?

✠ INFLUENCERS ARE EVERYTHING

You must PRODUCE your social media. I know – that sounds blasphemous! *YOU CAN'T STAGE SOCIAL MEDIA!* True. But what I'm suggesting is not *staging* social media – but simply *producing* it. Here's how:

Your newsroom must create a massive list of local social media Influencers. Those Influencers are local doctors, cops, firemen, politicians, teachers, sports stars and athletes, musicians, bloggers and vloggers, editors and authors, entrepreneurs, social activists, business owners, lawyers, psychiatrists, marketing experts, financial experts, parole officers, funeral directors, on and on. All these people must have Twitter, Facebook and Instagram accounts and have access to Zoom, Skype and Facetime. They must be experts in their field. And they must know how to interact on various social media platforms.

That long list of go-to Influencers must be compiled and vetted well in advance of your newscast. Once you've got a solid list of local Influencers, you take your plan to air. Let's assume today is December 15, 2018, the date Pete Davidson announced on his Instagram feed:

“I REALLY DON'T WANT TO BE ON THIS EARTH ANYMORE. I'M DOING MY BEST TO STAY HERE FOR YOU BUT I ACUTALLY DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH LONGER I CAN LAST. ALL I'VE EVER TRIED TO DO

***WAS HELP PEOPLE. JUST REMEMBER I TOLD YOU SO.
(red heart emoji)”***

An hour after Davidson posts these words, he deletes his Instagram account. Your producer decides he’s going to lead the show with this story. Frankly, it’s not a bad lead for a newscast that is social media driven:

- It features a well-known celebrity involved in a well-know relationship with **Ariana Grande**, who recently ended their relationship abruptly;
- It’s an alarming message that implies Davidson might do something to hurt or kill himself;
- It’s of interest to the demo you’re trying to attract;
- Suicide rates have been climbing in the US for quite a while;
- It’s still playing out in real time;

To “produce” his lead story, the producer has an intern at the assignment desk call up half-a-dozen influencers on the list a few hours before airtime – a psychiatrist, a suicide expert, an expert on illegal drugs, a publicist and maybe someone familiar with crisis-management of celebrities. This intern tells each of these influencers that at approximately 4pm today, the newscast is discussing the Pete Davidson Instagram post that everyone is talking about. The intern invites each of them to take part in your channel’s discussion of the story via your channel’s Twitter, Facebook and/or Instagram pages. The intern has already prepped the discussion by sharing Davidson’s post to your channel’s pages.

Meanwhile, an hour to air, actor **Jon Cryer** tweets concern for Pete.

The producer then takes to Twitter, Facebook and Instagram teasing coverage of the Pete Davidson story and requesting viewer’s thoughts. Is this just a publicity stunt? Is Pete so broken-hearted over his split with

Ariana Grande that he's really suicidal? Is his fame and alleged drug use causing him to implode like **Charlie Sheen** did? Whatever your angle is, you get the reaction coming in, well in advance of your 4pm lead.

Five minutes to air, Cryer tweets that a rep at *Saturday Night Live* confirmed Davidson was at the NBC studios and "accounted for".

When you finally go to air with your lead story, you're going to have breaking word from TMZ that Ariana went to 30 Rock in hopes of seeing Pete. You're going to have immediate crowd-sourced feedback from those people who responded to your teases on those platforms. You might have one of your experts "live" via Zoom. But most importantly, you're going to have quality, expert thought leaders in their fields adding their facts, thoughts, and opinions on the Davidson story. Not just one-liner comments from trolls, but facts about suicide, facts about drug use, and look, an incoming tweet from the NYPD saying they did a welfare check on Pete after the Instagram post, and he is safe. As far as social media stories go, this one was a home run. Here's why:

- The viewers are rewarded with real-time events, as they happened, and important, factual information about suicide from reputable local sources.
- Your Influencers are rewarded by getting their name, their post(s) and their expertise highlighted on your show. Those Influencers will also EXTEND your station's brand when they carry on the conversation via social media once you've moved on to other stories.
- And the program itself is rewarded by having a quality segment that included heavy social media interaction that was also RELEVANT, thanks to your Influencers.

Yes, it's true. You're not going to have social media events like this happen every day. The Pete Davidson story was an "in a perfect world" scenario. But let's say potholes are a big headache for drivers in your ADI. Bringing that discussion to your social media platforms, adding some input from your local Influencers like Steve down at **Pep Boys** and Janet at the highway department, and lawyer Tom who tells you how to get the city to pay for your car repairs, and you've got a decent social media segment that you *produced*.

Social media is fuelled by one thing – human emotions. Whether it's anger, outrage, love, admiration, or concern for, that huge assemblage of emotion plays out in real time on your station and its media platforms. Plan it. Produce it. Present it. And be prepared to Pursue it "live" if the segment takes off on-air.



Psycho Opera

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE ELEPHANT IN THE AIR

One of my greatest resources while producing *The KTLA Morning News* was **Skycam 5** – our news helicopter, and just as importantly, the people inside – traffic reporter **Jennifer York**, a photographer (often **Martin Clancey**) and their pilot (usually one of the **Tamburro Brothers**). With L.A. traffic being a commuter’s worst nightmare, the chopper was in the air four hours daily with scenes from traffic tie-ups in every direction. The bird was also one of our greatest tools in covering breaking news. In fact, as I told you back in Chapter 1, we found a huge audience from an exclusive story KTLA broke thanks to our chopper – the massive flooding in Ventura County where torrents of water literally washed away a mobile home park.

News helicopters cost stations an average of \$1500 an hour. That amount adds up when you’re using a chopper four hours a day, five days a week. In some markets like Los Angeles, a chopper is essential if you expect to remain competitive. In other markets, it’s a luxury. The helicopter is only sent up for breaking news coverage. Some stations share their chopper with their competitors, and some never have access to one. At KTLA, we had a camera inside the chopper so we could see



Jennifer (on a close-up, naturally) and a photog operating an outside camera with a super zoom lens and a 5-axis fiber optics gyro stabilizer which provided a flawless picture.

But the chopper is so much more than just a valuable tool for covering breaking news and traffic. It's also a marvelous toy. I discovered that first-hand while on the air one day. In the control room, I looked up and Martin the photographer was pointing his camera at the top floors of the First Interstate Bank Building downtown. He was just peeking in the windows with his camera. It was awesome – and moments later it was on the air! I talked about this back in the chapter on Signature Segments.

“Window Shopping” became a regular feature on the Morning News. But this was just the beginning. Martin, Jennifer, and John Tamburro in Skycam 5 were always looking for opportunities to show us their view from the sky. Just a few days after our first Window Shopping adventure, they found an elephant in mid-air!

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Now yes, I realize shipping an elephant out for cleaning at **Disneyland** is not exactly breaking news. And that's exactly the point! It's just not something we see every day. And since the chopper was nearby, what the hell, let's show a sight happening in Anaheim – let's see how other people (or stuffed elephants) are spending their day. As the producer, you need to think of your chopper as your own, exclusive, private window on the outside world – and you alone get to pick and choose when to share the magical, unusual or everyday run-of-the-mill goings-on that are happening right outside your window with viewers.

Aside from **O.J. Simpon's** freeway chase, and the Northridge Earthquake, the Malibu Firestorms and the nickel and dime spot news we covered all the time, Skycam 5 has been used to bring us countless moments of unstaged, unexpected eavesdropping pleasure. Here are just a few examples:

- We once watched the man now known as **Caitlyn Jenner** bring in his garbage cans at his Beverly Hills estate;
- We watched some skinny dippers enjoying their backyard pool (from a safe distance, of course);
- We witnessed three bears leisurely cooling off in someone's Rancho Cucamonga pool;
- We showed ridiculously expensive mansions in Bel Air and gave clues to the anchors to try to figure out who lives there (**Lionel Richie's** was literally jaw-dropping);

- We had a great recurring segment called “*Filthy Backyards*”, which showed these massive junk yards behind many rural homes and we’d try to identify some of the junk there, like a Model-T we found one day;
- We once followed a limousine just to see who would get out of it. It was **Fabio** (remember, risk = reward, if you consider Fabio a reward!).
- We followed a runaway dog;
- We watched jetliners taking off and landing at LAX;
- We followed skiers down the slopes at Mammoth Mountain;
- We’d watch crossing guards as they escorted school kids across the street;
- We saw cowboys horseback riding on the beach;
- We witnessed whales congregating off the shores of Long Beach;

Whatever’s happening out there, we’d show it. And all of this came with commentary from Carlos, Barbara, Mark, Sam and Jennifer, which made these moments all the more magical! Sometimes something completely unexpected would happen. It’s “live” TV. Allow it to happen.

A regular viewer, **Tom Hanks**, once talked with Sam about the time our chopper flew over the KTLA lot at Sunset and Van Ness:

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You must think of your chopper, your remote crews, your city-cams, your newscam, your reporters iPhones and any other live feeds you have access to as “windows” to the city you cover. Many stations still have pre-shot video that they may use under their weather graphics. Don’t use that when you have all these “live” windows to choose from. Every reverse bump back into the show, and many bumps into breaks are opportunities to show viewers something happening right now in their home town. Those windows make people feel connected to their community and to your show.

Your newscast is a large hall of windows you’re opening to viewers. Your chopper is the magnificent skylight above that gives you a stunning view unlike any other. Open that window. A lot.

10 NEWS

ANDERSON
COOPER

JUJU
CHANG

WORLD NEWS NOW

abc

Clear Channel

GOOD MORNING AMERICA

abc

CLEAR CHANNEL

1. What is a good entry point?

- an investment path you find you understand well
- when the guaranteed period isn't starting a year out and the number periods is small (3)
- the guaranteed time is limited to a working year and then drops back to zero

Press 1, 2, or 3 to answer

Bank of America

CHAPTER TWELVE

TALK SHOW DIRECTING

In 2011, Tribune decided to move *Eye Opener* out of the Tribune Tower in Chicago and relocate it to its Dallas station, KDAF, to save on production costs. The company was mired in bankruptcy proceedings and there was no leader at the helm since the last management shakeup, so upper managers literally came and went on a regular basis. I had inherited my sixth boss in twelve months. This was an individual I simply could not work with. I was incredibly frustrated that a) he saw no value in what we had created on the air – a #1 show with a unique and compelling collection of talent, and b) he didn't feel it was necessary to make any attempts to keep the team together. So, I chose to return to Los Angeles with an offer to executive produce *James & Sunda*, a comedy talk show in need of some goosing on the global Jewish network, **JLTV**. Working with those two was one of the best experiences of my career, so I have no regrets. The majority of the *Eye Opener* cast and crew did not move south with the production – so a new incarnation of EO had to be redesigned from the ground up.

✦ EYE OPENER DALLAS

Fast forward three years – Tribune had an entirely new management team following its exit from bankruptcy. *Eye Opener* was now airing two hours live each morning. It was syndicated in Dallas, Houston, Philadelphia, Portland, Miami, Fort Smith and Myrtle Beach – most of them Tribune stations. I was recruited to clean up the mess the inexperienced Chicago replacement EP, who had never produced a minute of television in his career, had created when the show relocated. Word is, this EP preferred a day shift. Couldn't be bothered to be in the control room with the show when it was airing live. That's the caliber of the situation I faced. The only stipulation from the higher-ups was, I couldn't ax any of the talent, otherwise, I was free to make the necessary changes. The format I was dealt was nonsensical. There were three set locations in the studio and each talent was relegated to their own location. The anchor would read the news from one location, hard cut to the tech woman doing her thing, hard cut to the feature guy. No interaction. Each host was standing up in solitary confinement.

✦ THE KITCHEN TABLE

Rule number one with morning formats – establish a home base, a place I prefer to call the “kitchen table”, put all your talent around the table, send all your cameras to the kitchen table to shoot the goings-on. Present your show from there. Problem was, no real home base area existed, there was no kitchen table, and there was no budget to make the necessary changes to the set. So, we pushed a couple backdrops together and I scoured the storage area, discovering a ratty old black pub table, about six feet long that would do nicely – that is, a zero-budget nicely. I met with the talent individually, to get a feel for what they wanted to do and what they would, quite literally, bring to the table. Their roles on the show needed to be defined. The main anchorwoman, **Brooke Thomas**, had a very strong presence – on-air and in person. She's good, but a bit serious for a morning show, so I had to find a way to soften her up. **Neha Curtis** was in the mix but never relegated to a specific role



on the show. I turned her into a sort of sub-anchor. She would be on-set breaking down one of the big stories of the day. **Allyn Hoang** would continue doing tech stories, **Hilary Kennedy** and **Oliver Tull** continued with features and Meteorologist **Kevin Roth** would provide the national forecast.

✠ TYING ONE ON

I wanted to pair Brooke with a co-host who had solid hosting experience, was comfortable with live TV, and wouldn't be overshadowed by Brooke's strong presence. As luck would have it, **Ty Treadway** was in town! I had hired Ty as host of *Merv Griffin's Crosswords* in Los Angeles several years back, and he had since moved to Dallas. He had co-hosted the **SOAPnet** series *Soap Talk* with **Lisa Rinna**. He was perfect for the role. And he could continue running his successful real estate company during the day. Tyrus, as I call him, wasn't too thrilled about the 5AM set call every morning, but he agreed

to join the show. There you have it; the family was in place and would come and go around a crappy old black table.

As I mentioned earlier, it's imperative that shows like this, built around the kitchen table, are directed like a talk show. That means cut, cut, cut between close-ups by the director following the conversation of the hosts. Fortunately, we had three robocams, a jib cam and a manned steady-cam, so the quick cuts I wanted were not out of the question with five potential cameras in play.

But they *were* out of the question if you'd ask our director. She had become very comfortable as a "spacebar director" – the entire show pre-coded in advance, so when we went live, it was just a matter of hitting the spacebar to take the next camera, roll the next video or advance to the next shoulder-box. When I insisted the show be directed talk show style, there was immediate friction - because she would actually have to dolly cameras, cut cameras, pan cameras and generally direct a live, seat-of-your-pants show. Who the hell wants to bother with that? Well, "in the moment" directing seemed impossible, because the automation didn't allow for those kinds of overrides – or so she claimed. The line producer was the one who actually showed her how to accomplish this technically - to cut the show in override exactly as I described. As it turned out, cutting cameras on-the-fly was indeed possible after all.

