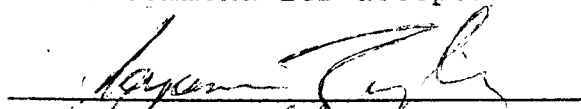
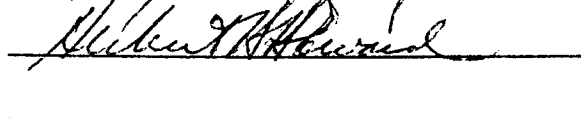


To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Charles M. Denney entitled "Measuring the Effectiveness of Television News Consultants." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science Degree in Communications.


Dr. Sam Swan, Major Prof.

We have read this thesis,
and recommend its acceptance.

Accepted for the Council:


Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of the Graduate School

MEASURING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TELEVISION
NEWS CONSULTANTS

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Science Degree
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Charles M. Denney

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ABSTRACT

This research project seeks to determine news director attitudes toward television news consultants. It asks the news directors if consultation firms are truly effective in improving a station's overall news product and ratings. The study also calls to interview representatives of the three major consulting firms -- Frank Magid and Associates, Audience Research and Development and McHugh and Hoffman. This thesis project asks the consultants about their own methods of helping a station improve, and further shares with the representatives the information gathered from the news directors.

The findings are based on a confidential mail questionnaire sent to three hundred news directors in markets all over the country. The survey included questions about the effectiveness of the consultant's advice, how often it was implemented, and the personal relationship between the news director and consultant. The consultants, in turn, were asked about some of their methods for helping a client, and what are some of the changes we are seeing now in the consulting business.

The results indicate the majority of the news directors surveyed like what their consultants do for them, and want to keep the same consultant on board. Findings show most stations surveyed said ratings had increased since the consultant started working with them, and news directors gave partial credit to the consultation firms. The consultants

said their role is changing in today's newsroom, with an emphasis now on research.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Television news is undergoing tremendous changes in the 1990's. In television's pre-cable days, many affiliates could all but print money. It was not uncommon for a local television station in a top fifty market to operate at forty and fifty percent profit margins. Even a third place station had a one-in-three or perhaps one-in-four chance that viewers would tune in, and an opportunity to earn a sizable profit. Local television news turned profitable in the 1970's when advertisers saw that commercials in the framework of a newscast added credibility to their products, and the audience watching news tended to be more affluent and knowledgeable than the audience for regular entertainment programming. (Cummings, 1987). From the late 1960's to the early 1980's, local television revenues grew at annual rates averaging between fifteen to twenty percent. Television news was now the signature, the "image" of a local station in a market. (Powers, 1978).

News remains the centerpiece of a local station, and in some instances can generate anywhere from one-fourth to one-half of a station's revenue. However, the sluggish economy of the past few years has seen advertising revenues drop for many businesses, which in turn, affects the broadcasting industry, where the advertising dollar is its lifeblood. From the early to mid 1980's the annual increase in advertising slowed to

about two percent a year or less, and has actually dropped since then for some weaker stations. (Cummings, 1987). Many business owners may want to advertise, and need to advertise, but simply cannot afford it at today's rates.

A loss of viewership is another factor affecting the cash flow at many local television stations around the country. Now a fickle audience -- armed with a remote control -- has dozens of cable channels to watch, as well as movie videotapes and pay-per-view channels. Over fifty cable services and numerous "Superstations" have come into existence since the early 1980's, and the number of independent stations has grown significantly. (Cummings, 1987). The result has been a smaller slice of the advertising pie for local network affiliates. Local stations now struggle to maintain their audiences with this increased competition, and this slipping viewership is felt hard in the newsroom. Now a news director must not only worry about viewers watching a newscast from another local station, but must also consider the audience may not watch news at all. The news director's only real course of action is to improve his product as a means of staying respectable in the ratings.

Local affiliate general managers and news directors often turn to outside television news consultants as a way to improve, to boost ratings and perhaps find on-air talent. The purpose of this thesis will be to look at the role of the television news consultant in newsrooms across the country, in

huge, medium and even very small markets.

Organization of the Chapters

Chapter I of this thesis will be an introduction of the study, and will define the role of a news consultant, provide a statement of the problem, research questions to be answered and a historical background of the three major consulting firms. The opening chapter will outline a framework from which the paper and research will evolve.

Chapter II will review published literature on the consulting field and other related articles. It will include a brief synopsis of articles published in trade journals, as well as excerpts from books on the television news industry. Examples of reviewed literature include an article about a station in Little Rock, Arkansas, and how it uses a consultant as an attempt to gain in the ratings. There will be quotes from people in the industry on what they think of consultants, and a review of the turbulent career of anchorwoman Christine Craft, who took her station to court because she felt she was fired for being "too old and too unattractive."

Chapter III will look at the methodology of the study, a defense of its implementation, and possible limitations of the research. The chapter will detail the methods used in forming a questionnaire for news directors, and the interview questions for representatives of three major consulting firms.

Chapter IV will include the results of the study from both news directors and consultants. It will detail the

answers given by news directors to a confidential mail survey given in the summer of 1992. There will be answers to thirty-eight questions, as well as written comments added to the questionnaire. The research will include the number of respondents to the entire survey, the number of respondents to each question, and the numbers and percentages for each possible response. The chapter will also include the results of three personal, telephone interviews with television news consultants. The results will include direct quotes from these individuals.

Chapter V will conclude the paper and the research project. It will present the conclusions of the study, and discuss the findings and potential implications of the information collected. The chapter will also offer recommendations for future study and research.

Statement of the Problem/Research Questions

This research project is an attempt to examine attitudes news directors around the country might have regarding broadcast consultants. A review of related literature finds few studies have been done on either the effectiveness of consultants or what news directors think of them. This information is vital in this changing age of television, where increasingly shrinking budgets now dictate that money spent on consultants must be spent wisely. The project seeks to determine just how effective these consultants are in terms of increasing ratings and improving the news product for

stations. The study will seek information from news directors in television markets from the very largest to some of the very smallest.

Likewise this thesis also calls for information from news consultants working in today's competitive market. It seeks information on what the consultants think about their business in modern times, and how they see the business changing. The research also calls for the consultants to respond to the some of the answers provided by the news director questionnaire.

The thesis seeks answers for the following research questions:

(1). What are some of the existing attitudes news directors have of television news consultants?

(2). Do news directors respect (and often put into action) advice offered by a hired consultant?

(3). Are television news consultants truly helpful in increasing a station's ratings and revenues?

(4). Do news directors see the consulting business as helpful and worthwhile? Is it worth the money their station invests, and would they like to see more or less spent on consulting?

The research project further seeks to answer the following research questions from representatives of the three major consulting firms:

(1). For consultants, how important is it to have a good personal relationship with a news director?

(2). Is the consultation business suffering because of the economic slowdown?

(3). What services can a consulting firm offer a potential client?

Defining the Role of a "Consultant"

First, just exactly what is a consultant? In logical terms, we might say it is one who "consults," an expert who offers advice. This would be an accurate portrayal of the television news consultant. Virtually all of these men and women working in today's consulting business have experience in television news, many as reporters, producers, anchors and quite often, news directors. The television news consultant offers advice to news directors and general managers of their "clients," local affiliates paying for their services. The advice might be on ways to improve ratings or the presentation of the news. The advice could be on the number of stories in a newscast, or what type of stories the audience wants, and needs, to see. Or the advice could be as simple as what color tie the anchor should wear.

Consultants also are concerned with the content of a news program, and to a lesser extent, the "look" of a newscast, i.e. the set and lighting. Consulting firms may also serve as talent scouts for their clients, usually maintaining a supply of audition tapes from anchors and reporters from across the country. In fact, there are a handful of companies that would fall into the general category of "consultants" that only

provide talent banks, and offer no consulting advice or research. If, for example, a news director is looking for an anchor, the firm will send tapes of several possible candidates. If the news director hires the recommended talent, the company then receives a percentage of that person's first year salary as compensation.

Consultants also work extensively in market research, providing clients with numbers, facts and figures that might give them an edge over their competition in attracting viewers. Research is perhaps now the cornerstone of the consultation industry. These findings typically deal with audience patterns and behavior, i.e., who is watching and perhaps *why* are they watching? News made the transition from being a neglected step-child at most stations, to being a spoiled step-child in recent years -- with consultants along for the ride. Consulting firms have been around virtually since the beginning of television news, but really came into prominence during the period in the 1970's when stations saw their local news broadcasts as a potential money-maker. (Powers, 1978). All of a sudden, local stations starting pumping big dollars into their news departments, hiring extra people, building flashy new sets, buying helicopters and expensive electronic news gathering equipment such as videotape cameras and heavily promoting its news programming. The big spending of this era also included, for many stations around the country, hiring outside consultants, who would then

recommend further changes and that more money be spent on news. (Powers, 1978).

So who are these people, these consultants? When the term consultant is used, most people in the television news industry think of the three major firms -- Frank Magid and Associates of Marion, Iowa; Audience, Research and Development of Dallas, Texas; and McHugh and Hoffman of Alexandria, Virginia. Two other firms have grown considerably in recent years -- Primo Newservices of New York and Reymer and Associates of Southfield, Michigan. There are a number of smaller firms around the country ranging from one to three people. These smaller firms will typically work for clients in their region of the country, often providing local audience research, and sometimes consulting on cosmetic matters, i.e., makeup, hair style and clothes. In this study we will focus primarily on the work of the three major firms, with interviews to follow from representatives of these companies.

McHugh and Hoffman

In 1992, McHugh and Hoffman celebrates thirty years in the business, and prides itself on being the country's first true broadcast consulting firm. A man by the name of Phillip McHugh started the firm in 1962 after years in television programming and advertising. McHugh first worked in television in the programming department of CBS in the early 1950's, but always maintained an interest in moving into

advertising and research. He eventually took over for a Detroit advertising firm called Campbell Ewald soon after his days at the network. McHugh was in charge of essentially a durable goods advertising business, and within a short amount of time, increased the companies profits tenfold.

Was Phillip McHugh a genius? A visionary? In some ways, the answer is yes. McHugh was a very forward thinker who was years ahead of his time. He recognized very early on in his broadcast career the importance of research, of knowing one's audience. McHugh was dissatisfied with the quality and types of research available to both the networks and local affiliates and sought to personally change the field. In the late 1950's, while still with Campbell Ewald, he went to the University of Chicago and commissioned a study on television viewing habits and attitudes. It was one of the first research projects ever done about the viewer's *feelings* about television -- a look at who watches and why, as opposed to just how many people are watching?

McHugh saw that local stations could benefit from thorough research and realized an opportunity to consult and service these local stations. In 1962, he formed the company with Pete Hoffman, a fellow advertising associate at Campbell Ewald. In time, they would add a third partner, Jack Bowen, who remains chairman of McHugh and Hoffman today. In the late 1960's, the company moved from Detroit to the Washington D.C. area because it was easier to serve a large number of clients

up and down the east coast. In some ways the move would backfire for the company. Lee Stohl, a top consultant, did not want to make the move to Washington, so he left the firm for Frank Magid and Associates, and is credited with building its consulting business over the years, in some instances, stealing clients from McHugh and Hoffman.

The McHugh and Hoffman consultants recognized the importance of local television news and began studying it very early on. The consultants saw that if a station was a market leader in news, it could lead in many other areas as well. The company grew rapidly in the 1970's, adding more consultants with a strong background in news, primarily former news directors. In the 1970's, consultants became more prominent, with Magid growing steadily along with McHugh and Hoffman. At this time many stations realized if a competitor was using one of the two firms, it also should hire a consultant to keep pace. Audience Research and Development (ARD) has since passed McHugh and Hoffman in terms of the number of clients served, but the Washington-based company remains one of the top consulting firms in the country. It currently employs four consultants and serves about thirty stations. The company also does a good bit of corporate consulting, both here in the United States and in Europe. (de Suze, 1992).

Audience Research and Development

ARD also was started by an expert in another area of

broadcasting other than news, but now primarily serves its clients as a news consultant. Willis Duff worked in the entertainment division of CBS television, and as a radio station general manager before entering the consulting business. Duff saw the importance of research to all broadcasters, and was not happy with the data available to him as a radio general manager. He decided to enter the consulting business for himself with an emphasis on television, and apparently, it worked for him. Willis Duff formed ARD in 1972 in San Francisco. As television news continued to grow, his research firm prospered as well. He prided himself on the thoroughness and practicality of his research.

Meantime, in 1978 a man by the name of Bill Taylor formed a consulting firm called Media Associates in Dallas. Taylor was more of an expert in the field of broadcast journalism, and was more able to offer advice on improving the news product of a station. Media Associates became embroiled in the Christine Craft controversy -- to be discussed later in this thesis in the literature review.

Duff and Taylor saw they could help each other. Duff was the authority on research, while Taylor knew the nuts and bolts of the news business. In 1980, the two companies merged, moving the San Francisco operation to Dallas. In 1981, the name was changed to ARD. Today the company employs about forty people, including twelve in research and eight

consultants. The company serves about one hundred stations, including WBIR-TV in Knoxville and WSMV-TV in Nashville. (Connell, 1992).

Frank Magid and Associates

Perhaps the leader in the broadcasting consulting field is Frank Magid and Associates of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Frank Magid started his company in 1957 with a handful of clients in the Cedar Rapids business community, none of whom were broadcasters. Magid was a psychology and sociology teacher at several area colleges, including the University of Iowa, with a strong background in behavioral research. He held a firm belief that the study of human behavior could be a source of valuable insight to merchants. His very first clients were a group of Cedar Rapids bankers. He talked to them about banking, and in particular, people who use banks, their characteristics, expectations and level of satisfaction. The bankers were impressed with Magid's forward thinking and his consulting business was born.

WMT-TV (now KGAN-TV) of Cedar Rapids was Magid's first broadcasting customer. Magid studied the audience watching the local news broadcast by WMT, and provided station management with information about how viewers responded to the programming. Executives then made changes to make the newscast more appealing to the audience based on Magid's recommendations.

Magid moved wholeheartedly into the field of consultation

in the early 1970's, as television news saw its greatest period of growth. The first consulting client was WWL-TV in New Orleans, with the company doing research and consultation for news executives. The Magid consultants watched videotapes of the WWL newscast and critiqued the programming based on marketing research and trends. WWL soon became the strong, dominant station in the market.

Frank Magid and Associates celebrates its 35th year in business this fall. It now serves 115 of the 214 television markets in the country, and reaches roughly 95 percent of the viewing audience nationwide. Other clients include Cap Cities/ABC, Paramount Pictures, King Features and Time-Warner Incorporated. From a one-man company in 1957, Magid now employs more than 300 people, with twenty-five consultants and about ten people working strictly in research. Businesses in twelve foreign countries are also Magid clients, and the company also has a London office. (Braun, 1992, Magid Literature, 1992).

Significance of the Study

The information generated by this research project will be of value to both news directors and the major consulting firms. Both news directors and consultants have expressed an interest in the findings of this thesis. The information also provides insight into the changing field of both TV news and broadcast consulting, and perhaps builds a portion of the

framework needed for the future, where change is inevitable.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on the topic of consultants and their role in redefining television news is surprisingly hard to come by. A number of articles and book reviews seem to focus more on actual advice from consultants, as opposed to their real impact. Other publications tend to only scratch the surface of this topic as well, usually mentioning consultants as a sidebar to another subject. Related articles can work for this literature review -- primarily as we learn the background of each consulting firm -- but it would seem few researchers are seeking answers to the question of the effectiveness of today's so-called experts in television news, i.e., the nationally prominent and respected consulting firms.

