

HED: TV STATIONS TAILOR CAMPAIGN COVERAGE TO THEIR LOCAL MARKETS

Deck: Stations Deliver Unprecedented Live Coverage On-Air and via their Web Sites

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As the candidates made their way through Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Texas, and other hotly contested states, local broadcasters provided extensive coverage of primaries and caucuses, as well as key rallies, speeches, and events. They also provided in-depth analysis custom tailored to the needs of their local market—something the national news networks could not do.

What's particularly noteworthy about the 2008 campaign season is that broadcasters have been using their web sites in very innovative ways with significant impact. They view the Internet as a new outlet that not only complements their on-air operation, it benefits it.

“The web gives us an opportunity to truly interact with our viewers. It makes us better journalists,” said Maria Barrs, vice president and news director of KDFW-FOX 4, in Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas. “Because of the immediacy of online feedback, we can quickly ascertain what's of interest to our viewers. Our web site generates a lot of story ideas that ultimately benefit our on-air newscasts.”

KDFW – Dallas

Both KDFW-FOX 4 and its sister station KMSP-FOX 9, in Minneapolis/St. Paul, provided two-pronged coverage, with original content being produced for both their 9pm and 10pm local newscasts, as well as their web sites. The web sites carried live web streams from key primary and caucus sites, a webcast of the on-air signal, as well as innovative blogging and chat rooms.

“One day, our on-air and web content will essentially become one and the same,” said Kevin Boie, senior web producer for the KDFW-FOX 4 web site, on www.myfoxdfw.com. “In the future, with advances in technology, viewers will be able to sit in front of their TVs and access digital content from the web simultaneously. I think we're going to see a merging of the two operations.”

“Right now, our web audience spikes during the day when people utilize our web site to find out the latest news while they're at work because they don't have access to a TV,” said Boie.

According to Barrs, the three FOX owned and operated stations in Texas, KDFW-Dallas/Fort Worth, KRIV-Houston, and KTBC-Austin, formed an ad-hoc regional news network, sharing live coverage from local primary rallies as well as web streams.

KMSP – Minneapolis/St. Paul

At KMSP-FOX 9, in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Vice President and News Director Bill Dallman said that all of the stations in the “network,” referring to FOX owned and operated stations nationwide, regularly pooled news resources.

For example, Dallman said, “During the Iowa caucuses in January 2008, there were many candidates, caucus sites, and campaign headquarters that needed to be covered over a three or four day period, including the Des Moines Convention Center where they were tabulating the results. It would have been logistically challenging for a single station to manage it all. But since many of our FOX-owned stations had sent news crews, SNG trucks, and reporters to Iowa, we divvied up the events and pooled all that video.”

Dallman said, “The next big test was covering the home state of Minnesota which held elections February 5th. And on Super Tuesday, FOX-owned stations also pooled live 3D animated graphics, such as pie charts, that displayed timely polling data from Rasmussen Reports, which provides exclusive polling data to the FOX O & O’s. When a state’s results were called, we’d present a very eye-catching 3D animation where the state would spin up off the map with a picture of the winner punctuated by a checkmark by the name.”

KMSP also offered webcasts and streaming media on www.myfoxtwincities.com. At the Republican National Convention taking place at the Xcel Center in St. Paul, Minn., Sept. 1-4, 2008, Dallman said that reporters, producers, and news crews will all become video journalists and carry wireless RF cameras, smaller Panasonic P2 mini-DV cameras, and a variety of mini cams, so they can televise every aspect of the event.

KCCI - Des Moines

While the Iowa caucuses took place on January 3, 2008, the candidates had been actively campaigning throughout the state during the prior year.

KCCI-TV8, the CBS affiliate owned by Hearst Argyle, had ENG and SNG trucks on the road and several crews pursuing 16 candidates as they crisscrossed the station’s 33 county coverage area.

“This was an enormous story so we had to be selective about what we would cover,” said Dave Busiek, news director for KCCI. “On any given day, we had to evaluate what issues the candidates were talking about and make sure we were focusing on what was particularly important to our viewers.”