Then came the fight for close-ups. She liked two-shots better. Of course, she did. Two-shots give you more coverage as a director, they require less cutting, while close-ups mean you have to keep those cameras moving. I stood firm. And guess what? It was possible to get close-ups as well! Following a few weeks of rehearsals and a few tears shed in the control room (mostly mine), the shows were coming along. Around this time, because the director was not a happy camper, she began switching roles with our young floor director, **Blaire Gibson**. I was a bit concerned, maybe for a minute, until I saw Blaire's enthusiasm matched her awesome abilities as a newbie director.

BONDING

Out in the studio, meanwhile, the talent totally embraced their revised roles. They grew comfortable around the crappy black table very quickly. Their conversations about the news they were reporting on weren't forced, but very natural. They were bonding. We began experimenting with Kevin's walk from the table to the green screen, and Allyn's walk from her tech set to the table. I loved those walks. I loved showing the green screen as an actual "green screen" before Kevin walked into the effect. And the angle on Allyn's walk was a simple, classy moment on the show. I can hear you thinking how bizarre it is that I'm so enamored by a stupid walk from set to set. But it's those little details, those moments that only work on this particular show with this group of people that get me jazzed about each show's unique personality. You could see, during these rehearsals, all the pieces coming together that were going to help define this show as a whole. I was excited.

My boss spent most of her time in New York or Chicago. I kept her up to date on our progress and would upload copies of the rehearsals for her review. She was impressed with how well the talent had gelled into a cohesive group. But we hadn't gone to air yet – partly because of the crappy black table.

"Look," I told her on the phone. "This team is getting better and better with every rehearsal. They've come so far so fast. They're solid covering news – and they're compelling talking about the big stories like the situation in Ferguson, the Ebola scare, and the Sony hack. No one's gonna notice the table. We'll only see it in bump shots. I say we go to air with what we got, crappy table and all!" She agreed! We hit air the following Monday with the new format.

By this time, Blaire had made the show her own as a director. And that's exactly what we needed sitting in the directors' seat. Every time I

suggested “we try this” or “is that possible” – boom – done. Blaire, the Override Outlaw, really helped *Eye Opener* reach the next level with her enthusiasm and energy in the control room – I know – I was usually sitting behind her running the teleprompter (did I mention – no budget?) Ratings for the show jumped +50% year-to-year June 2014 to June 2015. This new incarnation of *Eye Opener* had become a “hit show.”

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As for the previous director... She quit. Got a job across the street at another station where I suppose she’s happy spacebar directing once again.

That situation highlights how vital your director is to the show. You can’t take “no” for an answer when it comes to directing “in the moment”. And I’m not just talking about morning shows. I’d have no problem reformatting your 5, 6 and 11PM to take advantage of all the resources, the tools and the people-power you have available to you that are not being used. So many producers complain about what they don’t have – with absolutely no attempt to take advantage of all they’ve got at their fingertips - if they’d only look away from their computer screens.

That crappy black table, by the way, remained on set for the next two years. And no one noticed!

✠ **THEY’RE TELLING ME TO WRAP IT UP**

Now, while I’ve got your attention, I want to show you something. It’s a few moments of “live” TV that so clearly captures the energy and emotion of brilliant television – when all the pieces come together so perfectly. It’s not really all that applicable to directing a newscast. But watching it inspires me. Watch first, then I’ll dissect.

► **VIEW VIDEO #38 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

I absolutely love watching this clip. It could not have been more perfect even if **Stephen Spielberg** was directing it for a film, taking a week to capture every nuance, every cutaway, and every ounce of emotion dripping from the screen. This is as right-brain as life gets, people!

That show, the **26th Annual Daytime Emmy Awards**, was directed by **Louis J Horvitz**, who has directed countless awards shows including the *Academy Awards*, the *Prime Time Emmys*, and so many more. He's won many Emmy's for his directing, usually winning while he's actually directing the show he's won on!

Susan Lucci was nominated 18 times in the category of best actress for her role as *Erica Kane* on *All My Children*. She lost 18 times in a row. This 19th nomination brought with it weeks of publicity leading up to the *Daytime Emmy Awards*. Is this the year?

When **Shemar Moore** screamed at the top of his voice that Susan had won, all hell broke loose in the auditorium. The zoom in to Susan in disbelief, then hugging her husband with people literally jumping for joy in the background, Susan climbing the steps in a dramatic camera sweep, the cutaways of **Rosie O'Donnell** in tears, Susan receiving her award and stepping up to the mic, the music at full swell along with the thunderous applause, Susan's tearful "Thanks you's" amid the standing ovation, cutaway after cutaway after cutaway of exuberance, the close-up so tight on Susan you can almost taste her tears, the shout out to **Oprah**, until finally, the room quiets down in anticipation of Susan's acceptance speech.

She starts her comments off with a joke, "*I truly never believed that this would happen.*"

She then continues her speech by thanking everyone in the room for their hard work in the industry. She thanks God for the blessings in her life. She then thanks her acting teachers and her soap opera producers. Classy.

Then another great moment. *“I have so many people to thank and they’re telling me to wrap it up!”*

The audience erupts in outrage. A perfectly-timed cutaway of **Kelly Ripa** mouthing “no.”

Susan continues her “thank you’s” and then the music comes up. What the hell were the producers thinking? I don’t care how many minutes the show is running over, this is the moment people came to see. You don’t cut it. You extended it and let it play out – and you cut some other award nobody cares about coming up later in the show...

Susan ignores the music and tells the wonderful story of how her children wrote her poems and letters and drawings and gave her balloons and cakes over the past 18 years to make her feel better. The dramatic close-up on her husband when she thanks him. And then the hilarious line about how she was only supposed to be on the show every other Tuesday. And finally, the part about going back to that studio on Monday and playing Eric Kane for all she’s worth. Another standing ovation – and we’re out.

I have no connection to Susan Lucci. I don’t know anything about her or about daytime dramas. I didn’t particularly care if she won or lost the Emmy. But this clip is so captivating. Louis the director, Susan on stage with an excellent and emotional acceptance speech, the camera people, the perfect audio mix, and industry people in the audience – just a collection of TV pros coming together and doing what they do so well. If this inspires a newscast director to push his skills to the next level, then great. Get inspired. ‘Nuff said on that.

✠ ~~PERFECTLY CLEAN SHOW~~

Several years ago, a producer came to me quite concerned that I appeared to be "unconcerned" about a few technical glitches that showed up on-air recently in one or two of our newscasts. He said, *"I'm a perfectionist and these kinds of technical errors can't be allowed to continue"*. He wore the word "perfectionist" as a badge of honor. Almost like I should reward him for being so conscientious. I felt two things immediately, neither of which I expressed. The first was, *"Boy, are you in the wrong business"*. Television is an art - especially the right-brain lighter newscasts we're producing. No piece of art is ever perfect. Secondly, I felt sad for him. Sad that he will never know the reward of producing a great TV moment because his focus would always be on the glitch. Sucks to be him!

Clean shows - shows with no technical mistakes - are shows that took absolutely no risks. The producer, the director, the talent - none of them pushed the limits with "live" TV, stepped out of their comfort zone, took a risk. While "perfect" shows may be "clean", they are undeniably dull. Any show that perfectly follows the rundown from the lead to the good-bye is a missed opportunity. It's a sad statement on the industry that so many news and station managers are so hung up on their directors delivering a clean show - especially when viewers are more sophisticated than ever and very forgiving of technical glitches in "live" shows.

I've been lucky enough to work at stations and networks that had lots of toys for the producer and director to play with. I'm talking satellite trucks, ENG trucks, chopper, newscam, jib, remote sets, city-cams, steady-cam on set, on and on. And every day, I'd push the limits of what the director and TD could do. I often would walk into the control room at KTLA, look director Lenn Goodside in the eye and think, *"Geez, I'm so sorry for what I'm about to put you through."*

Working with Lenny was always a give & take – a compromise. That’s exactly the way it should be between director and producer. Here’s a typical example:

Lenn would tell me the problem while calling camera shots: *"We can't go back to back between the satellite truck, take one, and the newscam because, standby two, take two, because they're on the same frame sync, so you need to write 30 seconds of copy, close-up on one please, in between to allow us to punch the signal into the frame sync..."*

My rebuttal: *"OK then, let's go to **Jim Newman** at the stock exchange cam for a quick 30-second hit on how this affects **Wall Street** and then switch to the newscam for additional reaction."*

Lenny’s reply: *"Jim is on the radio from 5 to 10 minutes after the hour so that won't work".*

And I'd say: *"Well, if my timing is correct, Jim will be in a 1-minute radio package at :08 when we would need to hit him so theoretically, he could be free to do our 30-second hit between the sat truck and the newscam. I say we take the risk because it will play much better in that order on the air and it'll show we're all over the story."*

It takes a lot of bargaining and negotiating to be a right brain producer. If your director is a wuss, you're screwed. You're also screwed if he's a daredevil like Maverick in **Top Gun**. Someone who balances in just a few degrees tilted toward daredevil is what you want.

With grand plans and fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants changes in the control room, a wrong camera take, a font in the wrong place or a misplaced graphic is bound to happen. Especially when shows are so tightly coded as they are now for automation, "risk" requires an "override". No risk, no reward. Perhaps for a **Delta Airlines** captain, the automatic pilot is the way to go.

But for a live TV show, any landing is a good one.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE CLOSE-UP

Let me ask you a question. What is it about **Britney Spears** that transformed her into a legendary superstar?

Is it her voice?

Maybe.

Is it her catchy, heavily produced pop tracks?

Possibly.

Is it because she's hot and jumps off the TV screen in every one of her music videos and TV appearances?

Um. Bingo!



Britney is intoxicating. Even in black and white. And this is how she was sold, packaged and marketed around the world – in close-ups. It is my contention that Britney Spears became every man’s sexual ideal – and every teenage girl’s image ideal – for one primary reason – her appeal was heavily marketed via close-ups. Now look. I realize Britney no longer tops Billboard’s Top 40. I understand that the Britney craze died nearly twenty years ago. But Britney remains a perfect example of an iconic pop culture figure in America who achieved massive success in part, because she was strategically marketed – with close-ups! Lots of ‘em.

We as TV viewers and social media consumers are bombarded with tight, intimate shots like these all day long on every platform. On our smartphone. On TV. In magazines. Billboards. Everywhere we look we encounter these bigger than life, extreme close-up images jumping out at us:

And then, we turn on the local TV news... and this is what we see:



This is **Tricia Macke** of **WXIX-TV** in Cincinnati, one of my favorite hometown news personalities. From these two photos, who first commands your attention? Britney or Tricia? Who do you have an immediate reaction to – *whatever that reaction may be*? Who do you feel connected to instantly! Who makes you wanna say, “Gimme More?” If your answer is Britney, there’s hope for our industry yet!

Now don’t get me wrong. Tricia is a first-class news anchor. She’s smart, she witty, she’s attractive, and she’s a bit daring. But she has a problem. She’s shot wrong. She’s shot on wide shots, monitor shots, two-shots. She’s rarely on a close-up. Whether WXIX’s decision to present its news talent on wide shots is made by the producer, the director, the news director, the station management, the station group or the station consultant, it’s a bad call. A bad call. This is NOT how you present talent. It’s not even how you present content. So why is this shot so present on local newscasts coast-to-coast?

What this comes down to is a simple argument over extremes. Britney is very close-up. Tricia is very far away. Yet television is a medium of extremes. If you don’t deliberately choose a side, you systematically

settle for something in the middle. And that's the mistake. You must pick a polarity. You must embrace the art of the extreme. Choosing the wrong extreme relegates your newscast to mediocrity. And that's the state of local news as we know it today.

Many *Walk-Away Joes* (aka news consultants) do not understand the concept – the *connection* a talent makes with his audience on a close-up – because it can't be translated into raw data. Joe wants your talent standing next to monitors, full anchor frontage, so viewers can't even see the whites in their eyes. They call it "research".

Do you trust anyone when you can't see the whites in their eyes? *Walkaway Joe's* keeping pushing "storytelling" and "authenticity". But telling a good story requires the storyteller to be right up to you, practically in-your-face, where every feeling and emotion the storyteller is expressing can be clearly seen and felt by his listeners. Close-ups magnify a storyteller and the emotions he is expressing, creating authenticity and a connection with his listener. In television, that's the power only a close-up can provide.

On the KTLA show, I regularly formatted stories in the newscast that had no video and no graphics. It was just Carlos or Barbara on a closeup, yes, telling a story. On *GMA Sunday*, the cameras would do an almost imperceptible extremely slow zoom in to Robin or Bill while telling a story on a simple close-up. They look you straight in the eye – and just talk to you. Close-up = connection.

Why do cops always hide their eyes behind mirrored glasses? Because eye contact creates intimacy – and they don't want intimacy – they want intimidation.

Do you recognize the power of a closeup?

The producers for the *Catholic Church* don't. (See there, that was an extreme transition!) Have you seen *Catholic TV Network*? It's the

oldest Catholic-based network founded in 1955 in Boston. Here's a :30 second look:

► **VIEW VIDEO #38A HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

They must have the same Walk-Away Joe's as many station groups. Its programming looks identical to so many local TV news broadcasts. Wide shots. Shoulder Boxes. No intimacy whatsoever. That producer and director, and Joe as well, should be immediately excommunicated. No questions asked.

Now compare that with *Hillsong Church*. It's an Australian Christian-based, Evangelical and Pentecostal network that **Justin Bieber** is really into.

► **VIEW VIDEO #38B**
rayjay.tv/book

Both of these channels are *selling Jesus*. Which one succeeded?