Definitions from Slatter

Bill Slatter, a former executive producer for WMAQ-TV in Chicago and talent scout for NBC, offers further definitions of the various categories of consultants and specialists in television news. In a recent issue of RTNDA Communicator, Slatter says, "Consultants advise news directors on content, style, sets, packaging, personnel, lighting -- virtually anything the station does. Some, like Magid and ARD, have research departments of their own, while others like McHugh and Hoffman, farm out research." On the topic of "headhunting," or talent scouting, Slatter says, "McHugh and Hoffman also farms out talent coaches, while Magid and ARD

provide that as part of their service. Their fees vary depending on market sizes. One hears figures of \$30,000 and up for full-service consultancy." (Slatter, 1990).

Criticisms by Powers

Media consulting firms saw their greatest period of growth in the 1970's, when a number of television stations around the country realized they could make money with their local newscasts. General Managers of local affiliates began hiring consultants to help them develop formats and news personalities who would attract an audience. The literature from this early era, in particular a book by Ron Powers in 1977 called The Newscasters, was critical of this movement. Powers was especially concerned about the changing face of television news, the addition of "Happy talk" chatter on the set and logos like "Action News" -- all the direct advice of consultants.

Powers wrote that consultants took journalism out of television news by giving the audience a heavy dose of what it wants, i.e., sleaze, fluff, and video of "action" events like fires and wrecks that are not really all that important, but make for good pictures. Instead, he believed the audience should view a combination of what it wants and what news executives believe it should have, i.e., stories about social issues, local, state and federal government and in-depth, investigative news. Powers writes, "The biggest heist of the 70's never made it on the five o'clock news. The biggest

heist of the 70's was the five o'clock news." Powers says television news became dictated by the sales departments of many TV stations in the 1970's, and he blames consultants for shaping a local news broadcast that fits this mold. (Powers, 1977).

"Who Uses Consultants and Why?"

It would seem news directors have a growing respect of consultants, according to a recent article by University of Missouri Journalism Professor Karen Frankola in Communicator, a publication from the Radio & Television News Directors Association, entitled "Who Uses Consultants and Why?" Frankola writes, "It's been twenty years since consultants began selling their advice to TV newsrooms based on their research of the audience, and these days you won't find much of a debate within TV stations over the value of consulting. It's almost impossible to talk to a news director who says he can do his job without research. And horror stories of consultants running the newsroom seem to be tales out of the dark ages."

When news directors are asked what they find most valuable about consultants, one word is repeated over and over again -- perspective. Helen Pasakarnis of WKBD-TV in Detroit is quoted as saying, "The consultant gives you a good perspective because they're all over the country watching the trends. John McCall of KETK-TV in Jacksonville, Texas adds, ". . . they give you a view of the forest instead of the

trees. When you're involved in the day-to-day operation, you tend to make excuses -- camera problems, a beginning reporter. Unless you're careful, unless you have an outside source, you really have a one-sided view. They're an expeditor of good ideas."

Diana Lamm, news director at WOI-TV in Ames, Iowa was thinking of adding a consultant at the time this article was published. The station was using one firm for its research and another as a talent coach, but Lamm wanted the two services to come from one company. Frankola quotes Lamm as saying, "Consultants usually know what's going to be hot before it hits most markets. We want to get one so we're not blindsided, so it's not 'why didn't we think of that?' Mike Ferring of KOVR-TV in Sacramento was quoted in the article, and said he likes the fact that consultants will bring him ideas, usable ideas. "The main thing I look to consultants for is overall direction. Are we doing what we ought to be doing?"

There are many times when consultants will offer advice a news director feels will not benefit the station. So what does a news director do? Lamm of WOI-TV is quoted as asking, "The scary part of it is, what if you don't apply what they advise, if something is against your gut instinct? Of course, you can say no. But what do you do, say thanks for the advice? Why did you spend \$10,000 on advice you're not going to use?" McCall of KETK-TV adds, "They're not Nazis, I don't

have to accept what they say."

The article also includes interviews with consultants, past and present, many of whom are former news directors themselves. Jerry Geisler, now of Frank G. Magid Associates, worked as a news director throughout the 1970's and 1980's. He again uses that buzzword "perspective" in defining the role of today's television news consultant. "We have access to tapes, new ideas. We're a very valuable source of industry information." Like Geisler, Tim Rudell spent many years as a news director before joining Reymer and Gersin Associates. He says a consultant serves "as a therapist and sounding board. News directors need someone outside their own head. The consultant is a safe and competent source to listen to a hairbrained scheme without it going on the air."

Paul Paoticelli, news director of KPRC-TV in Houston, has spent about two decades in TV news, three as a consultant. In the Frankola article, he says part of what a consultant is paid for is "scapegoat accountability." In other words, the General Manager and News Director like to have someone to blame if things don't go well or an idea is a bust. Willis Duff of Audience Research and Development agrees, and is quoted as saying "I don't know a news director who hasn't blamed something they did on a consultant." Many consultants stress their advice is based on audience research, and as Duff says, "We (N.D. and consultant) look at the same research together."

The news directors in the article seemed to agree they are the boss, not the consultant. The outside consultant is there to advise, not dictate, policy and newsroom philosophy. Tim Rudell says the relationship between news directors and consultants seems to be changing, not because news directors have become smarter, but because they have grown more sophisticated in terms of how to use a consultant. "Now a news director can certainly understand research," he states. Paul Paolicelli says a news director gets out of the consulting relationship what he puts into it. "The more articulate you can be in terms of what you want them to do, the better the result is going to be. If you just say, 'What do you think,' you're giving them the green light to nose around. It's like a doctor/patient relationship. If you give them a problem, they can help you solve it."

Frankola concludes the article with a peek to the future and the words of Charles Warner, now a fellow instructor at the University of Missouri and sometime consultant to TV and radio stations in management and sales. Frankola quotes Warner as saying, "News directors finally came to the realization that news is the business of getting ratings, not some high falutin' journalism business. They finally realized you have to have research if you want to get in touch with customers. It's not a question of consultants taking over -- the reality is that the TV audience is declining and competition is heating up for viewers." (Frankola, 1990).

KARK-TV Uses a Consultant

Perhaps one of the best examples of a station effectively using a consultant to improve its news product comes in a recent newspaper article by author Carrie Rengers, reprinted in the Arkansas Business Review. KARK-TV, channel 4 in Little Rock, an NBC affiliate in the 55th market, hired Frank N. Magid & Associates in a consulting capacity, "to help redefine its role in central Arkansas television." At about the same time, Channel 4 hired Peters Productions of San Diego as an "image consultant," mostly to work on how the station is perceived by the community, as Magid attempted to improve the news product. KARK executives knew there are no quick fixes in television, but had high hopes the consultants would have a positive influence.

Magid consultant Mark Antonitis critiques a random Channel 4 newscast once a week, a service usually performed once a month for most Magid clients. He is quoted in the article as saying, "Channel 4 is mostly headed in the right direction. We provide to them outside perspective." KARK also started a promotional campaign, calling itself the "24 Hour News Channel" for central Arkansas. Antonitis said the "24 Hour" idea was smart, but wanted reporters to be seen more on screen, and for the journalists to tell their stories through ordinary people, not officials.

The consultant was particularly interested in improving the product and ratings of a 5 p.m. newscast on KARK-TV.

Antonitis says in the article the broadcast is heavy on national stories, which is acceptable for the time slot, but needs more local angles to this global news. He is quoted as saying, news people think "that I'm going to make them all smile and tell them how to fix their hair." While Antonitis admits cosmetics are important in television news, he says changes in substance far outweigh changes in style. The influence of the Magid consultant was visible in a Gulf War segment about two hundred soldiers returning home to Arkansas. Not only did Channel 4 cover the homecoming, it also did several stories about individual families, in effect, personalizing the event. He commends one of the stories for its Little Rock focus, but says there is too much "wall paper video," that is, pictures that do not relate to the script. Good television news tends to be a marriage of words and pictures. When the two do not blend, the viewer can become confused and may change channels.

In the meantime, the Peters Productions staff went to work on improving KARK's community image. "A TV station of the future is going to be totally integrated with the community," said Ed Peters, president of the consulting firm. "Channel 4 has done and is doing quite a bit in the community, but needs to project it properly under one umbrella." The "umbrella" turned out to be a new station slogan, created by Peters, but widely used by Channel 4's across the country. Peters created a "4 the People" slogan, and completed a type

of check list of ten "human characteristics" the station could use in its decision-making policies. The "4 the People" campaign grew out of a historical evaluation of the station and the state, interviews with four hundred families, focus groups of business and community leaders, and evaluations of the two competing affiliates in the Little Rock market. Other Channel 4's nationwide frequently use the slogan "4 the Family," or use the "4" in place of "for" to play off some other catchy phrase.

KARK-TV showed modest gains in ratings shortly after the consultants began their work. In the November 1990 ratings, Channel 4 posted a 36 percent increase in viewers from the previous rating period, while competitor KATV, Channel 7 dropped by ten percent. While it would seem Channel 4 stole a few viewers from Channel 7, it should be pointed out that the previous ratings period would have come in the summer, when traditionally television viewing is down considerably, and the number of viewers would be expected to come up. Still, KARK management was obviously pleased with the gains made by the station.

But the February 1991 ratings were sobering. As war broke out in the Persian Gulf, it was Channel 7, not Channel 4, that saw its ratings dramatically improve. KATV's ratings for its 6 p.m. newscast captured 32 percent of the viewing audience, making it a healthy number one in the ratings battle. Channel 4's ratings edged up slightly, but still

lagged far behind Channel 7. "This book is really an aberration, not the norm," said KARK-TV News Director Bob Steele, who believed the war threw the ratings race out of kilter. However, Steele had to be discouraged that when a major event -- the war with Iraq -- was unfolding, viewers turned to Channel 7, not his broadcast, to get their information.

Yet Steele seemed pleased with the advice of the Magid consultant. He was quoted as saying, previously, Channel 4 "was doing a lot of gut calls and not basing it on good sound research. We were doing a lot of what was suggested -- we just weren't showcasing it very well." He adds, "We're not going to see it (a dramatic increase in viewers) in one book, but we will be number one. There's no stopping us now. We know it and we feel like they (Channel 7) know it. It's inevitable." (Rengers, 1991).

Criticisms in Newstalk II

A recent book from author Shirley Biagi, Newstalk II, includes interviews with a number of veteran broadcast journalists, both at the local and network level. Several of the journalists featured are quite critical of consultants and the influence they have in shaping television news today. Byron Harris, a senior investigative reporter for WFAA-TV in Dallas, expresses concerns over what he feels is the manipulation of television news and the pursuit only of dollars, not journalistic excellence. "Journalism is

certainly threatened," says Harris. "It's an endangered species. There are many, many threats. It's not just hairspray anymore."

Harris believes consultants are primarily interested in ratings and dollars, rather than improving the news. In the book, he says, "The consultant doesn't work for the news director. The consultant works for the front office -- the general manager. The consultant is there because the front office of our particular station -- it's not that way at every station -- wants to make a lot of money."

In particular, Harris doubts the research and statistics offered by consultants to news and station management. "Most of the information they give is statistically invalid because it doesn't meet the methodological requirements of any statistically sound research," he claims. Harris adds, "They do focus groups or get ten people together to talk about things. Well, that's just bull. It has no statistical validity." Harris worries that there are 320 meters in homes in the Dallas market to measure the viewing habits of nearly four million people. He believes news management and consultants put too much stock in the opinions of only a handful of viewers.

However, Harris admits he is not the man in charge at WFAA, and sometimes must go along with what consultants tell management. He is quoted as saying, "The consultants do even more spurious statistical evaluations to assay the opinions of

people on things like anchor talent and reporters. I'm sure studies have been done about me, what people think about me, how I look and things like that. Sure, I worry. I'm expendable. I could be gone." Harris adds, "I do a lot more stand-ups than I used to because the consultants tell us the audience likes to see that. They try to tell people how to write, but having never done it themselves, they don't know how to do it. I've been to their seminars." (Biagi, 1987).

In the same book author Shirley Biagi, reporter Susan Wornick of WCVB-TV in Boston is also highly critical of the role consultants play in local television news. Wornick says some of the advice suggested to her station by representatives of Magid and Associates is trivial and silly -- minor changes that have little to do with reporting the news. "Management never really lets you know the effect a consultant is having. But you always know when a consultant has been in town because things just happen. All of a sudden for no apparent reason you're told, 'You're not wearing red anymore,'" Wornick says in Newstalk II. Like her colleague Byron Harris in Dallas, Wornick says consultants frequently suggest reporters appear more often in their stories. "Periodically we'll be told to do more stand-ups or stand-up bridges, or be told to walk in our stand-ups, be more animated, do more interviews, fewer interviews -- those kinds of things."

Wornick also has a problem with consultants who want to use the same techniques and tricks of the trade in several

different markets. She is quoted as saying, "I believe that every market in the country is different and what works in one place does not necessarily work in another. One of the big complaints we have with consultants is that they'll do something in one market that will be a smash, and then order the same thing for us. And you fall flat on your face." Wornick says, many times, consultants offer advice without really knowing a city or its people. (Biagi, 1987).

Criticisms by Steven Zousner

Author Steven Zousner likewise is critical of consultants' advice that what works in one market, might work in another. In his book "TV News Off Camera: An Insider's Guide to Newswriting and Newspeople," Zousner is particularly concerned about so-called "T-and-A" stories, a traditional quick-fix for TV news organizations seeking to boost ratings. He says consultants often see only the bottom line, increasing the number of viewers, as a main objective for their clients, sometimes discarding good taste and good journalism aside. "Sex stories have always been a part of the news," he writes, "and sometimes they are legitimate, but what is repugnant is the cloak of serious journalism under which a news department tries to justify its peeping tom-ism." Zousner worries modern day TV news directors are too caught up in practicing this type of sensationalism, all for the sake of improving numbers and generating revenues. But with the short term benefits, long term harm can be the result, he warns. "Prostituting the

news, like prostituting your body, leaves an invisible stain that is not easily washed away."

Zousner also advises that reporters and anchors should keep their distance from such "T-and-A" stories. He relates a tale of a young, attractive female reporter who did a story about New York's Playboy Club, dressed in a scanty bunny costume. She concluded the "report" with her own eye-popping "T-and-A," with the station's logo pinned to her bunny tail and the camera zooming in for the closing shot, which lasted a good fifteen seconds. If the young woman was looking to draw attention to herself, she most certainly did, but Zousner says this intelligent, talented reporter was never taken seriously again in the newsroom after the fifteen seconds where she went too far. (Zousner, 1987).

Christine Craft's War with Consultants

A discussion of the history of consultants and their potential impact on television news would not be complete without mention of the turbulent career of anchorwoman Christine Craft. Craft began her career in the early 1970's doing weather for a station in Salinas, California, and eventually for KPIX-TV in San Francisco. From weather she moved to sports, and shot straight to the network in New York, landing a job with CBS and its short-lived "Women in Sports." The CBS staff bleached her hair and applied heavy lipstick and eye makeup before she went on the air. When the show died,

Craft felt she had been manipulated and vowed never to fall prey to such practices again. She returned to California and got out of the news business for a short while. In 1979, she was offered a job with KEYT-TV in Santa Barbara, the 116th market, where she was a general assignment reporter and anchor for the 11 p.m. news at a salary of \$18,000 a year.