“There was a tremendous spirit of cooperation between our station, other stations in our group, and CBS network’s news operation. A five person news crew came up from our Hearst Washington Bureau and worked out of our station for the week prior to the caucuses,” said Busiek. “Also, a reporter/photographer from CNN actually worked out of our station for six months prior to the caucuses, and we often shared tapes and supplemented each other’s coverage.”

Compared to the coverage by national news networks, Busiek said his news operation focused on the perspectives and reactions of Iowans, especially undecided voters. The night of the caucuses, they preempted CBS primetime to go live from several caucus sites and campaign headquarters with wall-to-wall coverage from 7pm to midnight.

“We had crews at six different locations and our microwave vans moved between the different caucus sites,” said Busiek. “Our engineering department was using every piece of equipment and every length of cable in the building to make sure we could cover everything we wanted to, even on short notice.”

Immediately following the Iowa caucuses, the focus shifted to New Hampshire, which held its primary five days later. Busiek said they worked closely with sister station WMUR-TV9, in Manchester, N.H., and got really interesting stories there that centered on how the Iowa caucuses were impacting voters in New Hampshire.

WMUR - Manchester

According to WMUR News Director Andrew Vrees, they also followed 16 candidates very closely for about a year prior to their primary. Vrees said they worked closely with other Hearst stations as well as Hearst’s Washington Bureau.

“Our station in Albuquerque, KOAT, was particularly interested in the progress of their Governor Bill Richardson, so we provided special coverage for them,” said Vrees.

WMUR co-sponsored two Presidential Primary Debates with CNN. They also produced extensive coverage during the four days leading up to the primary, culminating with continuous live reporting from 7pm to midnight from key locations on primary night.

WMUR, the ABC affiliate serving N.H. and the Boston market, also produced “Conversation with the Candidates,” a live one-hour town hall meeting show that featured each of the 16 candidates beginning in the Spring of 2007. The first half-hour of each program was carried live on the air, and the other half hour was a WMUR.com web exclusive.

“The candidates appeared before a live studio audience to answer questions from audience members and web viewers,” said Vrees. “Our objective was to cover all of the candidates, not just the top tier, so that N.H. voters would be informed.”

Vrees said that WMUR’s web coverage was unprecedented. For example, they partnered with YouTube and gave out 70 flip cameras to voters so they could document their primary experience and this user-generated content was featured on a special YouTube page. Also, during the WMUR debates, Southern Methodist University conducted focus groups where viewers measured their response to what candidates were saying using dials and this data registered on a graph in realtime—and this was carried on WMUR.com.

“Many candidates have gained their popularity from appearing on web sites,” said Vrees. “So, we wanted to make sure that N.H. viewers could come to our web site and get

unique content and have a totally different experience than they could get from television.”

WIS - Columbia

At WIS-TV, in Columbia, S.C., an NBC affiliate owned by Raycom Media, many activities and resources were made available on the station’s web site at www.wistv.com. For instance, WIS News 10 sent bloggers to give behind the scenes perspectives at two debates held prior to the State’s two primaries: one for the Republicans on January 19, 2008 and one for the Democrats on January 29, 2008. WIS News 10 covered these debates extensively.

According to Tina Luque-Blacklocke, news director for WIS News 10, the station’s web site also had a significant impact on its on-air coverage of the campaign. WIS devoted a one-hour newscast to covering the Democratic campaign—featuring Hillary Clinton (who appeared live), and Barack Obama and John Edwards, (who were taped prior to the show)—which aired Saturday, January 26, at 9 a.m. just prior to the day of the Democratic primary.

“We thought it was terrific that these candidates wanted to appear live on WIS,” said Blacklocke. “Each of the three candidates was given a full ten minutes in which to answer questions, all of which were submitted by viewers via our web site.”

“When we solicited the viewer questions, we were overwhelmed by the response. People sent in so many great questions,” said Blacklocke, “We made our viewers part of the political process by allowing them to ask the questions that mattered to them via the web and then hear how the candidates addressed their specific concerns on the live news show.”

Blacklocke added that their campaign coverage was not about the horse race and who was saying what about whom. She said, “We really tried to do something more substantive and valuable by keeping the focus on the issues that mattered to the viewers in our market.”

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