



## **Beyond the Spin: Practical Ideas for Engaging Candidates & Viewers**

### **Introduction and Overview**

This handbook is designed to help local television broadcasters produce coverage of political candidates that engages and informs viewers as it strengthens a station's ties to its community. It focuses in particular on short formats for candidate discourse – segments of one to five minutes that can be embedded within existing news or public affairs programs in the closing weeks of a campaign. Stations can use these segments to push the campaign beyond the spin, sound bites and attack ads that turn so many people off to politics.

Short candidate segments are versatile. They can be combined with background pieces by reporters, with viewer call-ins, or with man-on-the-street interviews. They can be done live or on tape. They can be packaged into an easily promotable ongoing series, in a way that establishes the station as an authoritative source for a better, cleaner, more substantive brand of campaign coverage. Short candidate segments can also have a “second life” on a station's Website, where video clips of candidate segments can be archived for the duration of a campaign, to be accessed on demand by Internet users.

### **Types of Segments**

In order to foster spontaneity and meaningful dialogue, short candidate segments work best if they are aired live (or live-to-tape) and in a format conducive to give and take. Perhaps the best model is the one that has proven so durable on “Nightline” – a skilled anchor leading two (or more) guests through a brief but pointed mini-debate. Ideally, the candidates are pushed beyond their sound bites, and the viewers are presented with an engaging, information-rich exchange that enables them to compare and contrast.

However, it's not always possible to persuade candidates to take part in such a spontaneous exchange. By nature, candidates are risk-averse; many prefer settings in which they are in control of the message.

We believe there is value to such formats as well; voters are well-served when they can see and hear what candidates have to say on a range of issues, in a format more substantive than a bite or an ad. In recent years, hundreds of stations around the country have offered candidates anywhere from 30 seconds to three minutes to look into the camera and make an issue statement. There are many variations to this format. Some stations let the candidates choose the issues; others pose questions that the candidates answer in a recorded statement; others have citizens pose questions. Some stations package the statements of several candidates into a single segment; others broadcast individual statements over several days or weeks. Some record the statements against a plain blue or black backdrop; others opt for

production elements to enhance the visual appeal. Some allow the candidates to use a TelePrompTer; others don't.

Finally, stations can do interviews with the candidates, live or taped. These can focus on campaign issues or they can be profiles of the candidates. We believe that a combination of hard and soft interviews will, over the course of a campaign, give the viewer a rich portrait of the men and women seeking elective office.

### **Candidate Participation**

Whether you air mini-debates, issue statements or interviews (or some combination), you will have to decide whether to invite all the candidates for a particular office, or just the "major" candidates. You'll also have to decide where to draw the line between major and minor candidates. These are questions without any "right" answers. Generally, voters like to have choices and want to hear different voices and ideas. A fresh perspective can be good for politics and may be good for ratings. However, practical considerations may make it impossible to provide time for all of the candidates for an office, especially if the ballot is crowded with fringe candidates. If you decide to restrict the segments to major candidates, you should do so on the basis of clear, objective criteria, such as standing in polls or demonstrable levels of political support. In the end, this is a decision for each individual station to make – and stations can make it free of legal jeopardy. In 1996, the Federal Communications Commission ruled that such short segments are bona fide news events, exempt from the equal opportunity requirements of the Communications Act.

### **Ground Rules**

Establishing clear ground rules for the segments at the start will help to avoid a lot of misunderstandings and confusion with the candidates and their consultants. You'll need to set rules for time limits, topic selection, setting selection, candidate order of appearance, use of TelePrompTer or cue cards, retakes and editing.

### **Framing and Context**

It helps the viewer if you provide a brief introduction or follow-up piece to the segments. For example, an intro piece might describe the responsibilities of the office at stake, or it might offer background on the issues the candidates will be discussing. You can follow the candidate statement with a brief overview of the race, and you can direct viewers to Websites – yours and others – where they can get more detailed information about the candidate or issue.