In 1980, KMBC-TV in Kansas City, the 27th market, offered Craft \$35,000 to anchor the evening news. The station had just hired Media Associates of Dallas (today known as Audience Research and Development) as a consulting firm to find a female anchor who could bring "warmth" and comfort to its newscast. Media Associates went all over the country taping local talent on the air. They liked Craft because she looked "laid back with California energy," and based on the consultants' recommendations, KMBC offered Craft the anchoring job. (Craft, 1986).

But Craft was wary of consultants since her bad experience at the network and did not like makeup artists or talent coaches. She stressed to KMBC management that she wanted to be hired for her journalistic abilities, and not because her appearance would fit into some consultants' categorization. Craft began her anchoring duties soon afterwards, but station ratings did not go up. Consultants returned to "help" her with her makeup and wardrobe "to improve her image." (Sanders, 1988). Nine months after she started work at KMBC, she was called into News Director Ridge

Shannon's office and told she would be removed from her anchoring duties and reassigned as a reporter. Craft said Shannon told her she was "too old, too unattractive, and not deferential enough to men." (Craft, 1986). Shannon would later deny making such a statement.

Craft decided to take her case to court, claiming "sexual discrimination in an advisory capacity," the violation of the Equal Pay Act (her male co-anchor was making about \$15,000 more per year), and fraud in that KMBC (and its parent company Metromedia) said they hired her for her journalistic abilities, but fired her for her appearance. A key issue in the trial was the research done by Media Associates, including the use of focus groups and surveys to judge Craft's popularity among Kansas City viewers. (Sanders, 1988). Focus groups are small groups of people who experience something together and then are questioned by a trained leader about their immediate reactions. In television news, a focus group will usually watch videotapes of an anchor or a particular newscast, then report their feelings and impressions to a group leader, with these remarks usually recorded and made available to the company sponsoring the research. (Fletcher, 1981).

It is reported that in the focus groups organized to study Craft's anchoring style, the leader began the discussion by asking participants if the anchorwoman was a "mutt." He is also reported to have said "let's spend thirty seconds

destroying Christine Craft," and ". . . if we all chip in we can buy her a ticket back to California." The focus group leader later said his remarks were meant to "loosen up" the group so they wouldn't be afraid to offer honest criticism.

Attorneys defending Craft later argued the method of testing violated Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 because of "sexual stereotypes encouraged in the testing setup." They said the focus group leader encouraged a negative reaction to Craft's appearance and anchoring style. According to the authors of "Waiting for PrimeTime," the focus group did seem to demand more from Craft in terms of her appearance than they did from her male co-anchor. Craft claimed sexual discrimination because the reasons for her demotion were based on poor ratings in categories of appearance and demeanor. The news director is reported to have said " . . . the audience perceived (Craft's) dress, appearance, makeup and presentation as stumbling blocks."

The first jury found in favor of Craft on the allegations of sex discrimination and fraud, and in favor of Metromedia on the equal pay charge. The jury recommended a \$500,000 settlement for Craft, but Judge Joseph Stevens threw out the jury's verdict and ruled that KMBC had not been guilty of sex discrimination in insisting Craft improve her appearance, because the same edict was often demanded of male anchors. Judge Stevens also rejected Craft's allegation that News Director Shannon said she was too old, too unattractive and

not deferential enough to men, ruling that Shannon had never made the comment. Stevens did order a new trial on the fraud charges that alleged Craft had been hired under false pretenses. The new trial convened with Stevens presiding again. The second jury also found in favor of Craft and recommended a settlement of \$325,000 for Craft. Metromedia appealed the case again, but Stevens declined to hear it a third time.

However, Craft would never see a penny of the huge settlement. Metromedia took the case to the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals where three judges read the arguments and briefs from both sides, and overturned the lower court's ruling. Court briefs stated the judges "didn't feel there was enough evidence for a 'reasonable' jury to conclude there had been fraud." The jurors, in the judges' opinion, had been "unreasonable" in their decision. (Sanders, 1988). Craft was incensed by the ruling by the Eighth Circuit Court, particularly in light of the fact that two lower courts had both ruled in her favor. She said the judges' opinion " . . . read like a Metromedia brief. Its thirty-one pages bore only a passing resemblance to my experience at Metromedia. I read testimony that was attributed to me that was not mine, but rather the defendant's." (Craft, 1986).

Craft would fight another day, but lose again. She took her case to the final step, the United States Supreme Court. However, on March 3, 1986, the highest court in the land

refused to hear the case because of insufficient evidence on the sex discrimination allegations. Ironically, on the same day she was turned down by the Supreme Court, Craft was honored by the California Senate for her "outstanding achievement in journalism and her perseverance and courage" in advancing the cause of women in television news. (Craft, 1986). Today Christine Craft is a television news director for a station in Santa Barbara, California.

The Craft case highlights many of the issues affecting television news today, including the role of consultants. It is undeniable that television is an entertainment medium and that appearance does affect one's perception by the viewer. Many people working today in television news accept this -- but should it be the *only* criterion by which an anchor is judged? And finally, the question must be asked, was Craft manipulated by the consulting firm? Certainly she was an employee of the station, and it could be argued KMBC was only protecting its investment and looking to improve its ratings. However, if the events of the focus group research are accurate and the leader did indeed encourage a negative reaction to Craft, then the consulting firm overstepped its bounds.

The literature on the role of consultants in television news today seems to offer mixed opinions. The news director of KARK-TV in Little Rock likes what consultants are doing for his operation, but news director Craft in Santa Barbara

probably has a different view of their purpose. It would seem the article from Karen Frankola at the University of Missouri points to the fact that consultants in the 90's are perhaps more qualified and more respected than in years past, yet the same piece of literature points out that news directors are still somewhat wary that a consultant is a buddy to management, not to the news department. As television news continues to undergo massive changes as we head into the next century, certainly the role of consulting firms will also change, and hopefully scholarly journals will continue to document this movement.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This research project attempts to measure news directors attitudes regarding television news consultants. It also seeks information from consultants on whether they feel they are able to truly help a station in terms of improved ratings and its overall news product. This project seeks *qualitative* information, sometimes referred to as the *why* of broadcast research. The study of the *whys* of behavior is often defined as qualitative research, and also is sometimes labeled *psychographics*. Here researchers seek more than the actual numbers of people watching or listening (referred to as *quantitative* research) and instead want to know more about attitudes, feelings and beliefs.

Two primary qualitative research methods will be used -- a confidential mail questionnaire for the news directors and a personal telephone interview with a representative from each of the three major consulting firms. The mail questionnaire is a relatively easy method of obtaining information, requiring only that a survey be addressed and mailed to a potential respondent. A mail survey can consist of a wide variety of questions and answers and may sample a good cross section of respondents. The mail questionnaire also offers confidentiality to the respondent, and perhaps allows the researcher more candid and honest information. The telephone interview also offers a number of advantages in research,

namely that the information gathered comes directly from a reliable source. And like the mail questionnaire, a telephone interview is relatively easy and quick.

The questionnaire was designed to assess the following:

- 1). News director attitudes about television news consultants,
- 2). What consultants do for their clients, in terms of time spent working with station employees and the advice offered, and
- 3). To measure the effectiveness of the consultant's work.

The news director survey consisted of 38 mostly "checkmark" questions. Respondents were given a choice of three-to-five possible answers, and then were able to mark a "check" or "X" by the response they felt best answered the question. This type of questionnaire was selected to make responding quick and easy and to perhaps elevate the overall response rate. Television news directors are usually very busy people, and keeping the questionnaire short and to the point was perhaps the best method to guarantee a greater level of involvement. Most respondents should have been able to complete the "checkmark" questions in five to ten minutes.

Two of the 38 questions required short "fill-in-the-blank" responses. Both were questions where offering a possible response for a "checkmark" answer would have been difficult. One question asked "What were your May 1992 numbers (ratings and share points) for your early and late evening news?" The second "fill-in-the-blank" question followed a "checkmark" questions on whether a station used a

consultant. The question asked the respondent to write the name of the consulting firm in the space provided.

The first eight questions were about the individual news directors background and information about his or her station. Here respondents answered questions regarding how long they had been in television news, how long they had been with their current station, and how long they had been a news director. Questions here also included market and staff size, number of newscasts per day and ratings information.

Questions following number nine asked about consultants, particularly if the station used them, would continue to use the same consultant and how much money the station spent on consultation fees. Questions here also included how often the news director meets or hears from the consultant, and what is the relationship between the news director and the consultant? The survey concludes with questions regarding how effective the news director feels the consultant has been, i.e., have ratings or revenues increased?

The questions were based on the thesis writer's past experience with consultants and research into the field, as well as a review session with thesis advisor Dr. Sam Swan. The survey questions were also pre-tested and reviewed by members of the WBIR-TV news management team, including news director Jim Swinehart -- a former Magid consultant -- news manager Margie Nichols and executive producer Vicky Purifoy. Each offered advice on questions that might be added or

deleted, and how some questions might be re-worded to obtain the best possible information.

Space was also provided at the end of the survey for news directors to offer written comments regarding consultants, the consulting business and their feelings about the survey itself. Respondents were encouraged to make written remarks as they too would be a critical aspect of the research project. Respondents were offered the open-ended question "If you have additional comments or thoughts about consultants, please add them in the space below?" This allowed the news directors to express more freely their attitudes, without the constrictions of the multiple choice answers.

Three hundred questionnaires were mailed around the middle of July 1992, mostly to markets one-to-one hundred. A few questionnaires were sent to very small markets, but the survey was largely contained to large or medium markets because these stations usually have a larger news budget and are perhaps more likely to pay for, and use a consultant. However, not all three affiliates in markets one-to-one hundred were selected, with some markets receiving one or two surveys. Some of the largest markets, on the other hand, may have received more than three surveys. For example, New York, Los Angeles and Chicago have several independent stations with competitive news departments. These cities received four or five questionnaires, whereas Bowling Green, Kentucky and Charlottesville, Virginia received only one survey.

Each survey included a short letter explaining what the questionnaire was about, encouraging each news director to take a moment to participate and that each response was completely confidential. Each envelope and letter was addressed only to the "News Director" at each station to further ensure the confidentiality of each response. A self-addressed stamped envelope was also included in the packet, again to make responding easier for the news directors and to possibly boost the response rate for the project.

After approximately one month -- with ninety-eight questionnaires already returned -- a follow-up letter was sent to roughly one hundred-fifty stations, mostly in markets that had not returned a questionnaire. The process of determining who *had not* responded was based on the postmarks on the ninety-eight returned envelopes. The follow-up letters thanked the news directors who had responded, and politely asked those who had not participated to take a moment to complete the survey.

There are perhaps as few as seventy-five to eighty full-time news consultants in the entire country. The three major firms would comprise roughly half this number, with the rest being small, one-to-three person consulting companies. Perhaps the best means of gathering information from such a small, select group is through personal communication. Here the personal interview sought new information from the perspective of the consultant, as well as a "sharing" of the

information gathered from the news directors, and then recording the consultants' response. The three major firms handle a significant portion of all the consulting done nationwide, thus it was determined that an interview with a representative from each of these companies might best reflect attitudes of the consulting profession.

The questions for the consultants differed from the news director survey in that the responses were open-ended, with the intent to gather direct quotes as opposed to a "checkmark" response from three-to-five answers offered. The questioning also differed in that the interview was a personal telephone conversation as opposed to a confidential questionnaire. The consultants knew they were being interviewed and how their responses were to be used. Three consultants were selected for personal interviews -- Jacques de Suze of McHugh and Hoffman, Jim Willi of ARD and John Quarderer of Frank Magid and Associates. Jacques de Suze of McHugh and Hoffman provided the background information for his firm already mentioned in Chapter One. Personal interviews with Sandra Connell of ARD and Eric Braun of Magid provided the background information on their respective companies.

There were a total of 25 questions to ask the consultants. However, not all the questions were asked due to time limitations and because the consultants might answer two or three similar questions with one answer. The interview began with questions about the consultants' own background,

their experience in television news and how they became a consultant. Each consultant was asked how many stations they served and how often they visited these stations. The consultants talked about their own news philosophies and recommendations they frequently made for their clients. There were also questions about their personal relationships with both news directors and general managers of the stations they served. Consultants were asked about how effective they thought they could be in making solid improvements for a station, both in terms of ratings and the overall news department. Finally, a portion of the research gathered from the news directors was shared with the consultants.

The interview subjects then offered their analysis of the data gathered from the research project. A key component to the project was to validate its findings through the perspective of consultants with the three major firms. This "sharing of information" sought to gather opinions on whether the true experts in this field believed the generalalized news director attitudes to be on target. Each consultant was asked about different aspects of the survey, i.e., particularly in an area where they expressed an interest in the findings.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Three hundred mail questionnaires were sent to news directors all across the country in July of 1992. By the first of September, 111 surveys were returned for a response rate of 37 percent. However, as is sometimes the problem with a survey, not all the questionnaires were filled out completely. The first eight questions of the survey were largely about the individual news director's background. But when the respondent reached the questions inquiring about the use of consultants, if a news director answered they did not use a consultant, frequently they did not respond to the remaining thirty questions. Twenty-five respondents of the 111 did not fill the survey out, for the most part, beyond question number eight. A handful of this 25 did make another response or two, particularly regarding the final question which asked about possible career changes for respondents. In terms of completely answered questionnaires, 86 of the 300 complied for a response rate of 28.6 percent. (See Figures 4.1 and 4.2).

Who Responded?

The typical news director who responded to this questionnaire tended to have more than five years of service as a news leader, less than five years with his or her current station, and at least ten years of experience in television

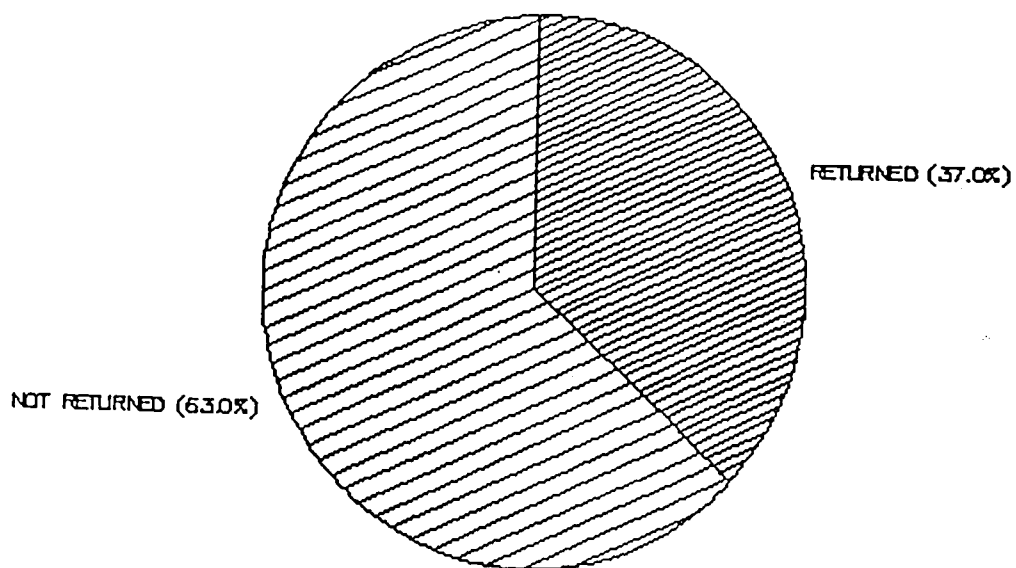


Figure 4.1: Returning Questionnaire

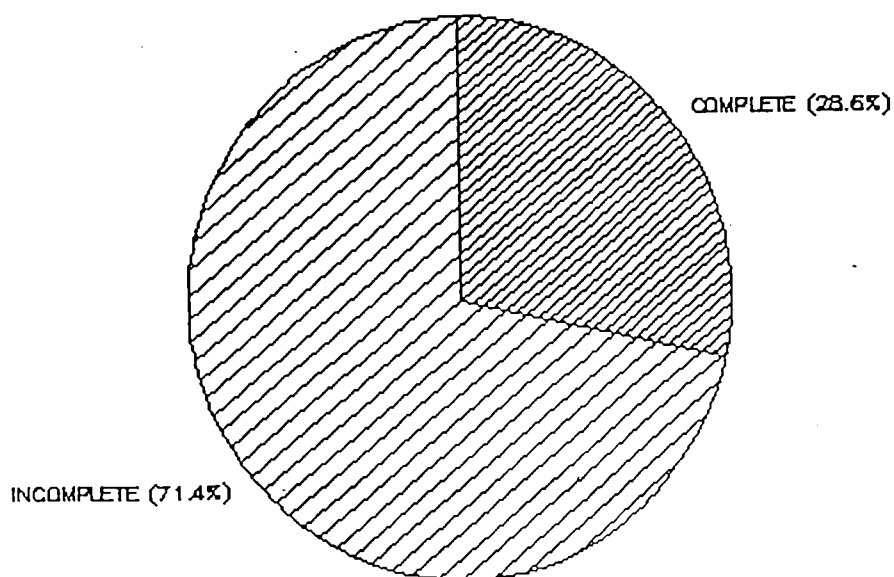


Figure 4.2: Questionnaire Filled Out

news. Respondents were scattered across various market sizes, and tended to manage a staff of at least twenty people. A high percentage of news directors responded who said they oversee first place newscasts in terms of overall ratings.

