Forecast: New Role For Weathercaster?

New certification program would encourage weather team to report on a broad range of science topics.

By Barbara Cochran for the October 2004 Communicator

Have you hugged your meteorologist today?

With most surveys showing that weather is the top reason for tuning in to local newscasts, meteorologists are playing significant roles for their stations in building audience and establishing a strong news image. Increasingly, how a station performs on a breaking weather story can shift standings within a market. A key ingredient in the effectiveness of the coverage is the credibility of the meteorologist.

Although early “weathermen” were chosen more for their personalities than their training in meteorology, that has changed significantly over the years. Today, many stations put a premium on being able to say that the weather is presented by a meteorologist who “holds the seal”—that is, someone whose skills have been judged as meeting certain criteria for scientific knowledge and effective communication.

Now, the American Meteorological Society, the organization that grants the Seal of Approval, is planning an upgrade. In 2005, the AMS will introduce a program called the Certified Broadcast Meteorologist program. Ron McPherson, executive director, says the new program is intended to raise the professional standard in broadcast meteorology and to encourage a broader range of scientific understanding, especially of environmental issues.

The idea is to rethink the role of the broadcast meteorologist and to think of that individual as the “station scientist.”

To obtain the new certification, meteorologists will have to pass a written examination on atmospheric science and other scientific issues. New applicants will need at least a Bachelor of Science degree in atmospheric science. All AMS-certified meteorologists will be required to participate in continuing professional development.

Last year, AMS approached RTNDA to gauge how news directors would react to the new program. To find out, we gathered 20 news directors and meteorologists last April at RTNDA@NAB.

What did we learn?

For news directors who have to fill more hours of news with the same number of staff, this is an idea that could pay off. The meteorologist could provide expertise not readily available among other reporters and could offer explanatory stories with high audience appeal.

Some meteorologists are acting as station scientists already. Here in Washington, Bob Ryan at WRC-TV often includes information about the environment, area waterways and even astronomical events in his weather reports. All-news WTOP Radio gets regular weather reports from WJLA-TV’s Doug Hill. Last spring, he became WTOP’s reporter on the 17-year cicada phenomenon, even though biology is different from atmospheric science.

For most of the news directors in our group, the concept of a station scientist was an entirely new idea. A few “early adopters” told how their meteorologists now regularly do environmental features and how they had built ratings with weather specials that included lots of science information.

But others had some observations and concerns. First, they felt stations had made a big investment in building up the identity of the meteorologist as a solid, credible, reliable source of weather information.

They were concerned that a new role might confuse the audience and undermine the sense of the meteorologist's expertise. They felt that concern could be lessened if the stories the meteorologists did were closely tied to weather and the environment.

News directors look for viewer (or listener) benefit in everything they put on the air. Viewers and listeners will stay tuned if they believe they are getting valuable, even actionable, information. Certainly, weather fits the definition of a high audience–benefit topic. Science information might be interesting, but the news directors felt it needed to pass the relevance test in order to be worth news time.

Another concern revolved around storytelling skills. Meteorologists are terrific live, being able to talk fluidly and authoritatively for minutes on end about the constantly changing subject of the weather. But storytelling requires a different set of muscles. The news directors felt meteorologists should get producing, writing and technical help to turn out good stories, at least in the beginning. Some were concerned about diverting scarce resources to help a meteorologist do a story that might as easily have been given to a general assignment reporter.

Some meteorologists argued that a station could boost its ratings by becoming known as the science station. Most felt that adding scientific information to their reports was not a stretch, and that the laws of the science of meteorology apply to other sciences. They did feel, however, that the role should not be forced on broadcast meteorologists, who have their own interests and talents.

There was one other special role mentioned that meteorologists are well-positioned to play—the role of communicator during an emergency. The public looks to meteorologists for instruction and direction during weather emergencies. Some meteorologists have played important roles in making sure their stations are prepared for an emergency. Bryan Norcross of WFOR-TV recounted how he had helped make sure his station was prepared to stay on the air when a hurricane hit Miami.

Since 9/11, we are all thinking about a new kind of emergency that could arise in any community. Every station needs to develop plans to cover a terror attack. If the unthinkable occurs, meteorologists will surely be called on to report life-saving information to the public. For example, in the event of a chemical or radiological attack, meteorologists will need to report how wind patterns are affecting the area of contamination. For that very reason, RTNDF's News & Terrorism Workshops, being held in 10 cities around the country over the next year, are including meteorologists among the participants. (See story on page 7.)

The meeting at RTNDA@NAB was not the end but the beginning of a dialogue with AMS. The staff and board members of AMS came away with a better understanding of the questions news directors have about the new certification program and the concept of the station scientist.

Most newsrooms have limited resources for professional development—time off is hard to give and money for travel expenses and program fees is scarce. Those resources must be distributed fairly around the newsroom. The professional development requirements AMS plans to introduce will need to mesh with the resources and needs of most newsrooms.

Newsrooms will be hearing more about the AMS program. Given the important role meteorologists already play, anything that makes the meteorologist even more valuable in the newsroom is worth close consideration.

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