### **Video Streaming**

The era of political campaign coverage on demand has dawned, as hundreds of local stations in markets with political races in 2004 used their station Websites to post and archive video clips of candidate debates, mini-debates, issue statements, interviews and news segments. Increasingly sophisticated technology now allows Internet users to search archives of campaign clips by candidate, by issue or by event (say, a debate). As more consumers get high-speed Internet access, stations are finding that candidate clips are an ideal application for the new technology. Unlike most news events that grow stale quickly, campaigns unfold over many weeks and generate an inventory of clips that different viewers may want to

access at different stages of the campaign. Moreover, clips of candidate mini-debates, interviews and issue statements will have a longer useful shelf-life on the Web than clips of candidate photo ops or of horserace coverage.

## **Mini-Debates**

*What is a mini-debate?*

An exchange – lasting anywhere from two to ten minutes – between candidates or issue advocates aired during a local news broadcast.

*How can they be structured?*

- ❖ Candidates can be present in the studio for a debate that is aired live during the news.
- ❖ The participating candidates can appear live via satellite from different locations.
- ❖ The candidates can appear together at a studio earlier in the day and tape the debate live, no second takes or editing.
- ❖ The candidates can be linked by satellite earlier in the day and tape the debate live for airing later that night.
- ❖ The mini-debate can be introduced by an anchor and moderated either by the anchor or a political reporter.

*How is time allocated to the candidates?*

This can be done formally or informally. If you choose to go the informal route, you would encourage the candidates to engage in a free-flowing conversation with the anchor and one another, unconstrained by specific time limits. Out of a sense of journalistic fairness, the anchor would of course try to ensure that the candidates have equal opportunities to answer all questions.

If the candidates want to be assured of equal time, you can enter into an agreement with them prior to the debates. A sample format for a five minute mini-debate might look like this:

Moderator opening (15 seconds)  
Moderator's first question (15 seconds)  
Candidate A response (1 minute)  
Candidate B rebuttal (1 minute)  
Moderator's second question (10 seconds)  
Candidate B response (1 minute)  
Candidate A rebuttal (1 minute)  
Moderator closing (20 seconds)

The candidates will need to agree to be available at a specific time and at a specific place and agree that the debate will be conducted live with no opportunity for retakes (unless there are technical problems).

*What should the mini-debates be about?*

In addition to using your own news judgment to choose topics, consider using polls to find out what's on the minds of the voters. Or do a series of focus groups or town meetings. You

might also want to kick off the segments with a taped question from a town meeting, or from a man-on-the-street interview. If you're doing a mini-debate series, you could offer each candidate the chance to pick one issue. Generally, it's best to let the candidates know in advance which subjects you plan to address. It increases the chances they will participate.

#### *How It's Done: KTRV Hosts "Coffee with the Candidates"*

KTRV, a Fox affiliate in Boise, Idaho, earned a Walter Cronkite Award for Excellence in Television Political Journalism for its innovative "Coffee with the Candidates," a series of 26, five-minute mini-debates taped at a local coffee shop and aired during nightly newscasts.

The heavily promoted segments featured candidates discussing the issues at the Flying M Coffeehouse in downtown Boise. Candidates in every contested race on every ballot in 2000 within the station's viewing area were invited to participate; 62 of 66 did.

Along with KTRV reporters, members of the public — including customers at the coffee shop, which stayed open for business during the tapings — were able to question the candidates.

### **Issue Statements**

#### *What are candidate issue statements?*

Pre-recorded segments in which candidates speak directly to the camera.

#### *How can they be structured?*

- ❖ They can be of any length, but typically run from 30 seconds to 3 minutes.
- ❖ A candidate can record them in a studio with or without a TelePrompTer.
- ❖ A candidate can select an out-of-studio setting (the home or workplace, for example).

#### *What are the ground rules?*

There are several types of candidate statements. Some stations agree to film a candidate making a statement on a subject of his or her choice, in a setting of his or her choice. This flexibility can generate originality and personality – and better visuals than you get from a studio setting. The topic and setting that the candidate chooses reveal a lot. Some choose a setting at their home and may talk about their family life. Others choose their office or the state house and talk about their policy positions. Either way, the viewer is getting a unique opportunity to learn about the candidates.