Question 1 asked "How long have you been a news director?" A total of 110 respondents answered one of the four possible answers. Twenty-two of 110 (20 percent) said they had less than two years of experience as a news director. A slightly higher number, 24 (21.8 percent) answered they had served as a news director longer than two years but less than five years. The highest percentage came next, with 37 respondents (33.6 percent) answering they had been a news director longer than five years but less than ten years. Twenty-seven respondents (24.5 percent) answered they had been a news director longer than ten years. These responses were evenly distributed, with no one group dominant in terms of the number of years of experience as a news director. The typical respondent to this questionnaire was an experienced news leader, with 58 percent having at least five years as the head of a newsroom.

While most respondents had at least five years of experience as a news director, most indicated they had not been with their current station for a long period of time. Question 2 asked about the length of service with a current station, again, with four possible responses. A total of 111 responses were given to the second question and two others

that followed. (One respondent did not give an answer to the first question). Of the 111 responses, 35 news directors (31.5 percent) said they had been with their current stations less than two years. Thirty respondents (27 percent) had been with their stations more than two years but less than five years. Twenty-five participants (22.5 percent) were with their current stations between five-to-ten years, while 21 (18.9 percent) had been with their stations longer than ten years. The question asked only how many years with a current station, not how many years as *news director* with a current station.

Television news has long held the reputation of being an industry with a great deal of turnover, with on-air talent and other specialized employees jumping from market to market. With today's economy and many stations cutting back in their news departments, this stereotype has largely become a myth. It is not uncommon for anchors and reporters to spend many years in the same market with the same station. However, the role of news director may still be a position where frequent turnover is the rule rather than the exception. A common analogy might be that of the manager of a last place baseball team. If the team stays in last place, the manager is blamed for the poor showing and fired. If the manager helps the team improve, he is suddenly a hot commodity, and others may offer him a job. So it goes with news directors. They frequently are either blamed and hated by management, or management

worries another station may come along and offer a higher salary and more perks to get them to leave. The findings of Question 2 might indicate these trends are still very much a part of television news. Sixty-five of the respondents (58.5 percent) answered they had been with their stations less than five years. While several of these news directors may have been with their current stations only a short amount of time, the majority of them did have a number of years in television news. Question 3 inquired about the respondents' years of experience in television news in any capacity. Four possible answers were available, and once again, 111 news directors responded. Only three (2 percent) said they had less than five years of experience, with all coming from markets smaller than one hundred. Ten news directors (9 percent) answered they had more than five years experience, but less than ten. The largest number of responses came next with 58 news directors (52.2 percent) saying they had at least ten years of experience in television news, but less than twenty years. Forty news directors (36 percent) answered they had served more than twenty years in television news. These responses would seem predictable. A news director usually has an extensive background in television news, particularly in a medium or large market, and has often has served as a reporter, producer or other administrator before moving to the top position in a newsroom. It is rare to find a news director under the age of forty in a medium or large market,

and with more than half the respondents to the survey answering they had more than ten years of experience but less than twenty, it would seem logical that many of these news directors would fall into this age group.

A goal of the survey was to gather responses from news directors in a wide variety of markets, large, medium and small, and this was accomplished. A total of 111 news directors answered Question 5 "What is your market size?" Of the 111, 50 were in markets one-through-50, 51 in markets 50-through-100, and ten in markets over 100. There were further breakdowns in the first fifty markets. Ten news directors (9 percent) were in a top ten market. Fifteen (13.5 percent) were in markets ten-through-25. Twenty-five were in markets 25-through-50. A majority of news directors fell into the next category, with 51 (45.9 percent) answering they were in markets 50-through-100. Ten news directors (9 percent) were in the markets listed as 100 or above, with several of these not completing the entire questionnaire because they did not use consultants.

Many of the news directors in markets 100 and above responded to the first possible answer on Question 6, which asked "How many people are on your staff?" A total of 110 news directors answered this question, with ten (9 percent) saying they managed a staff of less than twenty people. Sixty-three news directors (57.2 percent) answered the next possible response, saying their staff was larger than twenty

people but less than fifty. Thirty-seven news directors (33.6 percent) followed by saying they managed staffs of 50 people or more. This latter group almost always came from markets 50 or larger, but there were exceptions.

Question 6 asked "How many newscasts do you do per day? Raw numbers were not tallied for this question largely because several answers were applicable. Choices included early evening, late evening, morning, noon, "cut-ins" and cable broadcasts. News directors checked all the different time frames where their stations did news. A total of 109 respondents answered this question, with only eight checking all six possible responses. Mainly this question served to distinguish network affiliates from independent and smaller market stations. On three occasions only "late evening" was checked on a questionnaire, which would likely indicate an independent station news director was responding. Independents doing news frequently do not compete with network affiliates in the same market in the same time period, particularly at six o'clock. Also, in many cases, smaller market stations are less likely to do as many newscasts as larger markets.

Question 7 asked the news director where they stood in the ratings battle with other stations in their market. A total of 106 news directors responded, checking one of six possible answers. Overwhelmingly news directors of first place stations responded to the survey. Fifty-five

respondents (51.8 percent) said their station was first in the ratings. The next largest group came in the next category, with 25 news directors (23.5) saying they were a strong second in the ratings. Fifteen respondents (14.1 percent) said they were a distant second to another station in the market. Five news directors (4.7 percent) said they were a strong third, with four (3.7 percent) saying they were a distant third. Two news directors (1.8 percent) admitted they fell in the category "other," which might again indicate that an independent station was responding. Frequent ratings surveys show independent stations do not do well in news ratings in many markets. (See Figure 4.3). Question 8 asked the news directors to write the actual numbers they registered in the May 1992 ratings period. On most occasions respondents complied, with a handful of news directors saying the information was "confidential."

Questions 9 through 11 inquired about consultant use by a news director and served as a cut-off point for some respondents who did not complete the questionnaire. Question 9 asked "Does your station use a major consultant?" In parentheses the firms of Magid, ARD and McHugh and Hoffman were listed, implying these companies were considered what was meant by a "major" consultant. A total of 104 news directors responded to question nine where a simple "yes" or "no" was the possible answer. Fifty-six news directors (53.8 percent) said they did use a "major" consultant, while 48 respondents

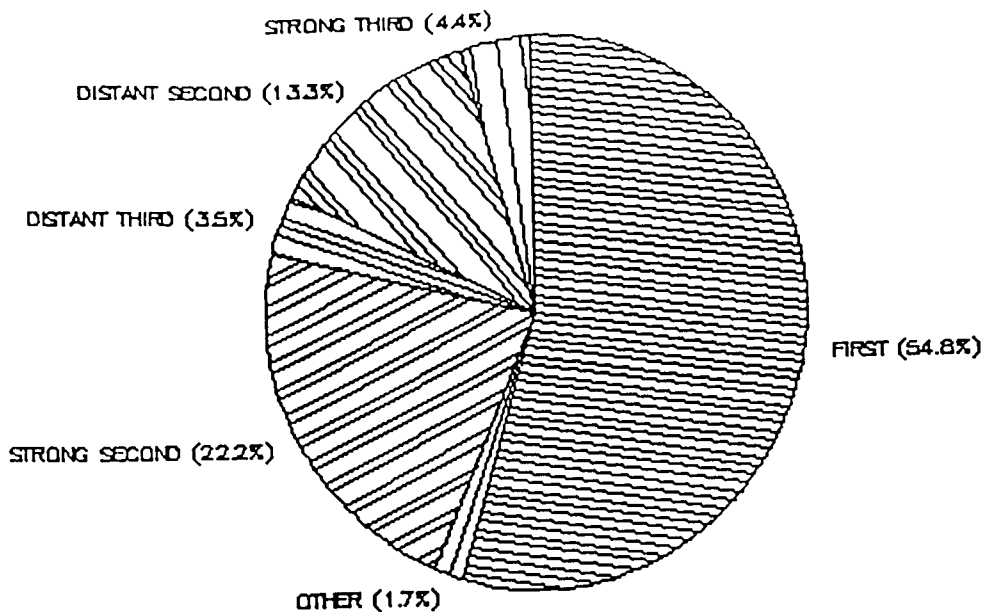


Figure 4.3: Where do you stand in Ratings?

(46.2 percent) said they did not use one of these firms. Question 10 asked if the news director used a second consulting company in an attempt to improve ratings and overall news product. Here 108 news directors responded, with only 18 (16.7 percent) saying "yes," with 90 (83.3 percent) saying they did not use a second consultant.

In retrospect, the findings of this question may be somewhat skewed because several news directors who did not use a consultant at all, as evidenced by their response to Question 9, certainly would not use a second consultant. Of the 18 news directors who did say they used a second consultant, in almost every instance the returned survey was

postmarked from a top fifty market. Secondary consultants also tended to be local agencies in that market, and frequently were used only in one or two capacities such as advice on clothing or local research. Question 11 asked the news directors to write the names of the consulting firm or firms they used. Even with the promise of confidentiality, many respondents were reluctant to name their consultant, particularly if negative remarks or comments came later in the survey. Overall, the news directors who did name their consulting firms tended to give more favorable responses than those who were not as favorable.

The next four questions dealt with the economics of consultant use, particularly how much stations were spending and was that amount increasing or decreasing. Question 12 asked if the respondents' station was cutting back on consultation services because of the economy or other budget shortfalls. As stated previously in this thesis, local affiliates are seeing their slice of the advertising pie shrink in many markets, and newsrooms frequently are feeling this pinch. When cuts have to be made in the news department, many times outside expenses such as consultant advice and research are among the first items checked off the budget. Ninety-six news directors answered Question 12, where three possible responses were available. Only 13 news directors (13.5 percent) said their stations had cut back on consultant use "a great deal." Twenty-one news directors (21.8 percent)

answered they had cut back "a little." An overwhelming majority, 62 news directors (64.5 percent) said they had been forced to make no cut backs at all in the last year. Perhaps this would indicate the economy is slowly starting to turn around for television stations, but it might also show that many stations do not spend much money on consultants in the first place. (See Figure 4.4).

Question 13 asked directly "How much money did your station spend on consultants in 1991?" A total of only 83 news directors responded, with several writing this information was confidential. Twenty news directors (24 percent) said their stations spent less than \$5,000 on consultation fees and research. Some of the answers here did come from news directors who said they did not use a consultant at all, and the actual dollar figure their station spent was zero. Only four news directors (4.8 percent) said they spent more than \$5,000 but less than \$10,000. Six respondents (7.2 percent) spent more than \$10,000 but less than \$20,000. Then as the possible answers moved to higher numbers, the corresponding number of positive answers also increased. Twenty-four news directors (28.9 percent) said they spent more than \$20,000 but less than \$30,000. The largest majority, 29 news directors (34.9 percent) said they spent more than \$30,000 on consultants last year. The findings would seem to indicate respondents to this survey either spent very little money on consultants, or spent a good

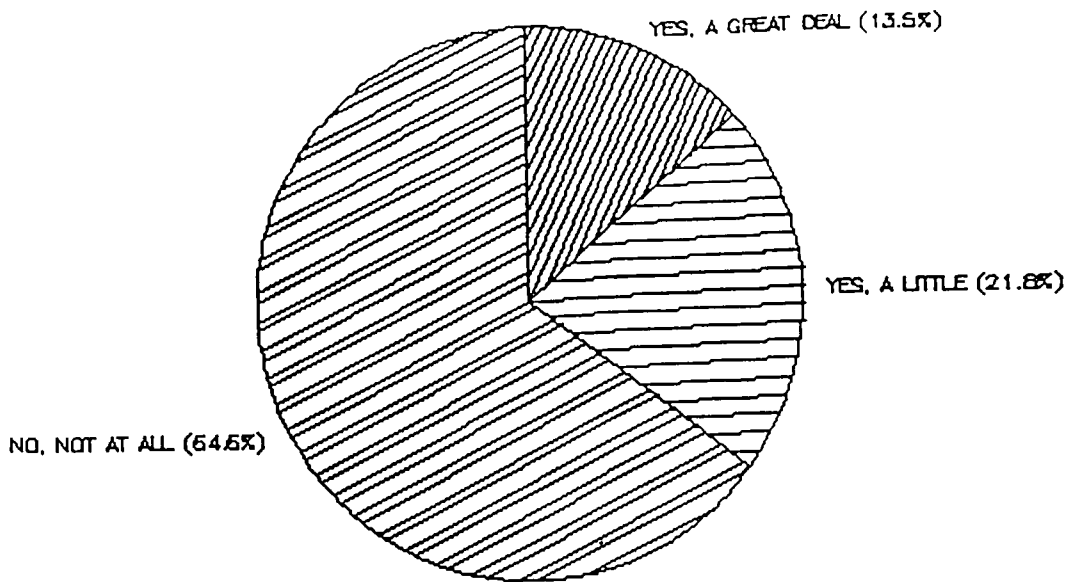


Figure 4.4: Cut back on Consultant Spending?

bit of money.

The findings of Question 14 seem to indicate that respondents expected their stations to continue spending approximately the same amount of money in 1992 on consultants. Of the 98 total respondents, eleven news directors (11.2 percent) said their consultation budget would "increase a great deal" this year. Thirteen (13.2 percent) said consultation fees for their department would "increase a little." An overwhelming 61 news directors (62.2 percent) said their consulting budget would "stay about the same." Seven respondents (7.1 percent) answered the amount their station spent would "decrease a little," while six news directors (6.1 percent) said their consulting budget would

"decrease a great deal."