I don't subscribe to the message of either this network or of Catholic TV, but what's clear here is that Hillsong knows how to sell its message. Through intense music, intense lighting, intense imaging, and deep contrast and colors dripping from the screen, they've transformed their message into a feeling – an emotion. The emotion is right there oozing from the screen – close-up – in your face:

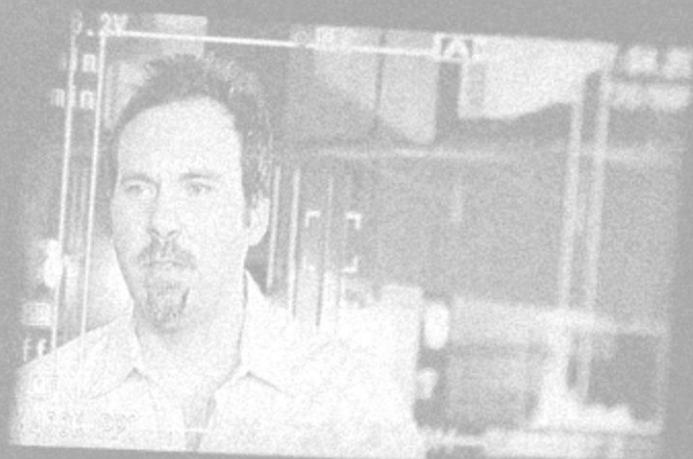
An awesome television production. Awesome! The images, the passion and the power just keep coming. The performers sell it. The music sells it. The lighting and staging sell it. And the audience was clearly buying.

My favorite moment is at 3:21 heading into the guitar riff during that killer zoom out when the performers are jumping up and down on stage – so subtle – so cool. Granted, a Christian rock concert is not exactly

produced like a TV newscast. But a great show is relative. Coming out of a control room after producing a killer show makes you feel as though you can fly. When I would leave a control room after producing an awesome morning show where everything comes together like this so organically, I didn't need to look at the ratings the next morning. I already knew we won.

Bottom line – here's the one universal question you need to answer for yourself – when it comes to extremes – when it comes to your newscast - and when it comes to close-ups:

Which church do you belong to?



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A FAILED ATTEMPT

Throughout this book, I'm giving you the tools necessary to create and produce engaging personalities and compelling newscasts. I've shown you examples of personalities who have become very successful because they've been allowed to reveal their authentic selves on camera. I've shown you how vital it is to pick, package and present your content in ways that build an emotional connection between your show and its viewers. Now, I want to demonstrate the end result for producers when they don't adhere to these **Hit Factors** I've identified as fundamental.

In 2014, the **Scripps** station group set an ambitious goal for its local stations. Each newsroom would produce a one hour, 4PM newscast called *The Now* - "a new approach to news." You've already seen the promo. The company's research determined that viewers wanted an *earlier*-afternoon newscast. The plan was to have each station independently produce a local newscast for its market and some of the production costs would be offset by all the stations sharing some content. In September of 2014, *The Now* premiered on **WCPO** Cincinnati, **WXYZ** Detroit, **WEWS** Cleveland, and **WFTS** Tampa. The remaining stations launched in July and August. The shows were

touted as being a source for local, national and international stories along with entertainment and lifestyle stories and the hottest viral videos. Social media would play a prominent role with exclusive tools that could measure user engagement “*to the minute.*” It would have the old “*finger on the pulse*” thing that no other station apparently does.

The Now Cincinnati, the newscast produced by WCPO, is the one I’m most familiar with as it’s my home town and I spend quite a bit of time there. I could have focused on another newscast in the market produced by **Hearst**, **Sinclair**, or **Gray**, but the Scripps station was investing in a new franchise and so it got my attention. When it debuted, *The Now Cincinnati* did indeed have local, national and international news stories. It had lifestyle and entertainment stories and viral videos. The innovations stop there. Social media, heavily hyped in promos, was an afterthought at best. It was a left-brain-produced newscast (mostly serious stories presented in typical newscast fashion) trying to be pseudo-right-brain (the camera shots were shaky, “Dutch angles” 1980’s **MTV** style). The show’s *ambition* was thwarted by its *execution*.

WCPO made the right call when it assigned **Julie Dolan** to be its original host. Julie is a bright, friendly, dare-I-say perky blonde who’s attractive and warm. She can read a prompter. And she can make small talk when handing things off to the weather guy. That’s pretty much all the skills Julie needed to host this show. She stood aside a 75-inch monitor and read the prompter. On my 55-inch screen at home, that made Julie’s face about 5-inches high. She was always so faaaaarrrrr away. Occasionally, **Tanya O’Rourke** would appear way over on the other side of the screen – about six feet away from Julie. She would read some prompter stories as well. The prompter was attached to a camera that would move and tilt and pan ever so slightly to give the appearance of hand-held movement. The show had two half-hearted attempts at Signature Segments. The first was “*Headlines in 90 Seconds*” (cliché as hell) complete with a countdown clock. The other was called “*Quiz Carol*” which consisted of asking former WCPO anchor **Carol**

Williams what she likes on her pizza – stuff like that. There was no rhyme or reason to it. It didn't endear Carol at all to us viewers. It was awkward.

The Now Cincinnati changed anchors a few times due to staff comings and goings, but there was nothing that gave *The Now* a unique presence, personality or position in the market.

In March of 2018, Scripps put most of *The Nows* out of their respective miseries by dumping all the local versions and producing one national version from Denver.

These are my observations as to why *The Now Cincinnati* failed:

- ⊗ Julie was not produced. Her personality was never revealed on-air. She rarely had anyone to talk to other than the weather guy and Tanya when she'd stop by. So, she read, read, read the prompter for a full hour. She didn't "*redefine the afternoon news*" as promised.
- ⊗ Story selection was as left-brain lame as they come. Nothing surprising or unexpected. The same local news as every other station in town. They were packaged and presented exactly the same.
- ⊗ The show featured *stories about social media*, but there was zero *engagement with social media users* in any of the newscasts I saw. Those incredible social media tools that could tell me what people are thinking *at this very moment* were never put into use. You'd think the producers would make *some* attempt at social media. Here's a basic, bare-bones way to put some social media into your newscast:

► **VIEW VIDEO #39 HERE:**
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- ⊗ 90-percent of the show was literally a single wide shot of Julie standing next to a monitor with a little Lucite desk in front of her. There was no conversation. No opportunities for something to just happen. There was no pacing to the stories. No cutting of cameras. The show was of cable access quality – a woman standing in front of a monitor.
- ⊗ There were two attempts at Signature Segments as I mentioned above. Neither added anything to the newscast. Why wasn't someone in the station group assigned to produce signature segments for all the shows? Why wasn't a solid pilot produced which presented a vision, a personality and an identity that gave each station some clear direction on where to start?
- ⊗ This show was the personification of a left-brain production through and through. There was no attempt at experimentation. Did anyone associated with ***The Now*** ever say, “*Hey, let's try this.*” “*What if we did that?*” “*I have a crazy idea...?*”

There are three possible reasons for the across-the-board failure of ***The Now*** franchise:

1. The idea was a play for cheap programming. If that's the case, the company got what it was after. There was no real investment of cash on this program, at least any that appeared on screen.

or

2. The company's stable of producers really are nothing more than data processors. Producers in eight markets couldn't find a suitable, workable format.

or

3. There's trickle-down, left-brain gridlock in that gleaming blue tower on the Ohio riverfront that ended up tying the hands of its producers in all eight newsrooms.

This is television! This is what we do! How could this attempt to create a new franchise crash and burn with no one breaking a sweat? You know... when a station group announces a new hour of local news programming, this is supposed to be a producers' dream job – to create something from the ground up. Producers should be lining up outside the news director's office with a detailed proposal of “*this is what I'd do.*” You're given the go-ahead to experiment and take risks and try all sorts of things simply because the company's behind you – they want something new and fresh and innovative.

Let's brainstorm a bit. Do some woodshedding. Does anyone do this anymore? If Scripps had handed me that show, these are the few things off-the-top-of-my-head I would propose:

- I would have chosen Julie for a host – doing the show - right there in the middle of the newsroom – without a monitor in sight;
- I would insist we find a “social media” expert, some young kid who *lives* **Twitter** and **Facebook** and **Instagram** and would shout out to Julie incoming bulletins from social media about **Meghan Markle** or **Nick Lachey** or someone who was an eyewitness to that big rig jackknifing on I-75 we just reported about;

- I'd want newsroom people coming and going, getting in the way of shots and generally creating some controlled chaos all around Julie. (*It might work, it might suck, how do we know if we don't try it?*);
- I'd have every employee in the newsroom turn their phone ringers on. I want to hear the pings of texts and the rings of calls and the connecting sounds of Skype. (*Could be cool, could be annoying as hell – how do we know if we don't try it?*);
- I'd probably have a local electronic musician produce a music soundtrack for the show;
- I'd do a regular ***Fake News Alert*** – exposing recent fake news making the rounds in the media;
- Since the station used to subscribe to that “*on your side*” thing, I'd expose all the license plate reader cameras the city or county or state has around Cincinnati violating your privacy. Does the city use a **GrayKey iPhone** crack to open suspects smartphones? Privacy issues would be a recurring segment on the show;
- I'd assign **NKU** students various stories to cover in Northern Kentucky and present them as newsworthy student reports on the air (a win-win);
- I'd dig into the WCPO news archives – it's a valuable tool for all kinds of segments that no one uses. Archives are rich sources of content but are routinely overlooked until someone needs file tape;

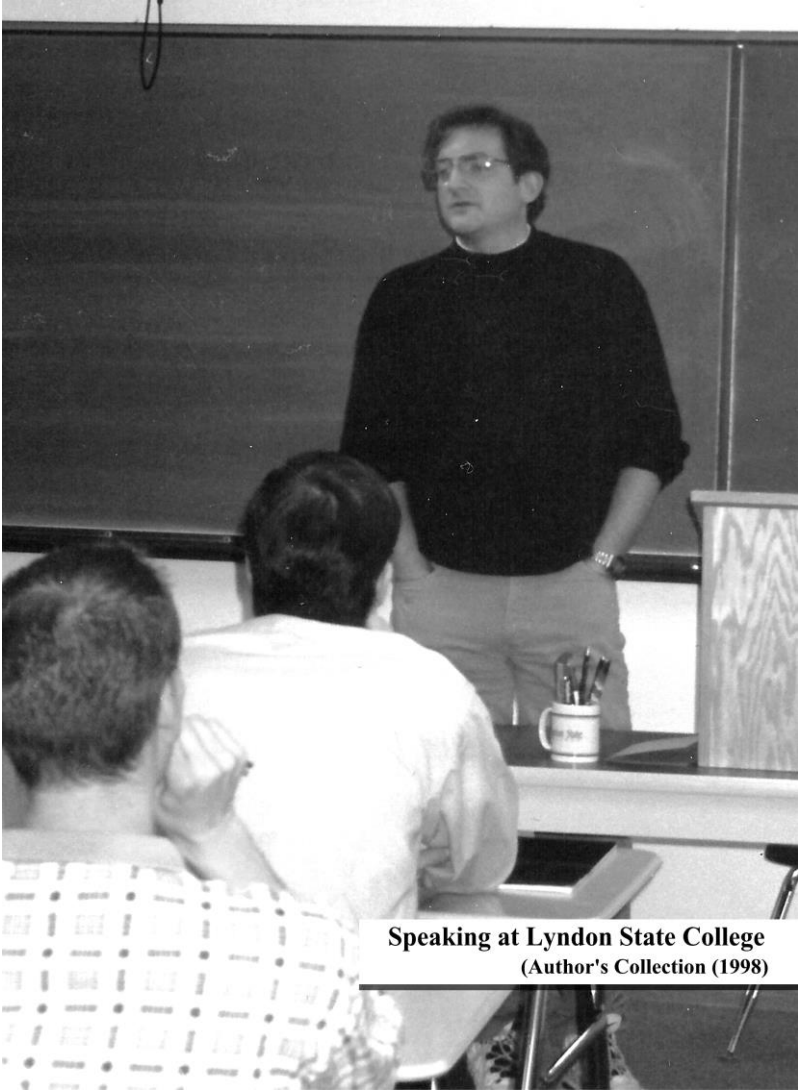
- I'd get one or two reporters to experiment with using their iPhone to shoot and report stories raw – a more professional version of what **Rhoda Young** did;
- I'd suggest Scripps team with **Microsoft** to create a chatbot similar to the **Xiaoice** that's so successful in China – viewers can chat with **9 On Your Side** about any conceivable topic;
- I'd have that helicopter in the sky every minute my show aired and I'd have somebody in it who talks with Julie throughout the show. This person might be reporting a news story one minute and showing me a mega-yacht drifting down the river the next. (S)he might show us the sick giraffe at the zoo or show us some unsuspecting kids playing hopscotch in OTR. The chopper would be a personality all its own on the show – because it's live video of my town right now making me feel connected to the city. I would be able to demonstrate to my left-brain bosses that it's worth the investment to keep that thing flying;
- I'd have that good-looking nephew of **Al Schottelkotte**, **Dave Schottelkotte**, come on and do non-partisan commentaries as he has a long news background in Cincinnati. Schottelkotte is still a well-known name in this town;
- I'd create a **Signature Segment** of local “lists” – playing off the Scripps-produced show **The List** – compiling the Top 10 busiest intersections in town, or the five most expensive houses for sale in Indian Hill, or the Top 5 hottest available Cincinnati hunks, or the Top 10 ugliest dogs in town determined from viewer photos sent in, or the craziest outfits people wore to Oktoberfest, or the Top 5 saddest attempts at the **Anything That Floats Race** on the riverfront, or viewers ranking the Top scariest rides at **Kings Island**, etc.;

- I'd have **Alexa** on-set at Julie's beck and call. Alexa might do a quick weather check every now and again or tell what's airing in ABC prime time tonight;
- I'd have some of the spelling bee contestants come on and try to spell some of the city's complicated German surnames or street names;
- I'd have a different Cincinnati restaurant feeding the newsroom staff and crew every day (for free) while the whole news team gathers around for a quick bite – a great “family moment” like this one:

