

A STUDY OF HOW TELEVISION ASSIGNMENT EDITORS IN THE TOP 30 MARKETS VIEW VIDEO NEWS RELEASES

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ABSTRACT

This opinion study was done following mounting criticism of video news releases (VNRs) in the news media and in journals. The study seemed especially important for those teaching students studying advertising, marketing or public relations. The producers of VNRs and most texts would lead the unindoctrinated to believe that their product is a highly effective and efficient means to get messages on television news programs at no cost for air time. A survey of TV assignment editors in the highly sought after top 30 market shows that the overwhelming majority are of the opinion that VNRs are not effective in getting aired on their stations.

INTRODUCTION

The video news release, welcomed by the marketing and public relations professions as the hot new communications tool of the 1980s, has recently been drawing unusually harsh media criticism. VNRs have been faulted in the following areas: (1) VNRs mislead viewers into thinking they are the work of independent journalists, (2) VNRs give corporations too much power to set the news agenda, and (3) VNRs erode the credibility of television news. The underlying theme is that VNRs are too often inadequately labeled. These charges of deception raise the question of just how effective VNRs are as a marketing tool. The purpose of this study was to determine how television news managers see the effectiveness of VNRs at getting messages on air, and how they think VNRs should be labeled. The results should be of value to marketing educators and students alike in making rational decisions about which media are the most effective and efficient to use to promote products.

Most video news releases resemble typical TV news stories or unedited video material. However, unlike typical TV news stories, VNRs are not produced by a news organization. They are produced on behalf of a client in an attempt to obtain free air time on television stations to promote a product or to present a position.

VNRs have assumed to be a more effective means of promoting a product or service than simply buying commercial time on television for two major reasons: (a) credibility of TV news and (b) lower costs. Unlike paid advertising spots, VNRs are usually aired as part

of a news program. Some contend that such programs are among the most credible time slots on television, so people are more likely to believe the information contained in a VNR.

Even though production and distribution costs can be high, VNRs are aired for free, so theoretically clients can reach more people and get more air time for less money with a VNR than with regular commercial buys.

Media criticism

Over the past two to three years, the VNR industry has had to endure such headlines as, "Fake News," a *TV Guide* cover story; "Doctoring the News," in *Quill*; "Making News," in *Consumer Reports*; "Bad News," in the *Public Relations Journal*; "The Video News Release: Let the Viewer Beware," in *The New York Times*; "VNRs Are Still Hot, but They're Drawing Fire," in *Marketing News*; "Ready-made News," in *Channels*; "Prefab News," in *Technology Review*, and "Questionable Sources," in *Maclean's*.

TV Guide's "Fake News" article hit the newsstands on February 22, 1992, touching off an outrage by VNR producers and distributors (Lieberman, 1992). Many in the industry thought the cover story's headline was overly sensational and cast aspersions on the industry. The article calls VNRs fake news because viewers think of news as the work of independent journalists who broadcast their own reporting and camera work. Industry executives countered the charge of fake news saying that today's VNRs supply TV stations with real news that addresses real issues and impacts real people.

The major issue raised in the article is that sponsored news, not identified as such, in some way tricks the public and erodes the credibility of television news. The article recommends there be an on-screen label during the airing of such tapes. Some VNR producers are concerned that clients would probably not be too happy if their company's video was identified on screen. The fear is that it would jeopardize the third-party endorsement a news report normally carries.

The *Quill's* article challenges the routine use of portions of VNRs produced by vested interests in the healthcare industry without telling the audience that

part of what they're seeing is from slanted sources (Schwitzer, 1992). The *Consumer Reports*' "Making News" asks if VNRs are blurring the line between news and advertising (Making News, 1991). The author points out that pharmaceutical commercials are now required to present balanced information, addressing the adverse effects as well as potential benefits of any drug. Video news releases had no such strictures prior to August 1991.