Question 14 asked the news directors how they felt about the dollar figure allotted by their stations for consultant use. Of the 95 total responses given, twelve (12.6 percent) said they would like to see their stations spend "a great deal more" on consultants, while 14 news directors (14.7 percent) said their station should spend "a little more." Again, the overwhelming majority came in the middle, with 51 news directors (53.6 percent) saying their stations should "keep spending about the same amount." Twelve news directors (12.6 percent) wanted their stations to "spend a little less," and six (6.3 percent) wanted to "spend a whole lot less." The results of these last two questions might again indicate the economy is making a slight turnaround in the broadcasting industry, and that news directors see dollars spent on consulting as a necessary expense.

The questions that followed dealt with consultant performance and relationships in the eyes of news directors. Question 16 asked "How often does your consultant visit your station?" Respondents had one of six possible answers, with a total of 80 news directors offering their views. Only three news directors (3.7 percent) said their consultant visited at least once every two weeks. Five (6.2 percent) said their consultant was at least a monthly visitor. The highest number, 37 respondents (46.2 percent) answered their consultant visited at least once every one to three months.

Twenty-four (30 percent) said their consultant visited once every three to six months. Four (5 percent) said their consultant made a personal visit "once or twice a year." And seven (8.7 percent) said their consultant never makes a personal visit to their station.

However, respondents did say they would hear from their consultants more often, i.e., phone calls or tapes in the mail. Of the 80 respondents to Question 17, 38 news directors (47.5 percent) said they "heard" from their consultants at least once every two weeks. Twenty-six respondents (32.5 percent) said they had contact from their consultant once every two to four weeks. The following choices started to drop in terms of raw numbers and percentages. Eleven (13.7 percent) said they heard from their consultant once every one to three months. Only one (1.2 percent) said they heard from consultants every three to six months, and one (1.2 percent) said they only heard from a consultant "once or twice a year." Three news directors (3.7 percent) said they "never" heard from their consultant. These numbers would perhaps indicate that consulting firms make an effort to stay in touch with their clients, even when a personal visit is not possible, or necessary.

Question 18 inquired how news directors used consultants, with three possible answers -- as a talent scout, for advice on improving the "look" of a newscast, and to learn what other markets were doing. News directors were encouraged to check

more than one answer if it applied to their operation, and roughly three-fourths of the respondents checked all three. Learning the trends in other markets was the answer checked most often, but only by a slight majority over the other two possibilities.

Question 19 followed up on the "talent scout" aspect of the consultation industry, asking news directors if they had ever actually hired someone recommended by their consultant. A total of 74 news directors responded, with 48 (64.8 percent) answering "yes" and 26 (35.2 percent) saying "no." Question 20 followed up on the respondents who said "yes" by asking what position did the news director fill based on the advice of the consultant. On-air talent was the predictable and overwhelming choice with 32 news directors saying they had hired an anchor and 24 saying they had hired a reporter. News directors were again able to check more than one response if it applied, and several did so regarding anchors and reporters. Eleven news directors said they had hired producers based on the advice of a consultant. Five had hired news administrators and none hired photographers based on consultation advice. Question 21 asked if the news directors were generally pleased with the talent recommended by consultants. Sixty-eight news directors responded with forty (58.8 percent) answering they were "very pleased." Twenty-two (32.3 percent) said they were "marginally pleased," and only six (8.8 percent) said they were "not very pleased." (See

Figure 4.5).

Question 22 inquired as to how much personal attention consultants gave to the on-air talent of their clients. A total of 79 news directors responded to this question, with 28 (35.4 percent) saying the consultant worked with their talent "very often" to help them improve. Forty-one respondents (51.8 percent) said their consultant worked with talent "sometimes." Five news directors (6.3 percent) said the consultant "seldom" worked with talent, while another five (6.3 percent) said their consultant "never" worked with on-air talent. Here the answer "sometimes" was given most often, and might reflect recent trends where consultants are more concerned with doing research for clients as opposed to

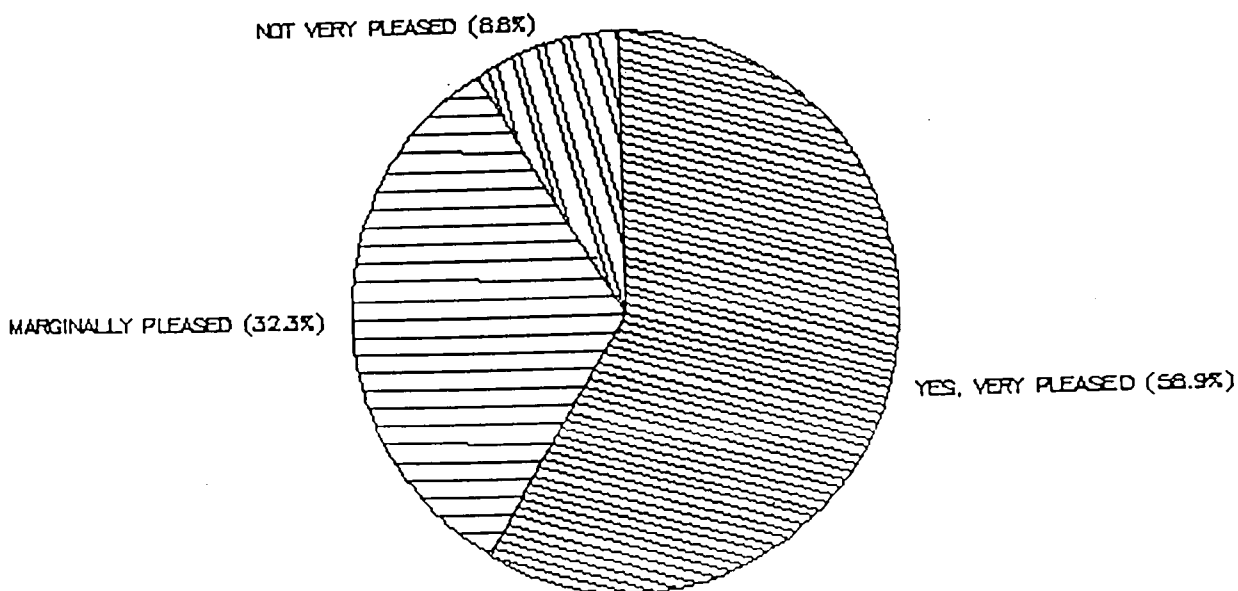


Figure 4.5: Are you pleased with Talent?

"coaching" talent.

Some less-than-ethical consultants have been alleged to try to help a client by telling on-air talent at competing stations about job openings in other markets. This practice is an attempt to get a competing, popular anchor off the air and boost the ratings of the consultant's paying customer. "It happens," one respondent wrote in parentheses next to the question. Question 23 inquired about this alleged practice, and if news directors worried a competing consultant might try to "steal" their on-air talent. A total of 93 news directors responded to this question, but only eight (8.6 percent) said they "worried about this a lot." Thirty-nine news directors (41.9 percent) said they "worry about this a little," while almost half the respondents, 46 news directors (49.4 percent) said they "never worry about this." Again, this might reflect a changing role for consultants, concerned more about research and the overall product of a station, as opposed to "headhunting" or the talent aspect of television news.

Question 24 asked "Does your consultant give you advice on ways to make your newscast better?" A total of 81 news directors answered this question, where three possible responses were available. A clear majority, 51 news directors (63 percent) said their consultants gave them ideas "very often." One-third of the respondents, 27 news directors (33.3 percent) said their consultant gave them advice "sometimes," while only three respondents (3.7 percent) said their

consultant "never" gave them usable advice. It would seem the respondents to this survey like what consultants are doing for them, and that the role of the consultant continues to be more of an advisor as opposed to a talent scout.

Question 25 asked "Do you respect the advice of your consultant?" Eighty-three news directors responded, with ten (12 percent) saying they "always" respect the advice given by their consultant. Two-thirds of the respondents, 56 news directors (67.5 percent) said they respect the advice of their consultant "most of the time." Only five news directors (6.2 percent) said they "seldom" respect their consultants' advice, and only one (1.2 percent) said they "never" respect their advice. Again, this might indicate an overall favorable impression respondents to this thesis survey have of television news consultants.

The next area of the survey begins what might best be labeled some of the "stickier" questions asked of news directors. In the past, some local affiliate general managers have shown a tendency to side with a consultant over a news director on certain decisions. This can create tension and uneasiness in the relationships between the three. General managers may also "pressure" a news director to use ideas generated by a consultant, largely because the station has already gone to great lengths to pay for the advice. The logic being here -- why pay for something and then not use it?

Question 27 asked "Have you ever felt pressured by

management to use the advice of a consultant -- even though you felt the advice was not in the best interest of the newsroom?" A total of 83 news directors responded with 21 (25.3 percent) saying "yes," they felt they had been pressured. Three-fourths of the news directors surveyed, 62 respondents (74.7 percent) said they had not been pressured by management to use a consultants' advice. While a clear majority of the respondents do not see this "pressuring" as a problem at their station, it is somewhat disturbing that one-quarter of the news directors surveyed *did* answer "yes." In this time of tight budgets, perhaps general managers see consultation fees as an item that cannot be wasted. (See Figure 4.6).

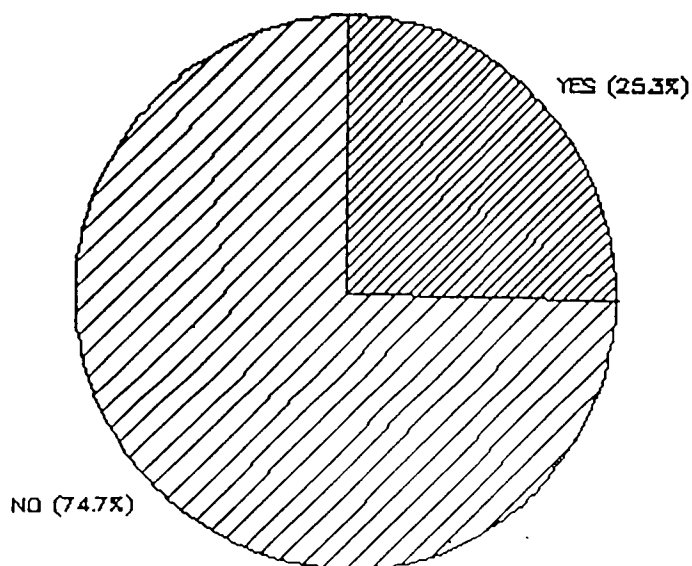


Figure 4.6: Pressure to Use Advice?

Question 28 seeks further information about the relationships between the general manager, news director and consultant. It asks "Do you feel your consultant has a great deal of influence at your station?" In other words, would your general manager perhaps take the consultants' advice over that of the news director in certain situations. A total of 81 news directors responded, with only 12 (14.8 percent) admitting their consultant had a "great deal of influence." A clear majority, 57 news directors (70.4 percent) said their consultant had "some influence," and 12 (14.8 percent) said their consultant had "hardly any influence at all." The findings of these two questions indicate the majority of the respondents to this survey are not intimidated by the presence of a consultant, and feel they are in charge of the newsroom, not an outsider. However, even with the promise of confidentiality, the point must be raised that some news directors may have not responded with complete honesty, particularly to "sticky" questions such as these. Ego may also have prevented some respondents from admitting they do not exert as much power as they think. But for this survey it must be assumed that all respondents answered the questionnaire with honesty and candor, and the responses given are the only data from which conclusions can be drawn.

The next four questions dealt with personal relationships between the news director and the consultant. Question 29 asked, "In your opinion, has your consultant ever make a

recommendation or offered to do something that you felt was unethical?" Here it was left up to the news director to define "unethical," with the emphasis on personal and confidential dealings between the two parties. A total of 78 news directors answered the question, and the response was the most lopsided in the entire survey. Only three news directors (3.8 percent) said "yes," their consultant had done something they considered unethical. Seventy-four respondents (94.9 percent) answered "no," and one news director (1.3 percent) wrote "maybe?" next to the question. These findings would clearly indicate the respondents to this survey do not believe their consultant is up to "dirty tricks."

Question 30 further inquired about the personal relationship between the news director and the consultant. A total of 79 respondents answered the question, with 54 news directors (68.4 percent) saying their relationship was "very good" with "lots of mutual respect." Twenty news directors (25.3 percent) said their relationship was "very businesslike." Four (5 percent) said their relationship was "neither good nor bad," and only one news director said the relationship was "strained or awkward." It would appear the news directors participating in this study are getting along - as we say in Tennessee -- "just fine" with their consultants.

The findings of Question 31 indicate news directors do not feel "threatened" by their consultants, i.e. that the

consultant might make a recommendation for a change in leadership for the news department. A total of 79 news directors responded to this question, and none, zero, checked "yes," I feel "very threatened." Only three (3.8 percent) said they "sometimes feel threatened." Eleven news directors (13.0 percent) admitted they feel "a very slight threat at times." The clear majority, 65 news directors (82.3 percent) said they feel "no threat at all."

The research gathered from Question 32 would indicate news directors like what consultants do for them, because only one of the respondents surveyed wanted a different consultant. Seventy-six news directors answered Question 32, which asked "Do you think your station will continue to use its current consultant in the future? Sixty-three news directors (82.9 percent) said "Yes, almost certainly." Twelve (15.8 percent) said they "weren't sure" the decision was "up to management." One news director (1.3 percent) said "No, we will not use this consultant." The news directors surveyed in this questionnaire must think their consultants are doing a good job for them, because a clear majority want them to stay with the station.

The next four questions dealt with consultants' possible effects on ratings and revenues. Question 33 asked if news ratings increased, decreased or stayed the same since the consultant began working with the station. A total of 79 news directors responded, with more favorable findings for

consultants. Forty-two news directors (53.1 percent) said ratings had "gone up" since the consultant came on board. Thirty respondents (38 percent) said ratings "stayed about the same," while only seven news directors (8.9 percent) said ratings had "gone down." (See Figure 4.7). Question 34 was a follow-up, asking "If up or down, did the consultant play a role?" There was a dropoff in the number of responses from the previous question, with only 55 news directors responding. Of that number, 37 respondents (67.3 percent) said "Yes," the consultant did play a role in the rise or fall of ratings. Eighteen news directors (32.7 percent) answered "No," the consultant played no role in the increase or decrease of ratings points.

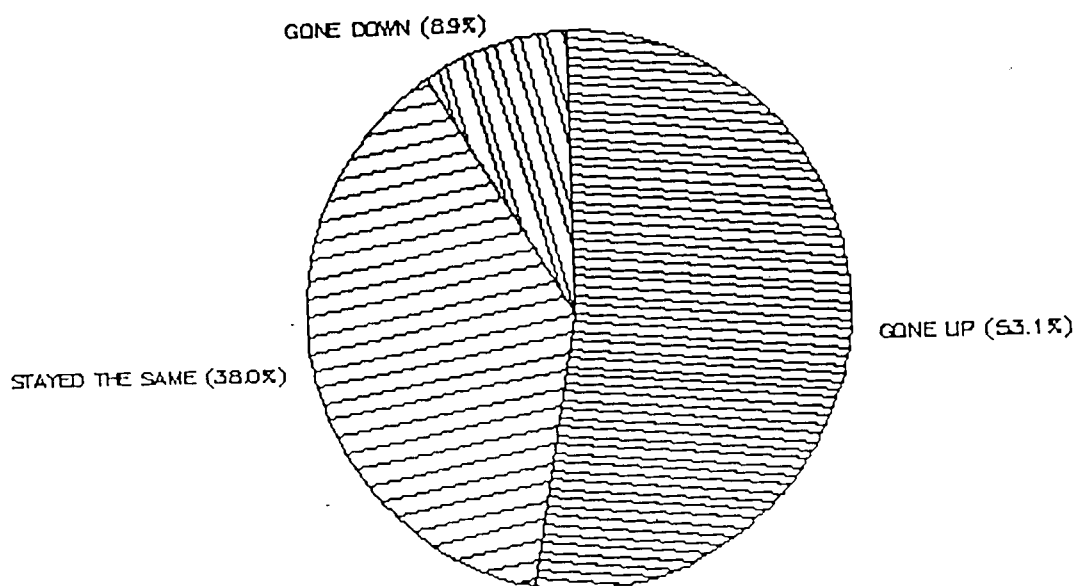


Figure 4.7: Ratings Up or Down?