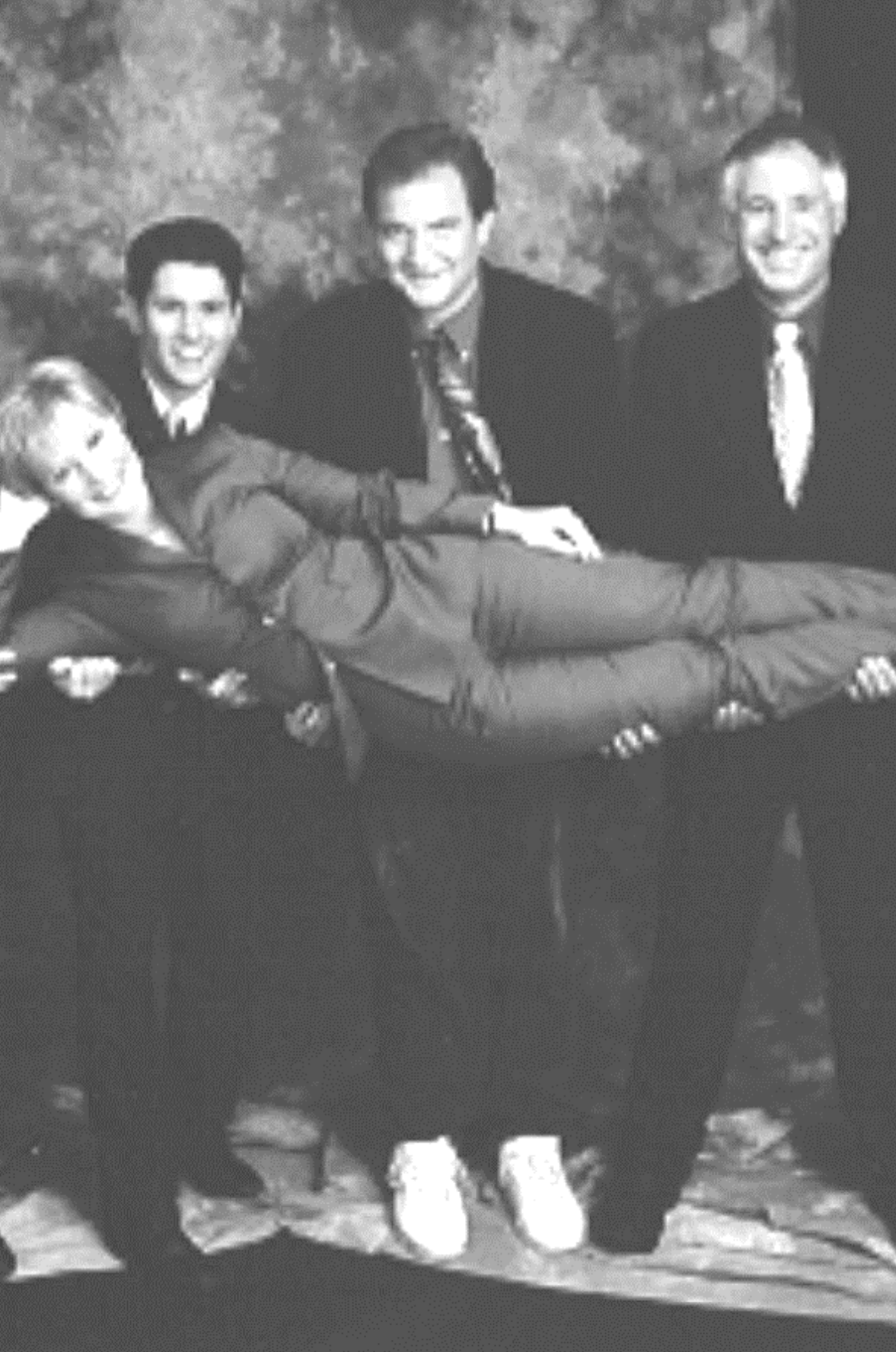
▶ **VIEW VIDEO #40 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

- I pitch a yearly “award show” for every Scripps market – the awards going to best teacher in the tri-state, the hero cop, the outstanding soldier, the oldest living person in our area – all these people would be profiled on my show throughout the year culminating in the annual star-studded, red-carpeted, **George Clooney**-hosted *Cincinnati Hometown Awards* “live” from **Paul Brown Stadium** with 65,000 people turning out for the show featuring a live performance by **Peter Frampton**. (Gotta think big).

These are just the first things that come to mind. Some ideas may be brilliant – some may suck. Some are risks – some are sure-things. But it's a starting point that shows like *The Now* never bothered to compile. Your show is a living, breathing, constantly changing work of art. My apologies to Scripps for singling out your show among many other examples – but I believe my assessment is fair and unbiased. And I believe I've offered viable solutions for the next station group that sets an ambitious goal.



**Speaking at Lyndon State College
(Author's Collection (1998))**



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

NEWSCAST VARIABLES

I've thrown a lot of ideas at you so far in this book. I sincerely hope you're jazzed about approaching your newscast in a different way and maybe you're even contemplating taking a risk or two. However, fair warning – only you know the current environment you're working in. There are lots of variables as to why these ideas may work on some shows but not on others.

I once tossed a paper wad at my director in the control room while we were on the air with *World News Now* in New York. It hit the desk with a thud and then bounced to the floor. Everyone eyed me like I was a bit off kilter. *This wasn't the KTLA control room!* People are different from company to company. Consider the following variables before you prepare your game plan:

YOUR BOSS

If you plan on keeping your job, you need to produce your newscast in line with your news director's vision. Remember, a lot of station groups these days essentially produce their newscast from the corporate offices

with a predetermined left-brain template. The graphic animations, shoulder-boxes, and fonts, the set, the news philosophy, the music, the motto, the must-runs, the writing style, – much of the stuff that defines a newscast’s personality is already clearly spelled out by corporate and its consultants. Only the names and faces change from market to market. The “creative” decisions are already made – it’s the news director’s job to implement them on the local level.

Rule #1 in a newsroom: “*Never Surprise Your Boss*”. You have to sit down with him/her and discuss how you want to approach your newscast. If you have specific ideas about the format, shoot a quick demo with the cast and crew before or after a newscast so you can show him/her the approach you want to experiment with. Many news directors encourage and push their producers to experiment and make their newscasts stand out from the others. Many news directors will fire you for doing that. How creative you get is determined by your newsrooms’ environment.

YOUR ANCHORS

Your anchors are key to your success. If they’re not on your side, you’re screwed. The majority of anchors I’ve worked with have been willing to embrace change if you can convince them it’s good for the show and good for them. If I had a dollar for every time I heard, “*It’s my face out there.*” And yes, it is, so I get an anchor’s apprehension. But rewards only come with risks. You can’t expect your ideas to make air if you just format your plans in the rundown – and don’t clearly lay out your vision to your team. Back to the KTLA hugging example – we had done stuff like that so many times - it was second nature to everyone on staff. There was no need for formal meetings anymore. But to get to that place, you need to sit down with your anchors, the director, the writers... anyone who’s essential to your plan, to get everyone on the same page. Hold a meeting once you publish the rundown. Go through it, line by line, shot by shot (allowing room for the unexpected to happen):

“Alicia Anchorwoman, right out of the open we come to you with the lead-in to the live shot. I’m killing the usual split reads and the two-shot because it just slows us down getting to the money shot – that video of the dognappers attempting to grab that Great Dane which Reporter Ron shows us off the top of his hit. Then, after Reporter Ron’s live shot announcing a steep rise in the number of missing dogs in that neighborhood, you talk with Co-Anchor Colin about how your dog, Duke, went missing three months ago, your concern because police have no leads, your fears about what might have happened to Duke, and how you empathize with that family Reporter Ron just profiled. I blocked in an extra 45-seconds for that discussion. Director Denise is going to be cutting back and forth between you and Co-Anchor Colin on close-ups, so talk to Co-Anchor Colin and talk to your close-up camera – remember, it’s a 3-way conversation, you, Co-Anchor Colin and the viewer – always! So be sure to alternate eye contact between Co-Anchor Colin and your close-up camera. We’ll have a still photo of Duke your Dog you can call for, and then mention the hotline number.

From there, Director Denise is going to zoom in from the two-shot to Co-Anchor Colin where he intros his package on animal research facilities in the tri-state that use animals in product testing. Co-Anchor Colin, when you tag your story, emphasize that police believe these dogs are being kidnapped and illegally sold to sleazy animal research facilities. Director Denise will be ready to cut between the two of you if you want to comment on that.

From there, Alicia Anchorwoman goes right into the voice over about the death of the white tiger at the zoo. Alicia keeps reading as we wipe to the latest on the fatal accident involving the archery expert.”

You get it. Spell everything out. Point out differences in the format from what you normally do so the anchors are prepared and discuss with them what the director will be doing so they're in-sync with the way the show's being cut. You've your game plan. Now just throw it away and let whatever happens on-air happen. Yes. Throw it away.

Produce your anchors. It's elementary.

✠ YOUR STATION OWNER

The way I presented stories on the 11PM newscast at the long-dominant **WBNS/Columbus**, owned by the **Wolfe Brothers** empire, was dramatically different from how I ran the 11PM newscast at **WDIV/Detroit** (then, a **Post-Newsweek** station). The Wolfe Brothers owned the local newspaper, *The Columbus Dispatch*, and have a conservative bent. Although I never met any of the brothers, never saw them, or knew anything about this reclusive bunch (including how many actual brothers there are), you could feel their presence amid the halls of WBNS. This presence caused me to produce my newscasts in a traditional, conventional, almost ancestral way. **WDIV**, now **Graham Media Group**, is where I came into my own as a producer, partly with the encouragement of news director **Carole Rueppel**, partly because **Mort Crim** and **Carmen Harlan** were a kick-ass anchor team, and partly because my first three months in Detroit I spent a **WJBK**, the **CBS** affiliate, where I was absolutely miserable. The executive producer at WJBK ruled the school with her constant ashy cigarette sermons and steely-eyed stares. She dictated to every producer what their lead was, exactly which stories to tease, and she was obsessed with each producer finding a “thinker” story – an on-camera read for anchor **Joe Glover** that caused the viewer to think... to ponder... to perhaps uncover some irony. *OMG! Those damned thinker stories!* The idea of a “thinker” story was great – a “signature segment” for Glover, but the woman just harped on finding the perfect one every fricking hour of every fricking day, and her reactions to the stories I'd find were humiliating and degrading. I used to sit in my car in the parking lot

before work (after driving through **NABET** picket lines every day at the gate), my stereo blasting the cassingle *Waiting for a Star to Fall* by **Boy Meets Girl**, desperate to summon the resolve to walk into the newsroom with a pretend smile pasted on my face. When **WDIV** rescued me after three months, I began to take advantage of my newly-restored producing freedom. My producing style became much more aggressive, much faster paced, and completely *thinker* free.

➔ ON A SIDE NOTE...

When you're interviewing for a producer job, it's essential to ask how much freedom you're going to have as a producer. I made the mistake – not asking who decides what the lead is? Who decides what I tease? I'll never make that mistake again. If you like the news director and think you could really make a contribution to his/her newsroom, you're going to have to ask some tough questions – like what's his/her career plan. Does (s)he intend to remain here as news director for another two years or so? After all, if he's hiring you to implement changes that you've both discussed, you want to make sure he's around when you begin to execute those changes. While there's no guarantee you'll get the truth, there's nothing worse than being hired by a soon-to-be lame duck news director. When the new news director comes in, you're often tainted as being a holdover from the last regime. Been there, done that.

✠ YOUR LOCAL MARKET

Columbus, Ohio and Detroit, Michigan were dramatically different news markets with viewers who had different sensibilities. In the late 1980's, a bust on a crack house in Columbus was scandalous and so rare, it was almost unheard of. In Detroit, a crack house bust was just another story on the "who cares" list. What constitutes relevant news is different from market to market.

✦ YOUR AUDIENCE

The consultants are going to clobber me for this one, but I have found that if I produce a newscast with content that I personally find newsworthy, informative, visually interesting and engaging, and present it in an easy to grasp way, it's well-received by the viewers. And the ratings reflect that. If I would watch it, if it had relevance to me, other people, no matter their age, gender, racial makeup, etc., would watch it as well. I can't say whether that's a "gut instinct" I have towards story selection or it's just a (left-brain) common-sense approach to finding stories that appeal to a broad range of viewers. I don't pander to the research by throwing in an exorbitant number of stories of interest to women 18-49, for example. That's not to say I totally ignore the research either; I seem to find a happy medium.

Your newsroom environment has a definite impact on how right-brain you can position your newscast. You've got to get your entire staff on-board before you can pull something off on-air that hasn't been tried before. Those damned pre-show meetings will begin to taper off once everyone begins to "get it" - the way you produce will become second nature to your co-workers. Until that happens, you've got to go out of your way to make sure everyone's clued in. That means getting away from your computer screen and talking with people, face-to-face. Experiment. I can't stress this enough. Always keep your eyes open and *watch* your newscast as it's airing. Countless times, something has happened "by accident" on one of my shows. Recognize that some of those accidents are actually insights into a way of doing something better – and try it again tomorrow night! That's how your show develops its own personality....by letting it just happen.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

PRODUCING PLATFORMS

Despite all the hype you come across by local stations promoting themselves as “digital first” news operations, the reality is quite different. The local newscast is still first priority because it’s still the moneymaker. Stations take stories produced for the newscast and repurpose them on Facebook, their websites and their apps with the sole purpose of upping their clicks. A 2017 **RTDNA** survey finds that 63 percent of stations are going after a younger demo – but doing so only via social media. Only 14 percent say they are creating new content specifically geared for younger viewers on digital platforms.

Many platforms are already in play, while many more are coming fast. I want to look at a few that some stations are experimenting with:

LIVESTREAMS

Livestreams of breaking news are growing with the birth of *Facebook Live*. It’s easy now to simulcast your broadcast coverage to Facebook, your website, and your mobile news app. Some stations are experimenting with OTT platforms such as **Roku**, **Apple TV**, and

Chromecast. Viewers could access thousands of clips from a station’s archive, old newscasts could be stored for playback on demand, and stations could stream important press conferences, trial coverage and sporting events that otherwise wouldn’t make air. Live streaming capabilities and a 360-degree live video platform have been introduced on Facebook, **YouTube**, **Instagram**, **Twitter** and **Periscope** among many others, some capable of streaming in 4k. Many also offer playback up to 24-hours after the live event.