You may prefer to record a series of candidate statements dealing with specific issues. If so, you'll need to pick the issues, decide how much time each candidate should get to describe his or her position on each issue, decide which candidates to include and work with the candidates to arrange for the studio time.

It works well to air issue statements back to back. The responses of each candidate to a question about health care, for example, could be strung together in a "point-counterpoint"

or “face-off” format. Ideally, all the candidate responses to a particular question should be aired during the same local news broadcast but you can also air a single candidate response each night on consecutive nights.

If you air the spots back to back, you should rotate the order in which the candidates appear. You may also want to randomly determine when each issue will be profiled. For example, do you run the health care or the auto insurance spots first, or vice-versa? The campaigns may have different preferences, so the best solution is to determine the order by random draw.

One way to provide journalistic context for these candidate issue statements is to do a set-up piece. Such pieces could include reporting about how the lives of the people in your viewing area are affected by the issues the candidates are discussing.

#### *Who has editorial control?*

This is an issue that will surely come up as the candidates record their statements. Are there any limitations on what they are allowed to say? Can they mention their opponent by name? Do you allow candidates to do retakes if they flub a line? Where do you draw the line between being a journalist and being the candidate’s handler? These are questions that each broadcaster will have to consider on a case by case basis. The important thing is to clearly establish the ground rules prior to the taping. It will prevent a lot of confusion and save you from a lot of hassles when the spots are recorded. As a general proposition, we suggest that the rules be limited to “time, place and manner” format restrictions, and that there be no rules governing the content of the statements. Ultimately, the best judges of whether the content is appropriate are the viewers and voters.

#### *How It’s Done: WRAL Offers Candidates a Forum to Present Ideas*

In several recent elections, WRAL-TV in Raleigh, North Carolina has invited candidates to tape two-minute issue statements that are aired during the station’s news programming, and are distributed to other television and radio stations also owned by Capitol Broadcasting.

“[W]e got a good bit of feedback from our Website from people saying, ‘Keep doing what you’re doing, because we like it, it’s important, it’s refreshing,’” noted WRAL News Director John Harris, following the May 2000 gubernatorial primary. In that race, candidates taped messages on the lottery, the Smart Start program for preschool children and a third subject of their choice. The only rule was that they could not attack their opponents.

## **Interviews**

Interviews are a staple of broadcast news. They come in all shapes, sizes and formats. During campaigns, journalists can use interviews not only to offer viewers the chance to hear the candidates make their cases, but also to provide the context in which to understand the issues at hand.

Here are two examples of ways to package issue- and candidate-centered interviews. In the first example, journalists compared the candidates during a single piece; in the second, journalists compared the candidates over the course of time through an ongoing series.

### *Comparing Candidates*

ABC News aired a regular segment during “World News Tonight” that featured candidates in the 2000 election answering questions from reporters and viewers. In the fall of 1999, the network ran a segment that featured the two leading presidential contenders’ views on religion during its regular feature, “A Closer Look.”

At the heart of the five-minute segment were candidates Vice President Al Gore and Texas Governor George W. Bush speaking for themselves in interviews each gave to religion editor Peggy Wehmeyer.

To offer context on the issue, ABC used a very brief introduction from anchor Peter Jennings on the role of religion in past campaigns, and a voiceover by Wehmeyer with a slate on some statistics about Americans’ religious beliefs. In addition, the segment included clips from the candidates’ speeches and other footage. To illustrate the public impact of Bush’s attitude toward religion, ABC showed inmates praying at a Texas prison managed by a religious group.

At the end of the interview piece, Jennings offered a quick summary of how some of the other presidential candidates were bringing religion into their campaigns.

### *The Interview Series: Seattle, 2000*

During the May 2000 gubernatorial primary in Washington State, the NBC affiliate in Seattle made an effort to present the candidates in a more casual — and more revealing — setting.

KING-TV launched an innovative “Bringing the Campaign Home” series, in which each gubernatorial candidate was invited to have dinner with an “average” Seattle family.