Entertainment Weekly's "Bad News" article says that in TV circles VNRs are sparking serious debate about corporate manipulation of the news (Benatar, 1991). From the marketer's point of view, the author says, promotional messages hidden in the context of the news are uniquely powerful. When it comes to judging the actual news value of VNRs, the article urges caution.

An article in *Channels* quotes critics as saying newsroom acceptance of VNRs gives the people who pay to produce the clips too much power to set the news agenda (Robins, 1990).

Television stations are urged in *The New York Times* article, "The Video News Release: Let the Viewer Beware," to become more conscientious in their use of VNRs. (Kleinfield, 1989). The reporter writes that many local stations frequently run VNRs virtually intact without explaining their origin. Viewers may think they are regular news footage.

The controversy over VNRs may make for great copy, according to the article, "VNRs Are Still Hot, But They're Drawing Fire," in *Marketing News*, but television stations are using them now just as much as they were before (Miller, 1990). Faced with shrinking budgets and an increasing amount of time to fill, TV stations seem willing to at least scope out the VNRs.

FDA scrutinizes pharmaceutical VNRs

The FDA concerns about the use of VNRs to promote pharmaceuticals are reported in *Public Relations Journal* article "FDA to Scrutinize Pharmaceutical VNRs" (Gordon, 1991). The concerns are that VNRs might have a hidden agenda or secret backing or would present a conflict of interest if people knew who funded it. VNRs also appear as an attempt to skirt the restrictions of full disclosure that are required in advertising. The FDA now requires the submission of some pharmaceutical VNRs for agency review. Public relations practitioners see this as having a chilling effect on the industry.

The *Columbia Journalism Review* predicts VNRs are likely to be more widely used in the 1990s than ever (Sonnenclar, 1991). One survey found more than 46 percent of news directors predicting that national newscasters will increase their use of VNRs at least until 1997. More than 4,000 VNRs were made available to U.S. television stations in 1991, up from 700 in 1986 (Lieberman, 1992). Research conducted for *Inside PR* by MediaLink, the nation's largest distributor of VNRs, indicates that the vast majority of TV news editors agree that public relations generated stories were used more frequently in 1991 than in 1986 (*Inside PR*, 1991). As VNR production and distribution costs fall, a growing number of corporations and other sponsors may be willing to start making VNRs. In addition, tighter budgets in many markets, as well as the trend toward more and longer newscasts, may give stations a greater incentive to air them. In a Nielsen Media Research telephone survey of 92 TV newsrooms nation wide in December 1992, 86 percent reported they aired one to five VNRs a month (Medialink, 1992).

PROBLEM

Has the criticism been so severe and damaging that the VNR as a highly touted marketing/public relations tool is in jeopardy? Media scrutiny is one thing, but those closest to the business, such as the managers of television news, are in better positions to judge the status VNRs. This study attempts to determine that status through a survey of TV assignment editors.

Specifically, the following research questions were approached:

- What are the opinions of television assignment editors about the value and effectiveness of VNRs as a means of getting free air time?
- How frequently do television stations air VNRs, and how much of the VNRs do they use?
- What are the opinions of television station managers about the labeling of VNR tape shown on air?

METHODOLOGY

To obtain answers to these questions, written questionnaires were mailed to assignment editors at 112 commercial VHF televisions in the top-30 television markets. The editors were surveyed in late 1991. A random sample was not used. The top-30 television markets were chosen because they are the most sought-after targets of the VNR industry. These mar-

kets, a common target audience in television research, reach more than half of the households in the country. The questionnaires consisted of a combination of statements with choices of strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree, and open-ended questions calling for short answers. Since the survey were not based on a random sample, caution should be used in generalizing the results.

After three mailings, 54 out of 112 TV assignment editors surveyed responded for a response rate of 48 percent. Some respondents did not answer all questions. Since this was not a random sample survey, the geographic location and characteristics of the respondents should be compared with those of the non-respondents. Of the TV assignment editors who responded, 2 percent were from the Northeast; Mid-Atlantic, 9 percent; Southeast, 17 percent; Mid-West, 30 percent; the West, 15 percent; and West Coast, 26 percent. The geographic distribution of the 58 nonresponding assignment editors with a few exceptions is similar to those responding. The distribution is Northeast, 12 percent; Mid-Atlantic, 15 percent; Southeast, 14 percent; Mid-West, 31 percent; West, 8 percent, and West Coast, 20 percent. One indication of how non-respondents might have responded is that responses did not vary significantly among the three separate mailings.