✦ SNAPCHAT

Snapchat streams live video – but its users aren’t the ones providing the content. The app has streamed clips of the Rio Olympics through NBC directly to its users, but Snapchatters themselves can’t go live. Plans for the app include providing significant and relevant live TV moments but will stop short of broadcasting award shows or sporting events.

Snapchat has apparently been a success story for NBC in the news arena (NBC has \$500 million invested in Snap Inc.). 29-million unique users monthly view personalities **Savannah Sellers** and **Lawrence Jackson** who host the newscast ***Stay Tuned!*** on Snapchat. It’s a good sign that younger viewers care about the news but also care about who’s delivering it to them. The shows run between two and three minutes in length with two editions a day and one on weekends. There are 30-employees dedicated to producing the show. It’s an ad-supported endeavor, but NBC hasn’t released revenue details.

Snapchat uses a different way to measure viewership on its app – it counts a *view* as a user opening up a video – but how much of that video they’re consuming is not calculated. **CNN** launched its own newscast on Snapchat entitled ***The Update***. It pulled the plug four months later because viewership is so tricky to measure. Producing content for mobile formats requires adjustments to stations’ content management systems as well as production routines. Viewing is moving from

landscape mode to portrait mode so consumers can watch the content without turning their smartphones sideways. Many viewers watch mobile content with the sound muted. Both of those issues require the content for apps like Snapchat to be specially produced for that platform – and that adds to production costs.

➤ **ON A SIDE NOTE...**

I have some experience in launching a digital newscast. Four years ago, business partner **Barry Pinter** and I launched *InZaNews*, a 2-3-minute morning newscast designed to give viewers the information they needed to start their day. We contracted with CNN for footage and found the perfect host in **Zacko**. This micro-newscast became popular in, of all spaces, high schools. We got loads of feedback

from teachers who were playing the daily show to their students first thing in the morning – with their students wanting more. The interest in Zacko was off-the-chart. I guess viewers aren't used to seeing news anchors sporting tats! Check out the clip here:



► **VIEW VIDEO #41 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

Word-of-mouth was a key factor in us producing this show for nearly a year. But measuring its success in raw numbers was impossible with the lack of data, and that caused problems getting sponsors. So, we finally moved on to other projects.

✠ MOBILE

I think mobile platforms will prove to be most disruptive for traditional newsrooms. Not only will production have to be adapted to the design of the app, but the whole story-telling process will need a major overhaul. Mobile users have their own demands and expectations of the content they access via their phone. The systems now in place for linear television won't work for mobile. The four P's I outlined earlier, producing, picking, packaging and presenting will all need an overhaul to adapt to the needs of each individual distribution platform.

✠ VIRTUAL REALITY/AUGMENTED REALITY

Virtual reality and augmented reality are popping up in local newscasts. **WRAL** in Raleigh, NC has its own AR/VR studio which it used to create a virtual world during its coverage of the Winter Olympics. Augmented reality put their anchors up in the mountains of Pyeongchang, South Korea, allowing them to highlight athletes with video and graphics all inside that virtual world.

Here are of few of the platforms emerging that will allow producers to share more content and tell better stories.

✠ OMNIPLATFORM STORYTELLING

Size no longer matters in the content game. Soon, all screens – laptop, desktops, internet-connected TVs, tablets, I-pads, and smartphones will be synchronized and interconnected via metadata. It's called **omniplatform content** – stories will be told using several screens at a

time. Imagine your live reporter on one screen - live footage of the wildfire he's reporting on is on a second screen – and a news conference with firefighters is happening live on a third screen. Viewers can pick and choose which information is most relevant to them by selecting a screen. Newscasts produced using omniplatforms allow viewers to make a deeper connection with your programming by having complete control over what they watch.

✦ UBIQUITOUS SCREENS

Screens are going to be everywhere in the near future. Content will seamlessly follow you wherever you go from your home to your car to the doctors' office. Screens will even replace your bathroom mirror. Soon, not only will we have to figure out what programming viewers are watching but also which screens they're watching it on in order to measure engagement.

✦ 5G, ATSC 3.0, AND SO MUCH MORE

Right around the corner, we've got **5G** for mobile phones – which will become the new standard when it comes to voice and data telecommunications by 2020. Faster speeds and more functionality are what the service promises. The next generation broadcast standard, **ATSC 3.0**, is upon us. This new system allows broadcasters to adapt to new viewing behaviors. The DTV system will incorporate all the distribution channels whether they're broadcast over-the-air, via cable and satellite, via the internet, or via 5G connections. This is all just a small sampling of the producing platforms we're going to encounter in the coming years. Some of them will catch on and others will disappear. Look at all the various technologies that originally brought home video to our TV sets - VHS, Super-VHS, Betamax, Laserdisc, CED, VHD, CD-V, DVD, Blu-Ray, and now 4k Ultra HD Blu-Ray. Evolution is inevitable. It's also inevitable that we will begin to produce news content for these emerging platforms. What that content will be and how it will be delivered is anybody's guess.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

PRODUCING EMPLOYEES

It's no secret in the industry that morale at station after station is in the cellar. I have many friends in the industry who have expressed to me how miserable their place of employment has become. I suspect what's motivating this morale problem is the enormous changes the industry is undergoing. With station consolidation, staff being cut while newscasts are expanded, all the unknowns in the digital and mobile space – everyone is scared. No one has answers. And no companies seem to be stepping up to *produce* their employees. It's every (wo)man for himself.

Employees are no longer seen as assets to a company. They're walking, breathing HR liabilities – and treated as such. Not too long ago, I had to lay off six people in my newsroom. A week later, the big boss announced all department heads would be jetting off to Hawaii for a management summit. Oh, c'mon! I just laid off staff. I can't go cavorting at a Hawaiian resort. What message does that send to my co-workers? I refused to go. I was chewed out for refusing to go, but I did not get on that plane. I was the only manager who said, "no". I don't expect a medal for that – or a special place in heaven - but it speaks

volumes that out of some one dozen department heads who had all laid off workers, only one recognized the wrongdoing. What's that about?

In my roles as a news manager, I always attempt to buffer my staff from the bullshit coming at me from above. I may be miserable myself, but I want my staff to remain motivated and empowered – it's just good business – and it reflects on the air. But managers at all levels don't seem to do that anymore. Whatever comes at them, they just send down the ladder.

I'm well aware that this industry is in crisis mode. I accept that people are scared – at every level on the corporate ladder. When all is said and done, the pieces will fall where they may – and that may very well be on our heads – our collective heads. But conversely, we're at a tipping point in broadcasting history. I believe we're on the cusp of something great. I can feel it in my bones just as sharply as I feel that nagging joint pain. The old way of doing business – and local news - has an expiration date and we're closing in on it. Today's mammoth, impersonal, traditional media companies could learn a thing or two from recent corporate success stories - **Netflix**, **Google**, **Dell**, and **Apple** - companies with core values that promote their employees as essential human capital. Their employees are 40-percent more productive than other American companies. Research from **Bain & Company** shows profit margins are 30-50-percent higher because they put their A-level “star players” in mission-critical strategy & execution roles (i.e. roles related to mission-critical products). There are fewer star players elsewhere around the company (i.e. accounting which isn't a business-critical area of the company). They tell employees to use their best judgment rather than creating organizational drag by implementing policies which need to be policed. No one at Netflix has an expense account. Anyone can charge expenses to the company if they're “*acting in the best interest of Netflix*”. Plain and simple.

I'm not suggesting stations provide full lunch spreads and allow my German Shepherds to roam freely through the newsroom. But think

about this logically (or left-brain if you prefer). The newsrooms of every station group are the last stop before your product goes out to customers. Of all the divisions and departments and systems in your organization, the *only* business unit that makes a direct connection with your customers (your viewers) – *the most mission critical department* - is the news department. Whether we're talking directly to your customers "live" on camera, reporting on news and sporting events in your customer's neighborhoods, answering your customer's calls and complaints by phone, engaging with customers via social media, or meeting with customers face-to-face at company-sponsored charity events, your news staff – from news director down to intern – is the face of your company. What's the face you want your customers to see?

Low morale comes at a high cost. People want to be led. Demonstrate leadership. Pass some goodwill down the corporate ladder. Goodwill is contagious.





CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WALKAWAY JOES

Let me start this chapter by reminding you that I am a right-brain producer. I see things in *shades of gray*. My decisions are made intuitively. So, it is in my nature to distrust data. Data is black & white. When managers act on that data in its purest, rawest black & white form, they are doomed to failure. Their mistake was they didn't *interpret* the data – which requires looking at all the shades of gray that make up the black & white results.

This is my issue with consultants, **Walkaway Joes** as you know by now I choose to call them. They've earned the name. One'll arrive in the newsroom wearing a fancy Italian suit, anxious to tell us *how them folks down at the shoppin' mall would perduce my newscast*, and then walk away for months on end – with, like, no strings attached, zero accountability and no money-back guarantee for the “goods” he just sold us. They walk away. They fail to interpret the data – which is why a consultant once told me to rename *Eye Opener* in Chicago to **Mommy News** and fill the show with lots of tutorials for parents on how to raise their kids. Hand to God! I still have his summary. What he gave me was

the raw data – not the interpretation. That’s where Walkaway Joes fail. They’re left-brain, so interpreting data is not what they do.

☒ HOW NETFLIX PRODUCES HITS

I want to paraphrase a **TedxCambridge** talk given by **Sebastian Wernicke**, a Data Scientist. The link to his talk is below, but if the link disappears, his thoughts are too important to miss. He explains how **Netflix** used data successfully to create a “hit show” while **Amazon** did not:

Analyzing data is a two-step process. First, Wernicke says, you take your research, tear apart your problem and analyze its bits and pieces. Then, you take those bits and pieces and put them back together in a way that forms your conclusion.

Amazon’s programing executives needed a hit show for their **Prime** streaming service. They took this two-step data approach, first creating a list of shows with hit-potential based on research done on dozens of show ideas. The list was narrowed down to eight. For part-two of the process, Amazon’s executives then produced the pilot episodes of all eight. Those pilots were put on-line for *Prime* subscribers to view for free. They received millions of views. Amazon, meanwhile, collected millions of data points from viewers of those eight shows. Data, like when they pressed pause, when they fast forward or rewind, how long they watched, when they left the show, on and on. All those countless reams of data brought Amazon executives to their conclusion – they needed to make a sitcom about four Republican senators. So, they did. It was called *Alpha House*. When all first season episodes were uploaded to the streaming service, the show rated average at best. Amazon’s approach to creating a hit show failed because the *data drove all of its decisions*. It was a very “safe” decision for Amazon execs because they could always point to the data – and escape being held accountable for their bad call.

Netflix also had a two-part approach to finding a hit show. Part-one was collecting data and viewing the habits of its subscribers to analyze all the shows they watched, the actors they liked, the genres that were most appealing, on and on. With that approach, their data told them to make a drama series, also about a Senator. That's where their data ended. For part-two, Wernicke says they, "*took a leap of faith*" (aka made a gut decision & took a risk) and *chose* to create a drama called ***House of Cards***. That show reached hit status on the Netflix. Wernicke says what Netflix knew that Amazon did not, is that when putting the pieces to your problem back together, you have to use your brain – especially the brain of an expert - not your data, because data is not suited for putting the pieces back together.

► **VIEW VIDEO #42 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

Truth be told, the raw data from Walkaway Joes, information about who's watching, when they're watching, what they're watching on, and why they're watching is *invaluable* to me just like it was to Netflix. It's when they begin telling me *how the people at the mall would produce my newscast* - like the data that was not interpreted but taken at face value by Amazon, that I start to get defensive. I'm very protective of my newscasts and my co-workers who get the shows on the air. I know what viewers want because I hear from them, I watch the ratings fluctuations and I have a solid *feel* and *vision* for the show. I'd like to tell Joe politely to shut his pie hole. But alas, I don't. I *do* remind him that my job is to know how to produce compelling television and I've been doing it quite successfully since long before he came on the scene. I produce with my gut.

Yikes. WRONG! I just stepped into his trap!

✠ CONSULTANTS FOR DUMMIES

Listen to this: in 2017, I was interviewing for a management position. During three days of meetings, I put my opinions about consultants right there on the table. As a result of my comments, I was asked to have a discussion with the company’s consultant - a woman from a very “prestigious” firm. Practically the first thing out of her mouth was “*news managers who make decisions with their gut are losers with bad news judgment*”. I believe that is the exact term she used. This was said before I told her how I approach making decisions. “*Research*”, she said, “*is the only reliable guidepost to producing a competitive and top-rated newscast*”. My jaw and all of my chins dropped to the floor at how blatantly brazen she was with her bag of bullcrap. This must be the first four bullet-points in the *Consultants for Dummies* handbook:

- Immediately attack the producer’s claim that he’s intuitive and produces with his gut – despite all his past successes.
- Call him names, like *loser* and shame him for his way of thinking. We’ve got to make him *completely* dependent on us and our firm.
- Hammer home how research, hundreds of thousands of dollars in fresh research, is the only responsible way to make educated choices when it comes to news decisions.
- If there is *any* resistance, *any whatsoever*, recommend to the hiring manager that they continue their search – because this candidate is not someone who will assuage our agenda.

And that’s how it went. I can’t be less than I am – especially when it comes to interviewing prospective employers. I Googled this ex-news director’s background. While she inherited two #1 newscasts, she had

never created her own hit show nor had she fixed one in need of repair. She essentially babysat her product. Results speak louder than research. And when you aren't successful producing results, sell research.