With just one photographer and no reporters present at the dinner, the family was allowed to guide the conversation to the topics they cared about most. On a later day, the reporter held a follow-up interview with the candidate to ask additional questions and clarify the candidate’s issue positions. The mix of hard and soft news elements made for lively, innovative segments.

### *How It’s Done: Tips on Candidate Interviews*

Karen Brown is news director at WMUR-TV in Manchester, New Hampshire, which is watched by voters in the nation’s first presidential primary. She offers these tips on how to handle candidate interviews:

#### **How To Move Beyond the Message Du Jour**

Campaigns plan events and speeches around specific themes and issues. The candidate will want to use your interview to further the message du jour. That is the motivation for agreeing to the interview. How do you get past the sound bites, slogans

and sweeping statements? If you summarize the message du jour in asking the question, you can move the discussion ahead by asking the candidate to provide specifics. Be politely persistent. If you don't get the specifics you are seeking, then point that out and ask the question again.

### How To Be Tough But Fair

The lines are often blurred as to what is considered "fair game" in a campaign. If in doubt, ask yourself whether the question is truly relevant to the voter. You will win respect from the candidates, the campaign strategists and your audience if you ask questions that are tough, but fair.

### Getting the Candidates

When a broadcaster asks a candidate to participate in a debate or to record an issue statement, the campaign staff considers the opportunity in relation to one question: Will it help or hurt the candidate? Many candidates, especially those who are way ahead in the polls, are reluctant to take any risks. If their opponent is under-financed, they might figure that they are better off if the opponent doesn't get the exposure that comes in a debate. Some candidates (or their staffs) may be wary of their own skills as television communicators. In short, there are many reasons that might cause a candidate to turn down an offer to participate in these types of candidate-centered formats.

#### *How do we get candidates to participate?*

Put simply, it has to be in the candidate's political interest to participate. How can this be done? First, create a public expectation that candidates will participate in these types of segments. You can approach the major candidates early in the campaign with a package of ideas for innovative candidate-centered coverage. Work out the details early and then promote the segments to the public. If people expect to see these spots it could become politically costly for a candidate to back out. Second, involve the community in the negotiations with the candidates and development of the package of coverage. A citizen presence, in the form of local civic and community groups, gives the agreement the feeling of a compact between the citizens, the candidates and the media. The more public this agreement is, the harder it will be for candidates to not follow through on a commitment. Third, in negotiating with the candidates and campaigns, emphasize how these segments are opportunities for the candidates to get their message out to thousands of voters free of charge, and opportunities for viewers to hear campaign messages free of spin. Finally, if you cannot reach agreements with both (or all) the major candidates, you can still air the segments with only the participating candidates. This may create an incentive for the reluctant candidate to participate.

#### *Working with Candidates and Campaigns*

Focus on how participation, or non-participation, can help or hurt the candidate. If a campaign manager is concerned about his or her candidate's performance on television, emphasize that a brief 2- or 3-minute mini-debate format is less risky than a longer format debate.

Present the format offers as a package on an all-or-nothing basis to the major statewide candidates and political parties. Political parties usually run some type of coordinated campaign for their candidates. While a popular incumbent governor may not need the free exposure of a mini-debate, the party's other candidates, such as lieutenant governor and attorney general, may welcome the exposure. So the mini-debate series may feature the governor in just two segments and feature candidates for other offices in the rest.

### *How It's Done: Scripps Stations "Nab" the Candidates*

When candidates are reluctant to participate in mini-debates and interviews, creative journalists can still find ways to produce compelling, candidate-centered news segments. In 2000, E.W. Scripps stations pledged to produce at least five minutes per night of candidate coverage in the weeks leading up to the primary and general elections. Bob Morford, news director of Scripps-owned KNXV-TV in Phoenix, spoke about some of his station's efforts during the 2000 presidential race:

"Here are some of the things we did to try to keep it interesting. We ambushed [Pat] Buchanan coming off the plane. Just threw a camera in his face live and said 'talk.' And you know what, Pat Buchanan has no problem talking...

We put a mike on [Alan] Keyes and walked with him all day, and edited five minutes of really interesting stuff, where people were asking him questions that were totally out of left field...