Effectiveness at getting message on air

The most revealing finding was that only 8 percent of television assignment editors responding to the question agreed that VNRs are an effective means of getting stories aired on their TV station (See Table).

TABLE
Opinions of TV Assignment Editors

Statement	Disagree N/%	Agree N/%
VNRs are an effective means of getting stories on TV	50/92	4/8
VNRs are just as ethical as written news releases	26/51	5/49
Clients should be identified in VNRs	4/8	48/92
Source should be identified if only part of VNR is aired	2/4	47/96
Source should be identified if VNR significantly altered	9/12	43/88
TV staffers should not be offered inducements	2/4	51/96

How frequently do the top-30 market television stations air VNRs? Ninety percent of the responding assignment editors reported they rarely or never use VNRs. Thirty-five percent said they don't even want to receive them. Ninety percent of those reporting VNR use indicated they use only the B-roll (unedited video with natural sound), with 10 percent using only part of the packaged video story. None reported using complete VNR packages.

Labeling of VNRs

Concerning labeling of VNRs, 93 percent of assignment editors agreed that clients for whom a VNR has been produced should be readily identified in VNRs. Ninety-six percent of the assignment editors also agreed that TV news staffers should identify the source/sponsor if a VNR is aired as part of a locally produced news program. Eighty-eight percent indicated that the source should be identified even if the VNR were significantly altered (See Table).

Only 49 percent of the responding television assignment editors were of the opinion that VNRs are just as ethical and legitimate as traditional press releases. Over 96 percent of the editors agreed that TV news staffers should not be offered inducements, money or gifts, in an attempt to enhance the chances that a VNR will air.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The media have criticized video news releases since their inception, but they seem to have been especially harsh over the past couple of years. Marketers should be aware that there are two conflicting views about the effectiveness of VNRs. Critical thinking should lead students to see through the hype of VNR producers. Success statistics provided by these producers certainly do not reflect what TV assignment editors reported in this study -- at least in the top 30 markets. If the high use reports are valid, this study would indicate that the successes must be skewed toward the smaller markets. On the other hand, can the editors be believed? Are they merely reluctant to admit they are using more video handouts than they would like for the public to believe? When 50 out of 54 assignment editors say VNRs are not an effective means of getting information on air, it is time for a closer look at the VNR business and the data being used to promote the business. With only 49 percent of the editors agreeing that VNRs are as legitimate and ethical as print news releases, perhaps some of the media concerns about credibility and ethics should be taken more seriously. Could these statistics be the results of the negative publicity?

One possible explanation for the increased media attention is that the VNR industry has been so successful from a producers point of view. In a sense, the industry could be a victim of its own success. Some of the most vicious articles contain good news for the business. In many respects they confirm how powerful a communications tool VNRs have become. The stories also illustrate how entrenched VNRs are in the budget-conscious, video-starved world of broadcast journalism.

There is a concern that the market is becoming saturated and news directors are getting more sophisticated. On the other hand, VNR producers have also become more savvy. Perhaps this saturation and more demanding news directors will drive those producing poor quality VNRs out of business. The relatively new industry has obviously been undergoing growing pains.

Some literature suggests that the industry grew up a bit as a result of all the adverse publicity. It seems to have brought the industry together and made it stronger, and the result is that VNR usage continues to climb, according to VNR producers.

George Glazer, senior vice president and managing director of the Worldwide Broadcast and Satellite Services Division, Hill and Knowlton, contends it is time for the VNR and television industries to stop ignoring each other (Glazer, 1993). VNRs are here to stay, Glazer writes, so the two professions should work together to make them better and more productive.

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