THE WALKAWAY JOE EFFECT

When the average viewer, with an untrained eye, flips between the three or four different newscasts available in his market, any guesses what he sees? Three or four newscasts that appear nearly identical. Do you know what I see, with a well-trained eye, when I watch them? I see news managers so desperate to be competitive, so badgered by their bosses to turn a profit, that they allow their company-provided Walkaway Joe to walk away with their common sense. They take Joe's data straight to air. And the following is how their newscasts look with Joe's fingerprints all over them:

✠ NOT-SO-BREAKING SPOT NEWS

OMG! Breaking news – or should I say, *not-so-breaking* news - is packaged and presented as if the end of the world is nigh! Every spot news story is *Breaking News* whether it's a nickel and dime stabbing or shooting or house fire. “*In real time – as it develops!*” Breaking News banners are broken out, sound effects are played, and the set colors on some NBC-owned stations actually change from calming blue to riot-in-the-streets red to impress upon viewers how dead serious *this not-so-breaking* story really is. Local stations go all out on **Twitter** and **Facebook** to fan the flames. They're trying to create that infamous feeling first expressed in words by **Walter Cronkite** back in 1953 – “*You Are There!*” Add the inevitable meta-chatter, the helicopters hovering overhead and the on-set news anchors throwing out preposterous and improbable theories of what *might be happening at the scene* and you've got yourself a bunch of *Breaking Bullshit*. Viewers ultimately become blasé to Breaking News because the story rarely matches the hype. So, stations need to create louder bells and whistles

to keep fooling viewers into biting on this next story. It's exactly the way those on-line clickbait stories get eyeballs – initially.

This is why Joe tells stations to go gangbusters on any story that can be sold as “breaking”: participants in focus groups tell Joe that local stations perceived as covering the most *Breaking News* are assumed to be the dominant news station in the market. So, Joe reports back to his stations that if they want to be perceived as the news leader, they've got to double down on Breaking News.

A second reason *Breaking News* is so preferred by newsrooms is because it's a cheap and easy time-filler. With stations doing hour after hour of local news in all dayparts, every two minutes “live on the scene” of a *Breaking News* story means one less package to shoot and edit. That's a big reason CNN has gone to all-talk – all-the-time – because it's so much cheaper to produce than actual news. Voila... Joe is even saving us money!

✠ “AS WE COME ON THE AIR”

Have you watched *ABC World News Tonight* recently? My God, we'll be lucky if the apocalypse doesn't descend upon us before this breathless newscast ends. In every open tease, **David Muir** references something that's supposedly “*breaking right now, tonight, as we come on the air on this very busy night*”. The words “*tonight*” and “*now*” are often used twice in nearly every sentence. It's so over-the-top urgent, *developing and happening right now before our very eyes tonight* that it comes across as a parody of itself. It would be hysterical if it wasn't so pathetic. *Saturday Night Live* couldn't do a funnier impression of the format. This is Joe's handiwork – and it's regrettably shameless.

☒ “WATCHING THIS PLAY OUT TOGETHER”

Brooke Baldwin was the first to utter those infamous words on CNN a few years ago. That little ditty was written by **SmithGeiger**, a Los Angeles consulting firm. Broadcast writing coach **Mervin Block** published a three-page memo SmithGeiger wrote to its clients, listing “urgent” and “happening now” words that should be used during *Breaking News* coverage. Among them:

- *we do have some breaking news right away*
- *rapid developments*
- *this story is rapidly changing*
- *you saw it here first just minutes ago*
- *we are going to be covering this live for you*
- *breaking overnight*
- *you are looking live*
- *but first we begin with*
- *new developments are unfolding*
- *we are watching with you these first pictures live from the scene*
- *this is a rapidly developing situation*
- *breaking as we go on air*
- *you'll hear in just seconds*
- *take a live look behind me*
- *we are going to stay on this story every step of the way*
- *we are following this closely and are making sure you don't miss anything*
- *we are going to stay on this story night and day*
- *we are not stopping with our coverage until this story is done*

Look. I don't have a problem with stations “beefing up” their writing. I pride myself in my ability to write compelling lead stories and teases of stories viewers will sit through a commercial break to see. But to have a list of “urgent” phrases on set next to the anchors to regurgitate during

a faux *Breaking News* story is a violation of Joe’s very own code of conduct. That little thing known as...

☒ AUTHENTICITY

I never had the pleasure of hearing Joe define *authenticity* for me. Apparently, authenticity is akin to *experiencing Starbucks*. You no longer *have* a cup of coffee. You *experience* the coffee. Starbucks is its own *storyteller* by the fact that you can smell the beans when you walk in. You can literally hold beans in your hands if you’re so inclined. You can experience *authentic* coffee. The colors and textures in the place – browns and greens – cradle you in the Earth.

Translate that to news anchors, and I suppose the message is, “*Hey. Be yourself.*”

☒ BRAND BEATING

Positioning yourself in the market is what branding is all about. The most well-known and most clearly-defined news operations don’t need to brand-beat you over the head. **Fox News Channel** is a colossal brand. You know exactly what you’re going to get if you watch Fox News. It’s such a commanding brand that they actually *lie about what their brand is - fair and balanced* – the network doesn’t even *deliver* on its brand – viewers know it - yet they *still* watch. That’s an effin’ powerful brand! Many local stations still brand themselves as *Eyewitness News* and *Action News*. Those ‘70’s brands used to mean the newscasts were produced and presented in very specific ways – from how anchors intro’d a package to what the field reporter was wearing. Some ABC affiliates still half-heartedly brand themselves as *Eyewitness News*, but the brunt of the brand was lost on viewers decades ago.

Real, authentic local news brands are being experimented with. The Fox-owned *Chasing News* in Secaucus and the former Tribune franchise *News Fix* in Houston were defined brands within the markets

they served. They owned their brand. They were 100-percent “in”. *Newsfix* is gone and *Chasing News* has been rebooted but they provided an alternative to the Barbie and Ken routine. **Tegna** is experimenting with new news formats. It’s Denver station **KUSA** is producing *Next with Kyle Clark*, hoping to reinvent the 6 o’clock news. It’s presented some stories in fascinating ways, and Kyle is opinionated and irreverent – which I like. But last time I watched, he needed to up his wattage by some 50 percent, he’s shot wrong, the show itself is “too polite” and the producers are playing it much too safe. They “go there” but not all the way. And speaking of wattage, the set is dark. I mean *Dark Shadows* dark. I’m expecting to see **Barbara Steele** make a cameo any minute. Turn on some lights. I look forward to watching this show’s progression. At its DC station, Tegna is experimenting with the morning format *Get Up DC* on **WUSA**, hosted by comedian **Reese Waters**. Uninspired. Unimaginative. And Reese doesn’t do it for me.

✠ FALSE WARNING WEATHER

I split my time between Los Angeles and Cincinnati. So yes, I see mid-western meteorologists doing their weathercasting and I see all kinds of storms come and go. They make tomorrow’s dew-drop-in drizzle sound like a come-to-Jesus epiphany for doomsday preppers. I was watching the local weather in the winter of 2018 when a storm was approaching. Hand to God, this weatherman said something along the lines of, *“I don’t want to induce panic. So, I’m not going to tell you just how severe I really believe this storm is going to be. Let’s just say it’s going to be a big one!”* WTF is that? It was a snowstorm. We got maybe 3-4 inches. *You don’t want to induce panic?* Hello? McFly? Are there no repercussions for deliberately distorted, unconscionable statements like this? Joe?

✠ SETWALKERS

Of all the doofus ideas Joe’s pulled out of his ass, *setwalking* is his most massive misfire. Have you seen this? The only newscast *not* having

their anchors setwalking in my market is the **Sinclair** station – so kudos for your common sense **WKRC**. For the rest of you, I once shared my thoughts on this epidemic with *The Huffington Post*:

 **SETWALKING SICKNESS**
INFECTS LOCAL NEWS
The Huffington Post, September 8, 2015

Watching a local newscast this morning, I was horrified when I saw two more newsreaders had become infected with a virus that transforms them into sub-human, brainless creatures I call *Setwalkers* - zombie-like news creatures who move from monitor location to monitor location around the set for no apparent reason other than to “mix things up”. It’s a virus that started, well, ground zero can’t be pinpointed, but I’ll bet it began festering unnoticed in some small-market station before the infection spread via the airwaves from one newsreader to another.

Slowly, newsreaders around the country have been turned into Setwalkers for no other reason than consultants think it adds movement to the show. It “*mixes things up*”. It’s “*a better way to tell a story*”. The symptoms are easy to recognize. A newsreader leaves the main news desk during a voice-over or package and suddenly appears standing like **Carol Merrill** from *Let’s Make A Deal*, draped around a monitor in another area of the set. “*Let’s see the next news story we have up for grabs, Bob!*” The monitor has some very important graphic on it, such as “Murder” or “Car Crash”. The newsreader, shot from his/her knees up, then reads the story about the murder or the car crash. (S)he looks extremely uncomfortable because (s)he is standing up reading news stories with their knees exposed. The question is: Why? What is so important about getting a newsreader off their butt to stand next to a monitor? Is it because the station has paid a lot of money for the talent’s wardrobe and wants to get

some mileage out of it? Doubtful. Is it because Alicia Anchorwoman has great legs and this just may increase her ratings? Um, nope. Does standing next to a monitor somehow stress that one story is more important than another? I think not. As someone who has produced thousands of hours of TV news, I can't find one sensible reason to turn any anchor into a Setwalker, unless, perhaps, you are producing Canada's *Naked News*. Then, by all means...

This full-frontal anchorage trend stems from something many news executives simply don't understand: news sets are not important to viewers (my apologies to my pal, set-builder **Dan Devlin**). Viewers tune in to watch your talent present the news, not to watch monitors – and not to be awed by the diverse number of set locations you can create with what you have. Since the invention of plasma screens in the mid '90's, news executives have gone gaga over finding as many places to use them as possible. Plasmas, and now LED's, photograph well without producing shadows and reflections like those old, rounded TV monitors used to do. Because they're cheap, they're now placed at every possible set location, flipped sideways and upside down, on the floor and hung from hydraulic lifts that move in and out of frame on cue. And don't forget those touch screens! Oooh! It's a flat screen frenzy that is simply nothing more than a distraction for the viewer.

I was in the office of a Top 50 market news director recently. I asked her, point blank, *“What is the most common criticism you get from corporate about your newscasts?”* She said without losing a beat – *“not moving the anchors around on the set as often as they want”*. There you go. Proof positive that the virus has infected SVP's and EVP's at the highest levels of station groups around the country. Sweet Jesus, this makes Ebola look like an over-the-counter colon cleanser.

I applaud the first station who tried this technique, I really do, because we should always be experimenting. But it's an experiment that failed the first time it was tried and should have gone no further. The "cons" so far outweigh the "pros" (are there any pros?), that there's no contest. Monitor shots reduce the number of close-ups on your talent. I, as a viewer, want to see their face, their expressions, their concern, not their knees. If your talent is any good at all – has any personality or magnetism or on-screen presence that captivates viewers, you could stand them next to a haystack and no one would notice. Putting talent next to monitors is actually an insult to the newsreader – it says they can't own a close-up. It says there needs to be other stuff in the shot to distract viewers from this newsreader whose presence alone isn't enough to carry a close-up. And if that, in fact, is true, then why are you investing money, time and promotion on this newsreader?

It fascinates me that *newsreaders* are susceptible to this virus, but *news personalities* are immune. You would never see the legends of local news - Mort Crim or Bill Bonds or Al Schottelkotte or Ann Bishop or Nick Clooney - setwalking! It just wouldn't happen. News personalities own any camera they're on. Their strength, concern, credibility and compassion are best expressed on a close-up, a "tight" close-up I dare say, from home base. Their commanding presence belongs in the lead anchor chair where I expect to find them every night. That's where news anchors anchor the news. Period.

A few years ago, CNN, which has suffered heavy casualties from this virus, went all out with floor to ceiling video walls on nearly every show. **Wolf Blitzer** – the face of the network - was reduced to a 2-inch blob on my 55-inch screen. He rarely, if ever, had a single close-up on his own show. Behind him on the screen was a live box with **Candy Crowley** next to a listicle of "important" facts next to a revolving animation of the words

“The White House” next to a listicle of stories yet to come – and that was in addition to the lower third scrolling mess happening below. It was news porn at its worst and it was utterly unwatchable. Fortunately, that “approach” has been abandoned by the network, although the virus could reach pandemic proportions among locals the world over.

News executives will tell you, using the latest buzzy catchphrases of corporate nomenclature (which I can’t speak), that varying set positions and monitors are tools that help tell a story. Bullshit. My grandmother never had to sit next to a monitor when she shared a story about her life. She said everything with her eyes. If your anchor has something to say, say it to me, face-to-face, and leave the monitors as blurry background scenery which is all they’re good for. So many news executives have never studied the simple psychology of television. That’s why this strain has become so virulent and widespread. And that’s why Setwalkers are here to stay. Like the flu.

✠ MORE ABOUT CLOSE-UPS

By creating and promoting this “Setwalker” craze – Walkaway Joes have walked away with the most elementary and most obvious tool that deepens the connection between an anchor and his audience – the close-up. **Station groups are putting their multi-million-dollar news franchises in the hands of Walkaway Joes who don’t know how to measure the significance of a simple close-up.**

It bears repeating.

Station groups are putting their multi-million-dollar news franchises in the hands of Walkaway Joes who don’t know how to measure the significance of a simple close-up.

Any questions?

✦ HOLD US ACCOUNTABLE

If I were to say one thing to station group managers, it would be this: Re-consider your dependence on overpriced, underperforming Walkaway Joes – and instead – **HOLD US ACCOUNTABLE** – the producers and news directors - for the results we achieve or fail to achieve on-air. Hire news directors and producers who get clear and quantifiable results – not showrunners who observe a focus group and are blind to how the group dynamic in the room dramatically effects the participants opinions. I stand behind every decision I make. If I screw up, I expect you to hold me accountable. I guarantee you I won't be using research as a cover-my-ass excuse.

✦ MOMMY NEWS

The majority of shows I've produced have been heavily researched and often focus-grouped by the higher ups. As I mentioned earlier, for the Chicago version of *Eye Opener* in 2011, Joe had the chutzpah to actually present me with research that essentially boiled down to (*I kid you not!*):

- Rename the show *Mommy News* or *News for Moms*;
- Tell moms how to better raise their kids through tutorial packages;
- Give advice on how moms can become better parents;
- Help moms balance child-raising and careers;

If I didn't have his report right in front of me, I would have thought I was on *Candid Camera* when he presented this – straight-faced - to me. Can you imagine – seriously – if I produced a morning newscast based on these specs? I ask you: how does any Walkaway Joe expect me to take him seriously when he hands me this hokum – raw data with no



interpretation? Problem with interpretation is it's right-brain. You have to look at the shades of gray to interpret the results and Joe won't do that because it puts him on the hook – if his interpretation is wrong.