We got [George W.] Bush in a hallway at the Ritz Carleton — where else? — and literally just interviewed him in the hallway, up against the wall. And he did well, did very well. And it went five minutes.

... [O]ne that was difficult was [Al] Gore. In the end, all nine Scripps stations asked, practically demanded — but that's rude — certainly insistently pursued him. And in the end, one of our stations in Detroit nabbed him. Literally, nabbed him, and then we fed it to all the [Scripps owned] stations."

### **Legal Issues**

A provision of the Communications Act commonly called the "equal opportunities rule" is the main legal hurdle broadcasters need to overcome when implementing new formats for candidate discourse. The rule provides that if a broadcaster or cablecaster permits any legally qualified candidate for any public office to use its facilities, it must permit all legally qualified candidates for the same office the same opportunities for use.

Congress, fearing that a strict application of the very broad equal opportunities rule would inhibit news coverage of the political arena, enacted four news exemptions to the equal opportunities requirement:

- ❖ bona fide newscast;
- ❖ bona fide news interview;

- ❖ bona fide news documentary (if the appearance of the candidate is incidental to the presentation of the subject or subjects covered by the news documentary); and
- ❖ on-the-spot coverage of bona fide news events (including but not limited to political conventions and activities incidental thereto).

#### *The Exceptions*

A bona fide newscast includes programs such as the local news, The Today Show or 60 Minutes. A bona fide news interview includes regularly scheduled shows such as Meet the Press or other programs that make interviews a part of their format. A bona fide news documentary that falls under this exception would not include a documentary about the candidate himself. It would instead refer to, for example, a documentary about former president George Bush that mentioned his son, George W. Bush, who is a candidate for public office in 2004.

The bona fide news event exception is likely to be the one most often relied upon by broadcasters to justify exemption from the equal opportunities rule. A number of FCC decisions have broadened the scope of what can be considered a news event, often leaving the decision to the discretion of the broadcasters. The decision to carry a particular event must be the result of good faith news judgment and not based on partisan purposes. In addition, FCC rulings have made it clear that the “on the spot” component of the exemption can be satisfied if the event is “reasonably recent,” clearing the way for videotaped spots to be aired within a few days of taping.

The following are specific examples of formats that fall under the news event exception:

#### *Debates*

The FCC determined that traditional debates fall within the news event exception, thereby allowing broadcasters to sponsor debates and freeing them from the restriction of having to invite all candidates. Broadcasters must comply with the following restrictions when sponsoring debates: (1) The decision to cover a debate must be based on a good faith judgment that it is newsworthy and should not be based on a desire to promote or disadvantage a particular candidate; (2) Debates must not be edited and must be broadcast in their entirety; (3) Debates should be broadcast live or reasonably soon after they take place; and (4) At least two candidates must appear in a debate.

The debate format can be varied, so broadcasters should be encouraged to explore town hall, talk show, or other formats that might interest viewers.

#### *Mini-Debates (Including “Nightline”-style events)*

Like traditional debates, mini-debates are exempt from the equal opportunities rule. As long as at least two candidates debate, the debate is newsworthy and not broadcast for partisan reasons, a broadcaster is free to invite only the major party candidates to participate in a live or recently recorded mini-debate.

#### *Video-Taped Statements*

Taped position statements by candidates are covered by the news event exception. Statements can be run either back to back or during comparable time periods on different

nights. Statements can range in length from as short as 30 seconds to as long as a broadcaster is willing to make them.

Because all of these segments fall well within the bona fide news event exemption, the station has considerable latitude in deciding which candidates to invite. But this decision is often difficult, especially in races with multi-candidate fields. Take a campaign in which there are four candidates for an office – two major party candidates, one third party candidate who has run before and build up a solid if narrow support base, and one minor candidate who has met the legal requirements to get onto the ballot but has no discernable constituency. How many of these candidates should be included in a debate? Offered time to make issue statements? There is no “right” answer. Stations may be justified in inviting just two of the candidates, or just three, or all four. Or stations may choose to apportion segments according to the candidates’ standing in polls – a certain number of segments go to major party candidates, a smaller number to minor candidates. (CNN and PBS took this approach in the segments they offered to major and minor party presidential candidates in 1996). What is important is for a station to establish a clear criterion upon which to base a decision – standing in the polls; the party’s or candidate’s track record in previous elections; identifiable pockets of support, etc. And then, having set this criterion, sticking to it and applying it evenly to all candidates.