Question 35 asked, "Since the consultant came on board, have station revenues gone up, down or stayed about the same?" A total of 67 news directors responded, with 29 (43.3 percent) answering revenues had increased. Almost an equal number, 28 news directors (41.8 percent) said revenues had stayed about the same, with ten respondents (14.9 percent) saying revenues had gone down. However, whereas news directors seem to think consultants play a role in the rise or fall of ratings, they do not seem to feel the same is true for overall station revenues. Question 36 asked "If (revenues were) up or down, did the consultant play a role?" The response rate to this question was poor, with only 48 news directors answering. The low response rate may be partially to blame on many news directors' apparent lack of knowledge of the dollar figure a station might make in advertising sales. The news director, while an important part of the overall scheme of a stations' operations, is still one of many managers under the general manager and station manager. It is quite possible they may only have a good working knowledge of the money earned by news broadcasts, and not other programming. Thirteen news directors (27 percent) said "Yes," consultants did play a role in station revenues, while 35 (73 percent) said consultants had little or nothing to do with the money a station earns.

The response rate boosted back to a total of 75 news directors for Question 37, which asked "Would you like to see your station change consultants?" Again, the results show the

news directors surveyed for this project seem to be satisfied with the work down by their consultants. Only 11 news directors (14.7 percent) said "Yes, we need a different consultant." Sixty-two news directors (82.7 percent) checked the answer "No, I'd like to keep the same consultant." Only two news directors (2.6 percent) said "I don't think we should use a consultant at all." (See Figure 4.8).

The findings of the final question were mixed, which inquired if news directors would ever consider a career move, becoming a consultant themselves. Almost all news consultants today are former news directors, and some current news directors have worked previously as consultants. WBIR-TV news director Jim Swinehart served as head of the Channel 10 news

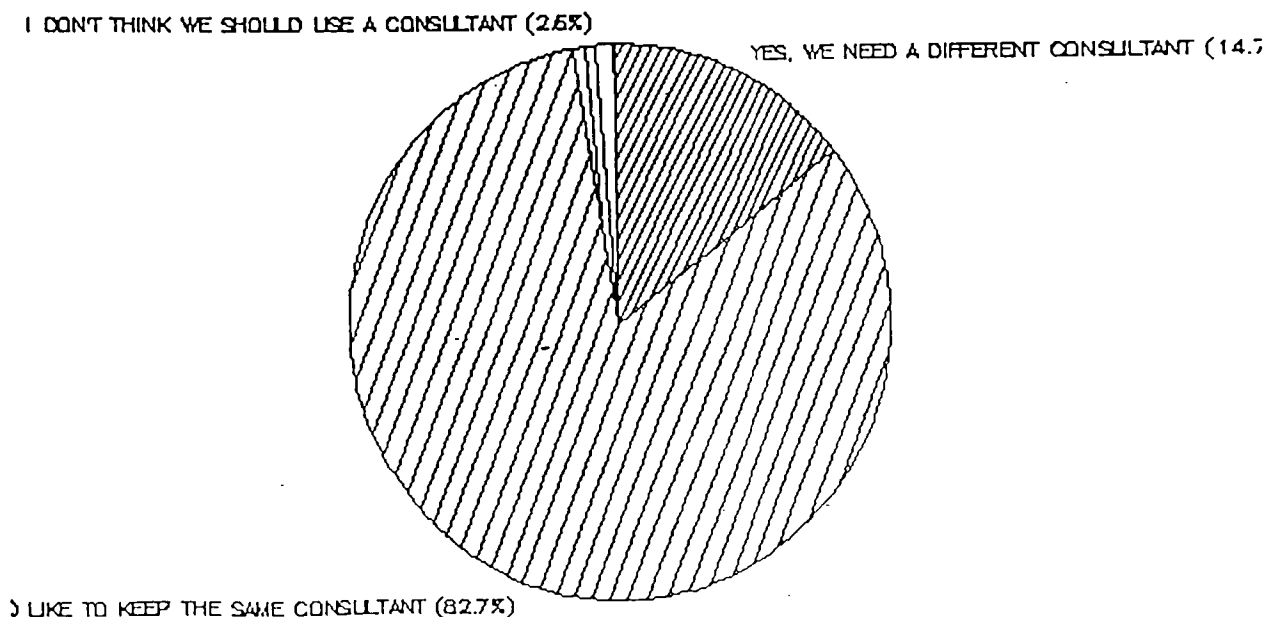


Figure 4.8: Do you want to change Consultants?

department for several years in the early to mid 1980's, then moved to a consulting position with Frank Magid and Associates, and eventually came back to his old job in Knoxville in 1989. Every consultant at Magid is a former news director.

Question 38 asked "Would you ever consider a career change to a consulting role?" The response rate to this question was relatively low, with 65 news directors responding. Twenty-seven news directors (41.5 percent) said "Yes, I would like to be a consultant." Twenty-six (40 percent) said "No, I would never want to be a consultant," and 11 respondents (17 percent) took the middle of the road answer "I've never really thought about it." One news director (1.5 percent) wrote in the space provided they had already worked as a consultant, but did not name the company. The positive answers might reflect a growing respect for the consultation business from news directors across the country. Several news directors who checked "Yes" were in smaller to medium markets, and may see the consulting business as more glamorous and high-paying in comparison to their current jobs. Several news directors who responded "No" were in larger markets, perhaps more established in their positions with a number of years of experience. Perhaps these respondents are more "set in their ways" and do not want to deal with the chief negative of the consulting business -- constant travel.

Written Comments from News Directors

Respondents were encouraged to offer further comments and personal insights after the questionnaire. A total of 18 news directors of the 111 respondents (16.2 percent) made written comments after the questions. A handful of news directors who *did not* complete all the 38 questions still offered written comments at the end of the survey. The written statements ranged from two pages in length to a few words. The comments were divided into three categories -- statements that were neither positive or negative, but spoke generally about the use of consultants, positive comments about consultants and negative comments about consultants. There were eight statements that fell into the first category with comments that were neither positive or negative. Four responses were overally positive with news directors saying their consultants were very helpful and knowledgeable, and five responses were easily determined to be negative with a bit of name-calling and criticism. One written response was critical of the survey itself and will be discussed following the news director comments.

The first group spoke generally on how and why they used consultants. "The station uses the consultants' research more than the consulting service," wrote a news director in Lexington, Kentucky. The word "research" was underlined with the respondent adding that he felt a number of stations around the country were primarily interested more in receiving

helpful market data, rather than "consulting advice." A news director from Birmingham, Alabama agreed, saying "The most benefit I've found from consultants is research and what to do with the findings. They also know what's happening in the industry."

A news director in Madison, Wisconsin writes, "A lot depends on how the station uses them. If they 'consult,' that's fine. If they manage, that's wrong." They (consultants) are a resource much like ascertainment -- used for the method of learning about your community." A news director at an independent station in Miami followed with comments along these lines. The respondent wrote, "There's only one danger with consultants. If there's a vacuum of leadership in news, they can, will (and should) take over. Intelligent news management uses consultants as a resource and a sounding board, not as a bible."

A news director in Huntington, West Virginia said, "You need to know your own market, then take advice that's applicable." The respondent said if a consultant goes over the head of the news director and "runs to the G.M.," that is "not good" for the station. The news director added that practice "is not done here." A respondent from Cape Girardeau, Missouri said his station had used both ARD and Magid in the past, however, the station "no longer uses either due to our budget." This news director did add that "Consultants helped change TV news from 'journalism' to

'business." A news director in Binghamton, New York offered an explanation for *not* using consultants. "We do not use consultants at all," the respondent wrote. "With ratings like ours, we have never felt threatened." The news director had responded earlier in the survey that his station had 39 rating and 72 share for its early evening news, and a 22 rating and 55 share for its late evening broadcast.

The most detailed and lengthy of the written comments came from a "strong second" place station in Little Rock, Arkansas who is a Magid client. Earlier in the literature review the use of consultants by KARK-TV in Little Rock is detailed, and based on the information provided, it would seem logical the respondent is the news director from that very same station. The respondent first offered intriguing answers to the "checkmark" questions that seemed to be both positive and negative about consultant use. For example, the news director said the Magid consultant visited often, frequently offered advice on improving the product, and played a role in increasing ratings and station revenues. However, the same news director also said he had been pressured to use the advice of the consultant by management, and he sometimes felt threatened the consultant would recommend a change in leadership in the newsroom. When asked if his consultant had ever offered to do anything "unethical," the news director wrote "Maybe." Despite some of these negative responses, the news director said he would like to keep the same consultant,

and he would be interested in becoming a consultant himself someday.

"The good consultants are those hired and fired by the news directors," the Little Rock news director writes. "Consultants many times are brought in to 'handle' the news director. I have no problem with news consultants who are under the *authority* of the news director. Good consultants confer with news directors and keep them up-to-date on series ideas, salary structures and management tips. I think news directors are overworked -- we can all use help and suggestions -- but someone has to be boss. It should not be the guy with the briefcase from out of town."

The Little Rock respondent also says a news director should not let a consultant dictate newsroom policy. He continues, "I have had good and bad experiences with consultants. I enjoy working with my current consultant. He has made many valuable suggestions and we have implemented many of them. I have also *ignored* some (suggestions) especially when they have related to personnel. I simply do not agree with his assessment. Consultants can absolutely ruin a newsroom unless the news director is a strong leader. If the General Manager can't trust his news director to make good decisions with regard to people and coverage of the news -- then get a new news director."

Four news director added written comments that were complimentary of their consultants and what they do for them.

A news director in New Orleans writes, "Magid is especially good with research. The research is vital, the advice is just that -- advice." A news director in Columbia, South Carolina gave an overall positive assessment of the stations' consultant, although the respondent did not name the consulting firm in the survey. The news director says the role of a consultant is changing. "I can remember the days when consultants 'ruled the roost.' Generally, I think those days are over," the news director says. "The consultants are smarter. We are better at using them. We know our markets better than they do. In sum, there is no substitute for common sense." Both the news director from New Orleans and the respondent from Columbia gave positive "checkmark" answers in the survey.

Two ARD clients offered positive written comments about their consultants. A Montgomery, Alabama news director writes, "Two things I feel consultants offer us of tremendous value are 1). Taped examples of what's going on out there -- ideas we might not come up with or might not see for a long time, if ever, and 2). an objective opinion on the quality and the overall feel and look of our shows." A news director from Milwaukee says "Our consultants are a resource, often a time-saver for us. When I wanted to see samples of weekend morning newscasts, I called ARD for tapes and contacts. They work for us. They do not dictate and are not interested in offering 'cookie cutter' advice. Our consultant is a former news

director whose strength is coaching strong writing, photojournalism and newsroom systems. I really enjoy her visits."

It was anticipated the survey would also reach news directors who may have had bad experiences with consultants in the past, and five respondents offered written comments that spoke negatively about the consultation business. A news director in Roanoke, Virginia writes, "Consultants are the scourge of the TV news industry. If you 'need' a consultant, then you've got the wrong management at your station." ARD did not fair well with a news director in a 100-plus market (no postmark was given), who said, "We do not use a consultant. I've worked with ARD in other markets. They are scum sucking bottom fish who make recommendations to justify their existence." This particular respondent did not completely fill out the questionnaire. A news director in North Carolina wrote simply, "We should keep Broadcast Image (apparently a local firm) and lose Magid." The news director did not specify why he wanted a change in consultation firms, but was one of the few respondents to say their consultant had offered to do something they felt was "unethical," and the station should "spend a whole lot less" on consultants in the coming year.

A news director in Burlington, Vermont offered strong opinions about the consultation business, although they did not complete the "checkmark" portion of the questionnaire,

adding "Surveys are not my favorite method to discuss issues that require thoughtful consideration." When asked if their station used a consultant, the respondent wrote in parentheses, "Never have and will not in the foreseeable future. A good news director doesn't need a consultant. His viewers will tell him what they want to see added or deleted from news programs. Does an out-of-town consultant know anything about Vermont, its people or its problems? I doubt it. Keep your news director in place -- let him or her learn the community and your news ratings will improve."

A respondent from Baton Rouge whose department had dismal ratings blamed the stations' poor performance on management and a local consultant. "The people they (the consultants) recommended for several key anchor positions were terrible. We lost the few viewers we had. The suggestions they made were not workable with the people and facilities at our disposal. They showed no knowledge of our viewers. By the end of the year our ratings were terrible and newsroom morale was even worse. I feel the station would have done better to talk to the employees in the newsroom and seriously consider their input. We're the ones out there. We know our city and its people, and we know what we as a group are capable of doing." The respondent gave an overall negative response on the "checkmark" questions about their consultant.

Interviews with Consultants

The consultants interviewed for this thesis were quite

helpful and seemed genuinely interested in the results of the survey. Their lifeblood, after all, is research, and all were appreciative of the data provided by the questionnaire. Each consultant also went to great lengths to carefully explain how they work with an individual station, as well as their changing role in television news in the 1990's.

Jacques de Suze -- McHugh and Hoffman

Jacques de Suze is one of four consultants with McHugh and Hoffman and has been with the company for more than fifteen years. A native of New England, de Suze attended Boston University and Yale, where he majored in foreign affairs. "I wanted to be a foreign correspondent way back then," he says. de Suze never made it overseas as a journalist, but has an extensive background in local television. In 1968 he began his career in Worcester, Massachusetts at a local station as a reporter. He would go on to report in Boston and report and anchor in Providence, Rhode Island. He also did free lance work for a number of New England stations. In 1976, de Suze faced two career possibilities -- anchoring or consulting. He had been offered a job with Magid, but did not want to move to Iowa. However, he liked the idea of helping other stations improve their news product, so he contacted, and eventually landed a position with McHugh and Hoffman. He is still with the company today. "We each work with about a dozen stations. Sometimes more than one of us will work with a station. We tend to go four-

to-six times per year." And what does he do on these visits? "We watch the newscast. We talk to people about their work. We do audience research. We don't teach them the business -- we offer advice."

Although McHugh and Hoffman was not specifically named in a negative or positive light in the survey, de Suze still seemed pleased with the overall favorable opinion of consultants. He particularly was interested in the aspect of the questionnaire dealing with the personal relationships between news directors and consultants. "If you don't like the guy (if a news director does not like a consultant) then there's no point in having the contract," de Suze says. "They (news directors) all demand a personal relationship. They want confidence, trust. But it's hard to develop." He admitted " . . . some of us are more appealing to news directors than others," meaning there are times when a consultant-client relationship simply does not work, and a new consultant is sent to work with the station, but he says that rarely happens. "A consultant is there to help a news director win," de Suze says.