My former business partner, **Andrew Yani**, once sent me an e-mail asking if I would like to attend focus groups that our syndicators were setting up for *Merv Griffin's Crosswords*, the new game show we were both Executive Producing. I replied very succinctly:

“Andrew, I would rather asphyxiate on my own vomit”.

He agreed, as I knew he would. And the syndicators held the focus groups without us – because the syndicators needed a piece of paper clearly stating *“it tests well”*, if they were ever going to sell the show.



✦ ANALYSIS PARALYSIS

And one final thought. Coaches, Trainers, Consultants and Strategists are now within our reach with just a few mouse clicks. Managers can purchase supposedly “expert” advice easier, faster and more conveniently than they can buy a **Big Mac**. What results is **analysis paralysis**. Managers can’t make a decision without consulting the consultants. Every move they find themselves making is delayed until the experts give their blessing.

There was once a time when managers would make a decision, maybe right on the spot, and move forward. It’s time to return to that business strategy. Management has to be confident in the people they hire – and their abilities. Here’s my philosophy:

Walkaway Joes and market researchers spend outrageous amounts of money trying to determine what it is that viewers want. I, on the other hand, just tell viewers what it is they want. And then I give it to them.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

PERSPECTIVE FOR PROFIT

If the *Fox News Channel* has taught us anything in its first 20-something years, it's that perspective is profitable. There's lots of money in opinions. I truly believe many Americans simply want to be told what to believe, what to think, how to feel. It's not a judgement. Just an observation. And that's why I think commentary could be a valuable tool for local news stations. I'm not talking about those painful "editorials" at the end of local newscasts recorded by the General Manager of the station, and usually advocating the construction of a new sewage treatment plant. I'm referring to news commentaries by newsmen and women, back before political correctness took hold and turned every newscast into a generic store brand.

JERRY SPRINGER'S COMMENTARY

I would advocate that commentary on local newscasts not be a case of right versus *left*, but simply, of right versus *wrong*. I've had some experience with this – I've seen how properly penned perspective can lead to a ratings bonanza. That experience came in the form of **Jerry Springer**. Jerry is a former lawyer and politician. He's a political

science graduate from Tulane and got his J.D. from **Northwestern**. He was a political advisor to **Robert Kennedy** before his assassination. Jerry became a Cincinnati City Councilman and then its Mayor. He then ran for Governor of Ohio but failed to clinch the nomination. He was then hired as a commentator on the Cincinnati NBC affiliate WLWT and later became its lead anchor. That's the Jerry we Cincinnatians know.



You most likely know Jerry *only* as the host of that tabloid talk show, *The Jerry Springer Show*. And that's too bad, because the popularity of that show – and the controversy that show encapsulates – so overshadows who Jerry really is. He's smarter than I'll ever be. He's politically savvy, he's a great writer, he's accomplished, he's driven, he's truly a genuinely nice guy, he's empathetic, warm, and undeniably authentic. That's the Jerry I know. So, put that other show out of your head for a few moments while I make a point.

Every Monday through Friday night while anchoring his 6 & 11PM newscasts, Jerry would suspend his objectivity for two minutes to speak his mind. When he had been promoted to news anchor, he insisted on wanting to keep his commentaries in his newscasts. An anchor sharing his opinions certainly blurred the lines in journalism circles. But even though he remained liberal, he stayed away from political partisanship – he said himself he did not want to be a voice for one political party. His opinions were clearly his own. He was not advancing the agenda of the station or its owners. I remember Jerry pacing the basement hallways that encircled the *News 5* newsroom, pad and pen in hand, writing and rewriting. As an intern, I was often the one who would take his handwritten notes and type them up for the teleprompter. I can attest that every word was his and his alone. Unlike today where commentary and opinion only focus on politics, Jerry focused on the local news of the day. Jerry was a Cincinnati. He was invested in the city, as we all were. His opinions related to his community and his topics were as diverse as our community was. Some of them included:

- **Marge Schott's** racial insensitivities
- A **Ku Klux Klan** display on Fountain Square
- Old **Coke** vs. New Coke
- Election rhetoric
- Abortion clinic bombings
- **Pete Rose's** gambling problem
- **Johnny Bench's** Retirement
- Surrogate moms
- Sex education in kindergarten
- ***Hands Across America***
- The lack of organ donors
- **John Lennon's** murder
- **Nick Clooney** leaving WKRC
- God will take **Oral Roberts** in 60 days if he doesn't raise millions of dollars
- Flying pigs (a city marathon)
- The **Ben-Gals**

- Desegregation

Jerry's commentaries riled people up or they rallied people behind him. The newsroom phones literally lit up like a Christmas tree every night. Remember those old bouncing phone line lights? They blinked incessantly after each commentary aired. It's something we came to accept and actually looked forward to. I had countless conversations with anonymous Cincinnatians who were either tickled or ticked off. Those people, too, had a stake in Cincinnati and those commentaries got them invested in Channel 5. Jerry got them thinking – and more importantly – feeling.

▶ **VIEW VIDEO #43 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

✠ **BILL BONDS COMMENTARY**

Only one other newsman (that I'm aware of) who effectively used commentary to reach his audience was good old Bill Bonds in Detroit. I may have mentioned him earlier. He did a breathtaking commentary one night at 11 – right after returning from the hospital where he literally pulled the plug on his younger brother.

▶ **VIEW VIDEO #44 HERE:**
rayjay.tv/book

What news anchor today would have the balls to use such a personal tragedy to make a greater point? Name one. I can't.

Pundits with half-baked opinions who pick-a-side-for-pay have replaced the virtuous viewpoint. With the 24/7 news cycle and so many hours of air-time to fill, there's no need to make a clear, concise point in three minutes anymore. The art of expression is extinct.

With that, I want to delve right into my thoughts about the Fox News Channel. 2017 was a turbulent year for the cable franchise. In my opinion, Karma has finally caught up with Mr. **Bill O'Reilly**, but reports of the network's impending death have been greatly exaggerated.

📺 **FOX NEWS IS GENIUS –
A BRILLIANT TV FORMAT**

PERSONALITY PRODUCER – The Raymond J Brune Blog; February 6, 2010

In all seriousness, I truly believe that. Hear me out. What **Roger Ailes** created from scratch is nothing short of phenomenal. Now keep in mind, Roger Ailes is the guy who took a slimy, squirrely, non-telegenic wanna-be politician named **Richard Nixon** and made him over into a statesman. If he created that miracle, there's no telling what else he's capable of. What makes FNC so brilliant is simple - Roger came up with a vision and executed it. First, everything written here is merely my opinion. I don't have any inside knowledge or sources - only my observations and hunches from years of watching the network. Roger clearly set out to create a conservative network and to reflect the values and mindset of the Republican Party. I think that is pretty self-evident and not in dispute. If Roger had called his network, ***The Republican Right, TRR***, there would be no controversy. The name of the network would state its focus and ideology - just as we accept that the ***SyFy Network*** focuses on science fiction and ***EWTN***, the Catholic Network focuses on the Roman Catholic faith. But instead, Roger chose to name his network the *Fox News Channel*. By invoking the word "news", it's implied that the network is fair and balanced, that this is broadcast journalism and there are ethical rules which apply. And by using a format viewers are familiar with, news anchors on news sets covering and discussing news issues, it's assumed that FNC will follow the unwritten rules of broadcast journalism.

The problem is, no one owns the word "news". "News" is defined as: *the presentation of a report on recent events in a newspaper or other periodical or on radio or television*. News, as you see, is not defined as "unbiased". Technically, FNC is presenting news reports. It's just adding that forbidden ingredient - bias - into the mix. I know that. You know that. So, what's the problem?

The problem is FNC claims to stand for one thing while apparently being another. Its slogan "***Fair and Balanced***" is, in my opinion, an outright lie. There's nothing fair or balanced about ***Fox & Friends*** in the morning. I've watched that show long enough to believe there's a clear agenda there. Once we move into the evening and the personality shows, the gloves are off. Even though these shows rehash selected news stories, they are presented with an extreme bias to the right. Ailes has even said that shows like O'Reilly, Hannity, and Greta are opinion shows, not news. But what seems to upset people is the apparent two-faced approach to how FNC sells its shows. "***We Report, You Decide***". No, essentially, they report and then tell you how to decide. "***Fair & Balanced***". Not always. O'Reilly's "***No Spin Zone***" is nothing but spin.

So, what do we have here? A network that has its own political agenda, that won't admit to having an agenda, and whose catchphrases are the exact opposite of what they represent. So, what? Nothing FNC is doing is illegal (that I'm aware of). Using seemingly misleading catchphrases is not against the law. Discussing the record of a Democratic president in a negative way because he's not a Republican is not breaking any laws that I know of. Putting a harem of knockout blonde anchor clones spouting opinions along with pseudo-facts is not unlawful.

Let me approach it this way. Suppose **Lifetime** went back to its old slogan, "***Television for Women***". But the network aired auto

racing and boxing and *The Man Show* and *Monday Night Football*. And in every break in that football game, the promo "*You're watching Lifetime, Television for Women*" came on. You'd think to yourself, that's weird. They want people to think they air women's programming when they're airing nothing but shows of interest to men. Many men watching would turn off the game and the network because they do not want to be "perceived" as a guy who would watch a women's network - even if it's airing all these programs geared towards men. That's how powerful branding is. That's what these slogans are all about. And that's the image TV networks want to create.

Now let's say FNC changed its tactics by changing its slogans. Instead of "*Fair & Balanced*", it aired promos touting itself as "*Faux News - Biased Beyond Belief*", or "*We Do the Reporting - And the Thinking for You*". And O'Reilly told you "*You're stepping into the total spin zone*". How would that change the way you view the network and the shows? Would these be the most successful promo campaigns in history or a disastrous flop? I suspect the latter. Because people don't always want to hear the truth. So, you give them what they want to hear. You give them what works. You give them what's comfortable. And they watch - *even if they're totally clued into what they're watching*.

Therein lies its genius.

People aren't stupid. People watching Fox News aren't being manipulated by a man behind the curtain into believing falsehoods. They're willing participants. Participating by the millions. And Fox is making a fortune.

Therein lies its brilliance.



CHAPTER TWENTY

FOR INTERNS ONLY

I've never told anyone this - only family members know - but I did not attend the graveside services for my father back in 1983. I went to the funeral and church services on that Saturday, but the burial was on Sunday at the same time I was supposed to report to **WLWT** for my first day as an intern. There was absolutely no question in my mind where I was supposed to be on that day.

I suppose I could have postponed things for a day or two. **Rick Willis**, the Assistant News Director called me the previous Wednesday, about an hour after my father passed away, to tell me that my start date was on Sunday. I didn't tell him my father had just died in his bed, in our house, in front of me, moments ago, after a terrible, three-year painful ordeal. He would have surely pushed things back a week or so. But I somehow knew that doing so would push back my "coming of age". The simultaneous burial of my father and my walking into **Channel 5** for the first time was the exact moment I became a man.

If I recall correctly, my first assignment was phoning the various police departments around town to see if anything was going on. Nothing was.

So, I helped out **Tom Craig** with other duties on the assignment desk. On the multi-line phones was a typed-up list of the last names and home phone numbers of the newsroom staff. I remember thinking, *"God, I can't wait until I'm important enough that someone would need to reach me at home."*

I then went back to editing to watch weekend anchor **Michael Collins** as he was editing a story he had just shot. It was his first day at WLWT as well. He played back an interview with a city official and then asked me where the soundbite was. I had never heard the word "soundbite" before, despite my college education, but quickly surmised it was the most important 15-seconds of what the talking head said. I chose the correct soundbite - purely by luck - and by pretending I knew exactly what I was doing.



With Greg Rahe at the Riverfront (1983)
(Author's Collection)

I think it was *LaRosa's Pizza* I brought back for lunch after the 6PM edition of *Action 5 News* wrapped up. Michael, his co-host **Robin**

Phillips, "bright eyes" as I would come to call her, and weekend producer **Jeff Hildebrant**, who intimidated the hell out of me, all sat in the producing area discussing the 11PM show. I walked back to the kitchen area where the vending machines were to get everyone drinks. The TV monitor was airing an episode of the **NBC** series *Voyagers*. I remember thinking, "*I belong here*".

And I did. My internship lasted a good two years. Not because that's the way it was set up, but because I didn't tell anybody when it was supposed to be over. I just kept showing up, going out with the photogs on spot news stories, getting soundbites with the mayor, writing packages, logging **Bobbie Battista's** stories on **CNN**. I was working with **Richard Hull**, **Jerry Springer**, **Norma Rashid**, news director **Bob Yuna**, Northern Kentucky Reporter **Clyde Gray** and *My Child Is Missing* correspondent **Toria Tolley-Hammill**, Cincinnati's first anchorwoman legend **Carole Wilson**, producer **Tish Armentrout**, photogs **Lori Bullerdick** and **Greg Rahe**. There were 6's and 11's and noon's and *Today show* cut-ins. There were beat up old gray news vans with giant *Action 5 News* logos on them and live shots and satellite downlinks and teleprompters and control rooms. Leave? Security would have had to drag me out of there before I'd ever let on that my internship ended more than a year ago.

Finally, the words I waited to hear. Tish said them first. "*Rayjay, we need to hire you!*" And they did. And getting my last name and home phone number added to that staff list taped to the assignment editor's phones was a far bigger thrill than receiving my first paycheck.

Without even being consciously aware of it, I approached this internship with a firestorm of passion - passion I had never given to anything else thus far in my life. Right or wrong, I even dropped out in my last semester of college so I could devote all of my attention to WLWT. I urge the interns of today to do exactly the same (except for the dropping out part). Bring passion and determination to your internship. Ask thousands of questions. Go out on assignments. Set up live shots. Insist

on writing some stories. Ask to do all the things that aren't expected of you. Taste the industry.