In addition to the FCC restrictions, broadcasters may be concerned that a proposed format will violate the Federal Election Commission’s (FEC) prohibition against corporate contributions to candidates. Federal law prohibits corporations, including broadcast stations, from making contributions or expenditures on behalf of federal candidates. (Your state laws may likewise prohibit corporate contributions to state candidates.) The law specifies that news stories, commentary, and editorials distributed through newspapers, magazines and broadcast stations are not contributions or expenditures on behalf of candidates, so long as the candidate does not own the newspaper, magazine or broadcast station. In addition, the FEC specifically carved out an exception that permits broadcasters to provide airtime for candidates’ taped responses to a set of journalists’ questions.

Often the term “equal time” is used when referring to the rights of political candidates with regard to broadcast stations, although the correct phrase is “equal opportunities.” The distinction is important to the extent that equal time is not necessarily the same as equal opportunities. For example, if Candidate Smith is given five minutes after the evening newscast to make a statement, and his opponent, Candidate Jones is given five minutes at 2:00 a.m., both candidates will have received equal time. They will not have had equal opportunities, however, as the audience for Candidate Smith’s statement will be much larger than that for Candidate Jones’s statement.

### **Additional Resources**

Other resources that may be useful as you plan your campaign coverage for 2006 include:

#### **Best Practices in Journalism**

975 Observatory Drive  
Madison, WI 53706  
phone 608.265.8071  
fax 608.265.5039  
[www.bpjtv.org](http://www.bpjtv.org)  
Offers examples of innovative campaign coverage

#### **Center for Responsive Politics**

1101 14th Street, NW  
Suite 1030  
Washington, DC 20005-5635  
phone 202.857.0044  
fax 202.857.7809  
[www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org)  
Offers campaign finance data

#### **DemocracyNet** (a project of the League of Women Voters)

1730 M Street NW, Suite 1000  
Washington, DC 20036  
phone 202.429.1965  
fax 202.429.0854  
[www.dnet.org](http://www.dnet.org)  
[www.lwv.org](http://www.lwv.org)  
DNet.org offers information about candidate issue positions; LWV.org offers information about sponsoring and organizing candidate debates

#### **Investigative Reporters and Editors**

138 Neff Annex  
Missouri School of Journalism  
Columbia, MO 65211  
phone (main) 573.882.2042  
phone (database library) 573.884.7711  
fax 573.882-5431  
[www.ire.org](http://www.ire.org)  
Offers database, tips and story ideas for coverage of money in politics

#### **Poynter Institute**

801 Third Street S.  
St. Petersburg, FL 33701  
phone 1.888.769.6837  
fax 727.821.0583  
[www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org)  
Offers resources on election coverage

**Project Vote Smart**

129 NW 14th Street, Suite 204

Corvallis, OR 93330

phone (main) 541.754.2746

phone (Reporter's Resource Center) 541.737.4000

fax 541.754.2747

[www.vote-smart.org](http://www.vote-smart.org)

Offers research assistance on candidate background and referrals to other sources

**Radio-Television News Directors Foundation**

1000 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 615

Washington, DC 20036

phone (members) 800.807.8632

phone (non-members) 202.659.6510

fax 202.223.4007

[www.rtnda.org](http://www.rtnda.org).

Offers resources on public journalism, campaign finance coverage and video streaming

**Reliable Resources**

University of Southern California

3800 S. Figueroa Street, Suite 106

Los Angeles, CA 90037

phone: 213.743.4969

fax: 213.743.4985

[www.reliableresources.org](http://www.reliableresources.org)

Offers tips on producing engaging campaign news, and a database of key sources for political stories