"Winning" can be interpreted a number of ways, and not necessarily by increasing ratings, de Suze says. However, de Suze understands increased numbers are mainly what news directors want from a consultant, and he firmly believes his advice, coupled with hard work and patience, will result in higher ratings and share points. "I'm convinced I can help

all my clients improve ratings if we have a good relationship. It takes time, guts and perseverance. If we're useful to a client, the progress they make, they own. If we provide recommendations, it's up to them to implement them. I take credit for good advice."

The section of the survey on talent was also of interest to de Suze, although he says McHugh and Hoffman does very little "headhunting" for its clients. "We keep large inventories of tapes, but it's not our major preoccupation." Finding talent, de Suze says, is one of the most difficult tasks a news director will ask of a consultant. "The toughest thing to do is to know who are the good people," he says.

McHugh and Hoffman has seen its business decline in recent years, and some industry experts say the company will have a difficult time maintaining its third place status among the major firms in the future. "We're in the second year of a bad economy," de Suze says. "Lots of stations don't have the cash flow -- so yes, we have lost some consulting clients. But many are coming back." de Suze believes the company will also continue to expand its growing number of corporate clients, both in the United States and overseas. "We are experts in total communications," he says. However, de Suze says the company's main function always will be to help local affiliates improve their news product. He offers this advice -- "Take the news seriously. Respect your viewer. Take risks, but be armed with research."

Jim Willi -- Audience Research and Development

Jim Willi began his career in broadcast news in the late 1960's, working as a radio news reporter while still in college. Willi graduated from the University of Wisconsin - River Falls in 1970, and spent the next few years working at various radio stations around the state. In 1974, he turned to television, landing a job as a reporter with WLUK-TV in Green Bay. He would stay with the station more than five years, working as a producer, weekend anchor and eventually assistant news director. From 1979 to 1983, he served as news director at WGR-TV in Buffalo, and from there moved on to KPNX-TV in Phoenix where he was news director for about six years. In 1989 he accepted a consulting position with ARD, and today serves as Executive Vice President of the company.

Although recently elevated to a new position, Willi still travels around the country and pays personal visits to his half dozen clients about four times per year. He says ARD has a different consulting philosophy from its chief competitor, Frank Magid and Associates. "We call our consultants 'account executives.' Basically we have people who consult on the news product. Each account executive is backed by an associate. We have a five-person team for each client that also includes a research project coordinator, a talent consultant and a representative from the talent placement department." On the competition with Magid, Willi says "We try to stay a step ahead of them and they try to stay a step ahead of us. It's

a big battle. We're both trying to outdo the other." Willi says the use and information from so-called "power panels" are offered as part of ARD's service. He defines "power panels" as "a gathering of newspeople -- news directors, producers, reporters -- with the idea of exchanging ideas."

Willi says ARD is not suffering from the effects of a down economy, and thinks difficult budgetary times are when stations *should* spend money on consultants. "We're having the best year in the history of the company," he says. "As dollars get tighter, it's more important to spend your dollars wisely. It's wise to spend one percent of your news budget (on consultation) to make sure that the other ninety-nine percent works." Willis says ARD is constantly adding new stations to its client list. Some are "stations that have never used a consultant before," while he says others are leaving other major consulting firm for ARD.

Willi says there is little doubt modern television news is changing, forced largely by increased competition from cable and other entertainment mediums. "The hardest thing we have to do is convince them (news directors) there aren't just three stations out there anymore," he says. Willi believes news departments must know their audience through research. "We try to target an audience. Most of my clients aren't concerned with being number one -- although that's great. Most want to win the 25-to-54 age group. Willi does add, "The audience is changing. Pretty soon we'll be going after the

30-to-60 age demographics." Willi believes the best way to target an audience is through improved writing and reporting. "We try to get stations to understand you must show how a story affects the viewer. It's not enough to cover the city council meeting without telling the audience why it's important to them."

Willi commented briefly on the section of the questionnaire that inquired about the advice given by consultants and whether news directors put it to use. Willi says his clients are usually receptive to ideas offered by the ARD team, but he says the difficult part is to convince the news director and station's management that they must also be part of the team. "Our biggest job is to be a motivator. We can't improve ratings unless they're willing to work hard. We're in a smart partnership with stations. Together we can get it done."

John Quarderer -- Frank Magid and Associates

John Quarderer holds both an undergraduate and masters degree from Northwestern University, earning the latter in 1973. He began his broadcast career at WBAY-TV in Green Bay, Wisconsin, where he worked as a reporter, producer and eventually assistant news director. Quarderer was in the Green Bay market at the same time Jim Willi was working at a competing station, WLUK-TV. Quarderer moved on to Salinas, California, where he served as news director from 1979 to 1981. From there he became a special projects producer and

reporter for KGO-TV in San Francisco, working at the ABC affiliate from 1981 through 1985. In 1985, Quarderer made another career change, accepting a teaching position at the University of Missouri, where he stayed five years. In 1990, he moved on to Frank Magid and Associates, where today he is Director of Television Research. Why the move to the consulting business? "I'm really interested in what brings people to a TV set," he says.

Quarderer admits "It's a difficult environment out there" economically, but says business remains profitable for Magid. "Our experience is that our established clients are spending more." Quarderer believes there will always be a need for consulting firms because television stations need research and an outside opinion, regardless of advertising sales. "My sense is that -- way out in the future -- even if there is only one station doing news in a market, they would still need a consultant. I think there are a lot of reasons people need our advice. We provide perspective because we send people all over the world to look at TV news."

However, Quarderer feels what necessarily works in one market, might not work in another -- a common criticism of the advice offered by some consultants. "Consultants aren't guilty of making TV look alike everywhere," he says. Quarderer adds most television news directors have worked in a handful of markets, but Magid consultants know what is going on in virtually every city that does broadcast news. "We

provide a managerial perspective. They haven't been in as many markets as we have." Yet Quarderer says a consultant's job is to make sure the information, research and advice offered will work for a particular client. "We do bring examples of what goes on in other markets," he says, "but we tailor directly to what would work best in a market." Quarderer says most Magid clients are interested in finding the best on-air talent, and look to their consultant for help. "Our clients are highly dependent on our talent placement service. It's the place where our clients contact us most often," he says. "We have a lot of travelling (talent) coaches."

Quarderer offered his thoughts on the survey question that asked if news directors ever felt "pressured" by management to use the advice of a consultant, largely because the consultation fee was already paid. On this question, roughly 25 percent of the respondents admitted they had felt this pressure. Quarderer says the consultation team does not want to "come between" the general manager and news director. "We work for the station as a whole," he says. "The days of general animosity towards consultants are quite far in the past. Most general news managers understand the value of the work we provide."

Quarderer believes strongly in a good, business-like relationship between the consultant and news director, but points out the relationship should not become *too good*. He

says if the two parties are too close, friendship can sometimes get in the way of making tough decisions. "Occasionally upper management will request changes (in consultants) if everyone is too close." He feels news director often want a "sounding board" for problems and concerns, and some consultants do play that role, although that may not always be for the best. "Some of our guys are the calm, soothing type. Others are well-dressed pit bulls."

Are these "pit bulls" offering to do anything that might be deemed "unethical?" Quarderer responded to the results of Question 29, which asked about the ethics of consultants. Only three respondents said their consultant had ever offered to do anything they thought was unethical, and one news director wrote "maybe" in the space provided. Seventy-four respondents answered "No" to the question. Quarderer says "That's strikes me as pretty good. Nothing I've seen since I've come here would I call unethical. My sense is that the audience is basically behind the ethics of the business. I've come to the conclusion that journalists don't give their audience enough credit."

Quarderer is optimistic about the future of television news and its relationship with consultation firms, although much depends on an improved economy. He says stations need consultants for research and solid advice. "Stations on top right now doing it through gimmicks won't stay there," he warns. "A client once told me, 'We're making hamburger and

they're not eating it anymore.' We can give you a pretty good handle on your audience. As the audience becomes more fragmented, you need to know what they want. That all points to research and being more critical," he says. "We deliver research, but also offer perspective and consultants who can guide its implementation. No, I don't despair that I'm in a business that's got a big roadblock up ahead."

Conclusions on Results Chapter

The responses to the background questions by news directors seemed largely predictable and satisfactory, although a higher response rate from top ten markets might have been preferred. Overall, the respondents to the questionnaire came from a variety of market sizes, with roughly half being in the top fifty markets and half in markets 50 to 100. The respondents said they had a good bit of experience -- usually at least ten years in television -- although a slight majority had been with their current stations less than two years.

Perhaps the most interesting findings among the background questions were the results about ratings. Fifty-eight percent of the respondents said they were first in their market in news ratings, while another 23.5 percent said they were a strong second. More than 81 percent of the respondents were either first or a competitive second in ratings battles within their market. These findings might indicate consultant use is indeed helpful in improving ratings, because an

overwhelming majority of first or strong second place stations took part in the survey. There is a significant correlation here; stations are high in the ratings and they use a consultant. Another factor in the correlation between high ratings and consultant use is station revenues. A station is profitable because of its high ratings, and therefore may have more money to spend, i.e. on consultation firms and outside advice to improve its news product.

Responses about dollars spent on consultant use were also somewhat of a surprise. The role of the news director has changed in the late 1980's and early 1990's. No longer is this position simply an editorial task, overseeing the activities of the newsroom and judging reporting and producing content. Today most news directors spend at least half their time trying to balance increasingly shrinking budgets. However, even with the budget constraints of these modern times, nearly two-thirds of the respondents to the questionnaire said they were forced to make no cut backs at all in consultant use.

A clear majority of respondents said their stations spent at least twenty thousand dollars in the past year on consultants, and that amount would largely stay the same for the coming budgetary year. More than half the respondents felt the figure their stations were spending was the right amount, with only about one-quarter of the respondents wanting to spend more. Again this might point to the fact that

stations high in the ratings, and presumably high in profits, were responding to this questionnaire, and these are stations that can afford a consultant. The findings of this section of the survey might also indicate the economy is improving slightly for some television stations. However, these respondents typically viewed consultant advice as useful, and perhaps reshuffled their shrinking budgets to make sure consultation fees would be included in the dollars they were allowed to spend. News directors were also receptive to the ideas and advice of their consultants, based on the findings of the survey. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents said their consultants "very often" gave them ideas to make their newscasts better, and a large majority said they "very often" or at least "sometimes" put the advice to use. A clear majority also said their consultants "very often" or at least "sometimes" work with the on-air talent in their newsrooms to help them improve. These numbers might indicate consultation clients responding to the survey feel they are getting a fair service for the money they spend, and likely will keep the consultant as part of the news team.

However, roughly one-fourth of the respondents did answer they felt pressured to use the advice of a consultant, even though the news director felt it was not in the best interest of the station. This would perhaps indicate general managers are spending a lot of money for consultation services, and do not want to simply discard the advice, particularly after they

have paid a lot of money for it. Three-fourths of the respondents said they did not feel pressure to use the advice, but the fact that almost one-quarter did answer "Yes" might indicate some news directors do not have as much overall influence in station management as some might think. These findings might also indicate a general manager is more inclined to accept the recommendations of a consultant over his or her own news director. Question 28 followed along these lines, inquiring about the amount of influence the consultant had at the respondents' particular station. More than 70 percent said their consultant had "some influence," a clear majority among the answers available. Almost fifteen percent said their consultant had "a great deal of influence," and the same number said their consultant had "hardly any influence at all." These findings certainly indicate consultants can have a strong influence in what many news stations put on the air, and in the decisions general managers make regarding their news departments.

Clearly respondents felt consultants were not performing tasks they might deem "unethical," with nearly 95 percent answering "No" when asked if their consultant had ever made such an offer. News directors also did not feel "threatened" their consultant would make recommendations for a change in leadership in their newsroom, with more than eighty percent saying they felt "no threat at all." However, one must wonder if a consultant was really going to make a recommendation for

a change in news directors, would they let on they were going to do so? Likely they would not, and this would be a matter discussed only between the consultant and the general manager.

News directors said overwhelmingly their stations would continue to use the same consultant, and their personal relationships were either very good or at least very businesslike. More than 82 percent said they felt their station had no plans to change consultants. A later question, number 37, inquired about the news directors' personal feelings on whether the station should keep the same consultant. Again, more than 82 percent responded the consultant should stay on board. This would perhaps indicate the news director and station general manager are pleased with the performance of the consultant, and might feel further improvements are on the way if the three continue to work together. More than 68 percent said their personal relationship with their consultant was "very good" with "lots of mutual respect." This would logically follow previous results where news directors felt the consultant was doing a good job for them. If the news director likes the work of the consultant, then the personal relationship between the two is likely to be a healthy one as well.

More than half the news directors surveyed said their ratings had increased with the work of their consultant. A large percentage also said ratings had stayed about the same, with only about eight percent answering ratings had gone down.

Two-thirds of the respondents said they believed the consultant did play a role in the rise or fall of ratings. Only about fourteen percent of the respondents said station revenues had gone down since the consultant started working with the station. However, respondents did not feel their consultants played a role in the rise or fall of station revenues. These findings seem logical with consultants mostly working in the news departments of their clients, and not with the sales staff. News directors again seem to indicate they are pleased with the work of their consultants, particularly if the consultation firm can deliver higher ratings.

Conclusions about Written Comments

Most negative attitudes expressed by news directors came in the portion of the survey where respondents were able to offer written comments, although there were only about five responses that might be deemed overly negative. The written statements seemed to fall into three categories: Comments mostly about consultant use that were not really positive or negative, comments that were positive and complimentary of consultants, and comments that were generally negative about consultants.

The written comments about consultant use mainly talked about the importance of research and knowing the audience. Here news directors said many times they used consultants as a "sounding board," and mainly looked to consultation firms to offer further perspective on improving the news product.

Generally, in these responses, news directors said consulting was a "changing business" with more emphasis on teamwork and both the consultant and news manager understanding the role of the other position.

The positive comments indicated news directors were pleased with the performance of their consultant, and often talked of the consultation firm "working for us" rather than the other way around. Some of the respondents who wrote back said their consultants were good about providing useful data and helpful research, and assisting in its implementation. Others said consultants were better at doing their jobs in these modern times, and news directors now have a better idea about how to use their advice.

Some name-calling was expected and a few respondents obliged with descriptions such as "scourge of the business" and "scum-sucking bottom fish." Others said their consultants' advice was more harmful than good, actually decreasing ratings and morale. Several respondents seemed insulted by the idea they might need outside help from a consultation firm, and stated boldly that "a good news director doesn't need a consultant." News directors were critical of consultants giving the same recommendations in several different markets, and said it would be next to impossible for a consultant from out-of-town or out-of-state to know the market as well as the people working at the station.

The written comments from news directors were perhaps some of the more insightful instruments of research in this project. Here news directors were not inhibited by the confines of the multiple choice answer, and were able to give thoughtful, analytical conclusions about the consultation industry. Unfortunately, only a handful of respondents offered written comments, and it is difficult to draw conclusions based on such a small response. However, we do see a pattern among some news directors that attitudes toward consultants may be changing, and a "teamwork" mentality between the two parties is perhaps becoming more of a necessity if stations want to improve the quality and ratings of their newscasts.

Conclusions about Consultant Interviews

The personal interviews with representatives of the three major consulting firms offered some of these same conclusions. The consultants expressed the belief their business is in a constant state of change, and it is vital to keep up with these new ideas to remain competitive. The consultants stressed teamwork is important for their recommendations, advice and research to work for a client. All the consultants said they had no "miracle cures" for a station with woeful ratings, but each said, by working hard and working smart, they were confident improvements could be made. Each consultant admitted the lame economy is being felt by virtually any business that is broadcast-related, but the

strong companies will survive these difficult times and continue to flourish in the future.