I've seen countless hundreds of interns come and go in the various newsrooms and offices I've worked in over the years. And of those, I'd guess I hired 1-percent of them to full time staff positions. I am always fascinated by the interns who plop themselves down in a newsroom and do nothing but surf the internet - as if living out their sentence until their time is served and they can get enough credits to graduate. It's as if they resent the fact that they are, essentially, "free help" and will do no more than what is asked of them. It's mind-boggling how they are literally throwing away the opportunities that are right in front of their eyes. If I was starting out in this industry today, I would take the exact same course of action. Every newsroom is understaffed (or, at least, perceives themselves to be). Most solid assignment editors and producers are willing to take a risk and let an intern go out with a photog (or alone with a camera) and get a story that you'd otherwise not be able to cover. When you've got a news hole to fill, free help is just as good as the paid kind.

That's my 5-cents worth of free advice. Approach this industry with passion. It's getting more and more competitive all the time. Passion is in short supply and it's always snapped up quickly when found.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE KICKER

As you move through your career, it's important to determine where you set the bar for yourself – despite where the bar is set for the place you work – which will always be lower. I've compiled this list of “rules” that I've sort of adopted through the years and made my own. Take what works for you and throw the rest aside.

✠ RAY'S WAYS TO A KICK-ASS CAREER

1 – KNOW WHAT YOU STAND FOR

Ground yourself in those values. This is especially crucial when things aren't going well at work. Decide who you are going to be in any situation – and don't waver. Walk away the bigger person. Look at yourself regularly in the mirror.

2 – GET OVER YOURSELF

One of the greatest compliments a boss ever paid me when introducing me to a new staff was “*He has no ego*”. It was something I never even realized about myself. Ego is just a bunch of bluster to hide insecurities. Be confident in your abilities and there’s nothing to hide. Admit when you’re wrong. Admit when you screwed up. Liars are littered across the landscape. Rise above them.

3 – FEEL COMPELLED TO DO SOMETHING? – DON’T

Chances are, your fight or flight instincts are activated. Take time to reflect before you react. Being impulsive can be a double-edged sword.

4 -TAKE (CALCULATED) RISKS

Move out of your comfort zone. And remain there. Nothing important happens when you’re in a safe place. There is no reward with no risk.

5 – DON’T ATTEMPT TO MULTI-TASK – IT’S A MYTH

We are only capable of doing one task at a time – period. Multi-tasking is just a buzz word for changing your focus from task to task. Each time you change your focus, you increase the time it takes to complete that task by 25%.

6 – DON’T QUIT

The temptation to quit any activity is greatest just before you are about to succeed.

7 – SLEEP

Fatigue makes cowards of us all. Nap when you can. And recognize a regular bedtime.

8 – TURN OFF THE TECH

Rarely is any e-mail, call or text so urgent as to demand your immediate attention. Chose times to be unavailable – and enforce them regularly. Being reachable 24/7 is not a trait to take pride in. Don't buy in to the accepted rules of Social Media. Participate at your own pace.

9 – WORK SMARTER

Human beings are not computers. Working 12-hour days at 50-percent capacity is much less productive than working 5 hours at full speed.

10 – PLAN FOR THE BEST – ANTICIPATE FOR THE WORST

Accept the worst thing that could possibly happen & quantify it. Rarely is the worst consequence nearly as bad as what you imagine it would be.

11 – ACT – DON'T REACT TO COMPETITORS

Force the competition to react to you. When you take on the role of a leader, more often than not, they'll fall in line as followers.

12 – SOLVE YOUR OWN PROBLEMS YOURSELF

There's nothing more empowering.

13 – LIGHTEN UP

Our success is 50-percent hard work and 50-percent luck. And so is everyone else's.

14 – BREAK RULES – EVEN THESE

Nobody gets extra points for playing by the rules.

In closing, I want to reiterate what an honor it is that you would take the time to read my thoughts and opinions on this industry -which I love dearly. I've worked with so many creative, smart, warm, wonderful people, many who have left local news because of the uncharted waters – oceans really – we find ourselves in today. I don't plan on bailing ship. I'm so incredibly grateful that I work in the industry I'm most passionate about – television – and I'm so lucky that some of my ideas have connected with viewers on an emotional level.

I believe that people come into our lives exactly when they're supposed to. If you and I should meet and eventually work together, it's pure destiny. And I look forward to that.

In the meantime, take risks, live in the moment, and be grateful for all the skills, talents and abilities you've been given. And remember, if your boss isn't *leading the way* – to borrow the **Hearst** stations current mantra - then you must. If your company is truly *on your side & working for you* as some **Scripps** stations remind viewers incessantly – then it's time you act. And if you definitely want to *make your mark in broadcasting* – to borrow the first sentence of every **Sinclair** job posting, and be part of a *hit* TV show, then you need to approach television like no one's watching!



afacebookfunny



Raymond J Brune

15 hrs · 🌐 ▼



In 1990, I cut in to NBC prime time programming to cover a major plane crash at Detroit Metro airport. Unfortunately, it was right when Matlock was about to expose the killer. To those thousands of you who called in to bitch, that episode is airing right now on the East Coast feed of Hallmark Channel if you want to know who the killer is. Oh, and every one of you can kiss my breaking news ass!



Like



Comment



Share



James Harris, Joyce Belmonte and 7 others



Dan Noel For 28 years, you left them hanging.. WOW. Not cool, sir. Not cool.

Like · Reply · 15h



Ian McGrady The Ultimate Cliffhanger. Well-played, sir.

Like · Reply · 15h



Lisa Bricker I'm not laughing at the plane crash. I'm laughing at the rest of the message. I remember those times when people would call into the station. It was always a nightmare when the soaps were on. Yikes

Like · Reply · 15h



Sunda Croonquist Raymond J Brune you ARE breaking news! They are not good enough to kiss that breaking news ass of yours...#brunerules

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

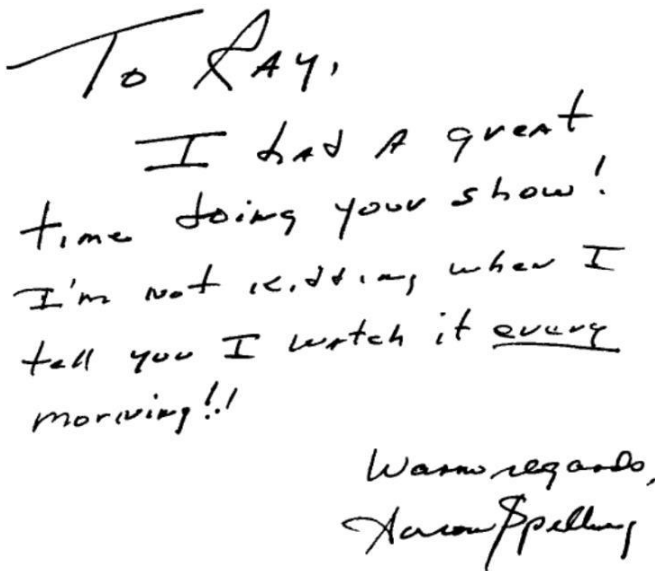
He's responsible for *Charlie's Angels*, *The Love Boat*, *Fantasy Island*, *Melrose Place*, *Hart to Hart*, *Family...* must I go on? **Aaron Spelling** has been my idol since grade school watching every one of his prime-time adventures. Aaron guested on the *KTLA Morning News* only once - to promote his autobiography.

He said,

"You guys must be making a fortune in royalties with this show!"

No Aaron, newscasts don't work that way!

He paid me the biggest compliment of my career with what he wrote in the inscription of his book:

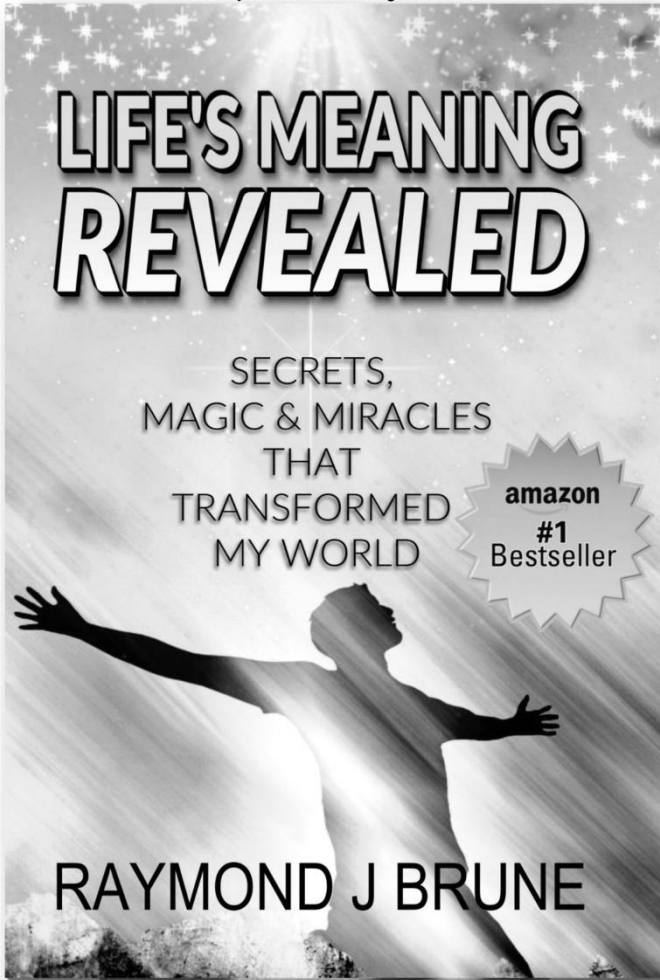


To Ray,
I had a great
time doing your show!
I'm not kidding, when I
tell you I watch it every
morning!!
Warm regards,
Aaron Spelling

Raymond J Brune

**More Stuff by
Raymond J Brune**

In this stunning pager-turner, Ray reveals how producing his Lifetime show "Lisa Williams: Life Among the Dead", brought him face-to-face with the dead, the reincarnated, tortured souls, alien abductors, and a parade of living, dead and multi-dimensional mentors he was destined to meet. Ray recounts how he found his life's meaning - in a brutally honest, irreverent, and sometimes snarky way only he could put to paper. His illumination is a must-read for any restless soul aching to evolve!

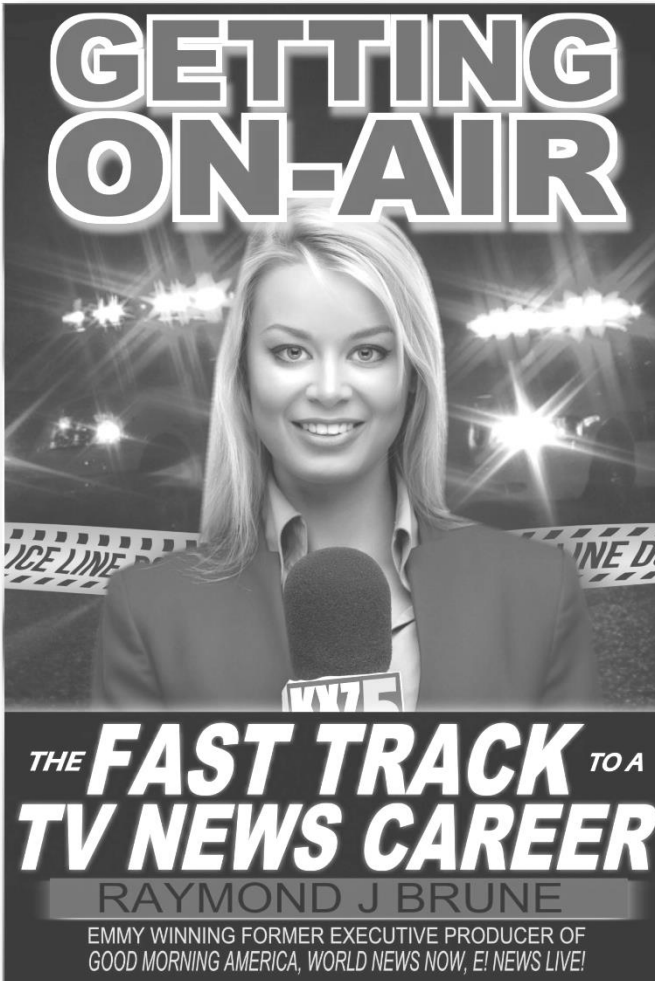


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"Ray Brune has outdone even those of us who spent years on the air. If you want to work in TV news, forget the graduate degree....buy this book!"

-Bobbie Battista, CNN



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Ray once asked co-worker and now WCBS anchorwoman Dana Tyler, "Dana, what are we going to do with our lives?" She replied, "Well, we start with a double box, then take the remote full and close again on a double box." Ray replied, "No! Not our live shots...our lives!" It was then he realized he would have to write books about the TV news experience.



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RAYMOND J BRUNE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Raymond J Brune (brū'–ee) is a **Peabody** and four-time **Emmy**-award winning television producer. News programs he's Executive Produced include *Good Morning America Sunday*, *World News Now*, *E! News Live*, and the nationally-syndicated **Tribune** morning show *Eye Opener*. He created and showran the original *KTLA Morning News* in Los Angeles, the highest rated local morning show ever. He started his career in Cincinnati, where he produced **Jerry Springer** when he was a news anchor. Ray also created the **Fox Sports/TV Guide** network, *TVG*, from the ground up, resulting in a valuation of \$3-Billion in his third year.

Ray created and Executive Produced reality shows including *Lisa Williams: Life Among the Dead*, which aired for two seasons on **Lifetime** and is seen around the world, *Second Verdict* for **PAX**, and *Knockouts* for **VH1**. His game show, *Merv Griffin's Crosswords*, currently airs on **Retro TV** and is seen in worldwide syndication.

Ray is an **Amazon** bestselling author of *Life's Meaning Revealed* and of three books targeted to the TV news industry crowd. He's written extensively for *The Huffington Post* and for his own blog – *Personality Producer*.

A Cincinnati native, Ray is an alumnus of **Northern Kentucky University**. He's made the stunning landscape of California's **Mojave Desert** his home for more than 20 years where he raises rescued German Shepherds and rescues cheesy made-for-TV movies of the '70's. He spends much of his free time with family and friends in Cincinnati.

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