The tone of the interviews seemed to indicate the Magid and ARD representatives have a mutual respect for one another and their competing companies. All three companies seemed to know what their competition was doing, and said the rivalry among them was intense at times, but fair. The general conclusions that might be drawn from these interviews is that Magid and ARD likely will continue to do well, while McHugh and Hoffman may face more difficult times. Research will continue to be the backbone of the consulting business -- as opposed to the old days of off-the-cuff advice -- with the larger firms having more resources to continue emphasis in that area. Their list of clients may not grow that much more, but what their existing clients will demand for their money in the future will likely change and intensify.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this research project would indicate, generally speaking, the news directors surveyed have a positive opinion of consultants and believe they are helpful to them in improving their news products. An overwhelming majority want to keep their current consultants, and most say their personal and business relationship is good. Respondents did offer some negative comments about consultants -- particularly when they were able to put their thoughts in writing -- but overall the news directors seemed to feel their consultation firms did a good job for them. The interviews with the consultants found there are general differences in philosophy among the three major firms, yet all feel confident they are capable of helping a client improve in quality and ratings. All were in agreement the economy has affected both television news and consulting, but advice from a consultant is a wise investment in these competitive times. Results from both the questionnaires and the interviews point to the general conclusion that the consulting business is changing, with more emphasis on research and teamwork.

The basis of the research project was a three-page questionnaire consisting of thirty-eight questions. It was randomly mailed to three hundred news directors at television stations across the country, with roughly 28 percent of the intended respondents returning the survey filled out

completely. Twenty-five other respondents returned the questionnaire partially filled out, mostly because they did not use a consultant. The questionnaire included a variety of topics, including the respondents' personal background, how much money their stations spent on consulting, their relationship with their consultant and their feelings about the overall effectiveness of their consultant. The questionnaire was confidential in order to elicit a more candid view of consultants.

The findings of the survey were then shared with representatives of the three major consulting firms, and personal interviews were conducted to gather more information about the consultation business. Here consultants gave their views on the results of the survey and offered insights into the industry from their perspective. Each consultant was able to agree or disagree with the general findings of the research project and give opinions on whether this data accurately reflects their industry and their respective companies.

The information gathered from the project offered answers to the original research questions of this study. The first research question inquired about news director attitudes towards consultants. In this project, the findings seem to indicate the news directors who participated generally are pleased with the performance of the consultants, and feel their relationship is not particularly competitive or negative. Another research questions inquired about the

respect news directors may or may not have regarding their consultants' advice. Respondents seemed to believe the work of their consultant is to be respected, and they often utilize the advice and research in their newsrooms.

Another key research question sought to measure the effectiveness of the consultants' work, particularly in terms of ratings and station revenues. Respondents seemed to indicate they believed consultants to have a strong hand in the rise and fall of ratings, and their research and advice to be invaluable in dictating strategy in ratings battles. However, respondents did not seem to feel consultants had a great deal of influence, and generally were not effective, in the growth or loss of station revenues. Finally, news directors seemed to indicate to the writer they feel an investment in a consultant is worthwhile, and can be helpful in improving news product and ratings. A handful of news directors indicated they wanted to spend more money on consultants, but a clear majority felt the amount they were spending was about right. In short, respondents to the survey were able to offer data conclusive to the writer to answer the primary research questions.

Limitations of the Study

Few research projects are able to measure one hundred percent of the information available in a study. The most glaring limitation to this research is that it does not include the attitudes and feelings of all television news

directors about consultants. A typical mail questionnaire has a response rate of about 25 percent, and with this project, that figure was exceeded by a small margin with response rates of 37 and 28 percent. Yet we cannot claim the survey accurately reflects the beliefs of all news directors nationwide about consultants. It must be pointed out that only a certain percentage of the news directors surveyed chose to participate, and the questionnaire is a measurement only of their views.

Another possible fault of the research project is that perhaps not all news directors who use consultants had an opportunity to receive and respond to a survey. Mostly top one hundred markets were selected in this random sampling, but not all stations were picked and certainly some consultation clients were missed in the process. Also markets over one hundred were largely dismissed in this project, and consultants do frequently work with these stations. In effect, the selection of possible respondents became largely a guessing game as to who uses a consultant.

Respondents were also somewhat limited in expressing their views because of the close-ended questions, i.e., where a response is already offered and the news director merely "checks" an answer. In gathering qualitative data, sometimes opinions are a better measuring stick than a multiple choice response. Although the opportunity to respond in written form may come later in a survey, many times respondents will go the

easy route and merely respond to the "checkmark" possibilities, leaving the available space blank.

Another major problem with a mail survey is creating a cover letter that encourages a respondent to participate, but does not bias the information. Cover letters must stress the importance of the research and the value of the respondents' opinions, but should also serve as a reminder that the individual's participation will not be a burden or will take up a great deal of their time.

Likewise, interviewing three television news consultants perhaps is not a complete reflection of how all consultants feel and act in certain situations with news directors. Even consultants within the same major firm might respond differently to certain questions and scenarios. It might also be difficult to measure hard data by asking open-ending questions or by only presenting the information gathered from the news directors. Open-ended questions can also sometimes "lead" an interview subject to a predictable response. In some instances here, the information offered by the respondent might be invalid, not applicable or inaccurate.

Another disadvantage to this type of research method is the confidentiality factor -- allowed for the news directors -- is not available for the consultants. When asked certain "tough" questions, respondents may not offer answers that are completely honest and candid because they know the information they give can be attributed directly to them. Subjects in a

research project are usually more likely to answer a question honestly if they know they will not be named in providing the information, and that their participation will not hurt their job status.

While there are certainly limitations in virtually any broadcast research project, great care was taken to ensure the information gathered in this thesis would be accurate. The study is an attempt to analyze a subject area that has not seen a good deal of research in the past, particularly of a qualitative nature. Although certain limitations exist, the findings of this research project will be extremely valuable to both news directors and consultants alike, who then may interpret the data and put it to use. This type of research should be conducted in an academic setting so the findings can be analyzed and future, related research projects can be proposed.

The responses to the background questions by news directors seemed largely predictable and satisfactory, although a higher response rate from top ten markets might have been preferred. Overall, the respondents to the questionnaire came from a variety of market sizes, with roughly half being in the top fifty markets and half in markets 50 to 100. The respondents said they had a good bit of experience -- usually at least ten years in television -- although a slight majority had been with their current stations less than two years.

Perhaps the most interesting findings among the background questions were the results about ratings. Fifty-eight percent of the respondents said they were first in their market in news ratings, while another 23.5 percent said they were a strong second. More than 81 percent of the respondents were either first or a competitive second in ratings battles within their market. These findings might indicate consultant use is indeed helpful in improving ratings, because an overwhelming majority of first or strong second place stations took part in the survey. There is a significant correlation here; stations are high in the ratings and they use a consultant. Another factor in the correlation between high ratings and consultant use is station revenues. A station is profitable because of its high ratings, and therefore may have more money to spend, i.e. on consultation firms and outside advice to improve its news product.

Responses about dollars spent on consultant use were also somewhat of a surprise. The role of the news director has changed in the late 1980's and early 1990's. No longer is this position simply an editorial task, overseeing the activities of the newsroom and judging reporting and producing content. Today most news directors spend at least half their time trying to balance increasingly shrinking budgets. However, even with the budget constraints of these modern times, nearly two-thirds of the respondents to the questionnaire said they were forced to make no cut backs at

all in consultant use.

A clear majority of respondents said their stations spent at least twenty thousand dollars in the past year on consultants, and that amount would largely stay the same for the coming budgetary year. More than half the respondents felt the figure their stations were spending was the right amount, with only about one-quarter of the respondents wanting to spend more. Again this might point to the fact that stations high in the ratings, and presumably high in profits, were responding to this questionnaire, and these are stations that can afford a consultant. The findings of this section of the survey might also indicate the economy is improving slightly for some television stations. However, these respondents typically viewed consultant advice as useful, and perhaps reshuffled their shrinking budgets to make sure consultation fees would be included in the dollars they were allowed to spend. News directors were also receptive to the ideas and advice of their consultants, based on the findings of the survey. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents said their consultants "very often" gave them ideas to make their newscasts better, and a large majority said they "very often" or at least "sometimes" put the advice to use. A clear majority also said their consultants "very often" or at least "sometimes" work with the on-air talent in their newsrooms to help them improve. These numbers might indicate consultation clients responding to the survey feel they are getting a fair

service for the money they spend, and likely will keep the consultant as part of the news team.

However, roughly one-fourth of the respondents did answer they felt pressured to use the advice of a consultant, even though the news director felt it was not in the best interest of the station. This would perhaps indicate general managers are spending a lot of money for consultation services, and do not want to simply discard the advice, particularly after they have paid a lot of money for it. Three-fourths of the respondents said they did not feel pressure to use the advice, but the fact that almost one-quarter did answer "Yes" might indicate some news directors do not have as much overall influence in station management as some might think. These findings might also indicate a general manager is more inclined to accept the recommendations of a consultant over his or her own news director. Question 28 followed along these lines, inquiring about the amount of influence the consultant had at the respondents' particular station. More than 70 percent said their consultant had "some influence," a clear majority among the answers available. Almost fifteen percent said their consultant had "a great deal of influence," and the same number said their consultant had "hardly any influence at all." These findings certainly indicate consultants can have a strong influence in what many news stations put on the air, and in the decisions general managers make regarding their news departments.

Clearly respondents felt consultants were not performing tasks they might deem "unethical," with nearly 95 percent answering "No" when asked if their consultant had ever made such an offer. News directors also did not feel "threatened" their consultant would make recommendations for a change in leadership in their newsroom, with more than eighty percent saying they felt "no threat at all." However, one must wonder if a consultant was really going to make a recommendation for a change in news directors, would they let on they were going to do so? Likely they would not, and this would be a matter discussed only between the consultant and the general manager.

News directors said overwhelmingly their stations would continue to use the same consultant, and their personal relationships were either very good or at least very businesslike. More than 82 percent said they felt their station had no plans to change consultants. A later question, number 37, inquired about the news directors' personal feelings on whether the station should keep the same consultant. Again, more than 82 percent responded the consultant should stay on board. This would perhaps indicate the news director and station general manager are pleased with the performance of the consultant, and might feel further improvements are on the way if the three continue to work together. More than 68 percent said their personal relationship with their consultant was "very good" with "lots of mutual respect." This would logically follow previous

results where news directors felt the consultant was doing a good job for them. If the news director likes the work of the consultant, then the personal relationship between the two is likely to be a healthy one as well.

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The personal interviews with representatives of the three major consulting firms offered some of these same conclusions. The consultants expressed the belief their business is in a constant state of change, and it is vital to keep up with these new ideas to remain competitive. The consultants stressed teamwork is important for their recommendations,

advice and research to work for a client. All the consultants said they had no "miracle cures" for a station with woeful ratings, but each said, by working hard and working smart, they were confident improvements could be made. Each consultant admitted the lame economy is being felt by virtually any business that is broadcast-related, but the strong companies will survive these difficult times and continue to flourish in the future.

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A confidential mail questionnaire can never give a true portrayal of the attitudes of all potential respondents, and this research project certainly was no exception. While the survey offered confidentiality, it also was somewhat limited

in the responses available, largely as a means of obtaining a substantial response rate to validate its findings. In other words, the close-ended questions where a choice of three-to-five answers were available perhaps did not offer the findings necessary to draw a true picture of the attitudes news directors have of consultants.

Perhaps future studies would include the opportunity for more written comments from news directors, yet still keep the responses confidential. Here respondents would have the freedom to express real opinions and attitudes, as opposed to merely checking off a generalized response. The questions could be more open-ended, encouraging potential respondents to reply with a short, written answer. Attempting such an experiment would run the risk of a low response rate, but the findings might be a better indicator of the respondents' beliefs. Perhaps administering the survey at the annual meeting of the Radio and Television News Directors Association would be the best way to elicit a high response.

In retrospect, there were several questions on the survey that offered few insights about attitudes regarding consultants, and probably could have been omitted. Inquiries about the number of newscasts done per day and whether a station used more than one consultant did not offer concrete findings. Staff size and years of experience of respondents also did little to explain beliefs and attitudes, although these questions perhaps allowed the respondents to grow

increasingly comfortable with the survey as they proceeded. Questions about who the news director hired as the result of a consultant recommendation also were not necessary. In almost every case, it is predictable that a consultant will make recommendations about on-air talent. Finally, the questions regarding station revenues probably could have been left off the page as well. News consultants will have little to do with the actual "selling" of the news product. It is their job to primarily make improvements in the product and its ratings, not to actually increase revenues.

While some questions could have been omitted, others certainly should have been expanded. Perhaps future research projects in the area of news director attitudes toward consultants will look more at the economics of the business. If stations are cutting back on consultant use, why are they cutting back? Is it because the station is having budget problems? Or could it be station management believes the consultant is ineffective? Further inquiries should be made into the actual dollar figure some stations are spending with consultation firms. The last available response on the question about consultant spending was "More than \$30,000." In further research, it has been determined this figure was too low. Some big market stations routinely spend six figures annually on consultants. Perhaps "More than \$100,000" should be the final available choice. However, it will likely be difficult to obtain such data because some news directors are

reluctant to divulge this information, even with the promise of confidentiality.

Questions about how often a consultant visits or makes contact with a news director also could be expanded upon in further research. Perhaps a follow-up question might ask respondents "How often would you prefer to see or hear from your consultant?" It could be that some news directors simply do not want their consultant visiting them every few weeks, or calling them every other day. Other news directors may prefer the constant contact. Another follow-up, open-ended question might ask "What would you like to see your consultant do on his or her visits? Would you like to see them work more with on-air talent? Help reporters and producers with their writing? Or help news management with its budget?"

The question regarding the ethics of the consulting business probably needed further clarification, and could also be further studied. Instead of asking "Has your consultant ever offered to do something you thought was unethical?" perhaps it would be better to inquire "Have you ever seen or heard of a consultant doing something you thought was unethical?" Even consulting firms might agree the number of "Yes" responses would likely increase if the question were phrased in such a manner. The ethics of television news consulting has long been a matter of concern and considerable discussion among those who have spent years in the industry, and certainly the topic would be worthy of future research.

Again, perhaps more open-ended questions would work best here, asking news directors to specifically tell what the consultant did that they felt was unethical.

Finally, on questions that inquired about future consultant use by a station, further research should be done to determine why a station may want a change of consultants. Again, could it be strictly a budgetary problem, or might there be a personality difference, a disagreement over the advice the consultant wants to administer, or that the consultants' past performance has been unsatisfactory? Further study could also explore why some news directors want to keep their current consultant. Do they believe the consultant is effective in helping them maintain the quality and ratings they desire? Is the consultant really that smart? Does the consultant provide valuable research and information? Does the consultant help implement the data in order to make his or her service an asset to your news operation?

Further study certainly could also be done to determine consultant attitudes toward news directors. Perhaps here a confidential open-ended questionnaire could be sent to several different consultants to gather their beliefs and attitudes about their own clients. Do the consultants themselves feel they are truly effective in helping clients improve their product and ratings? How do they feel about the ethics of the business? Would they be willing to do something that might be deemed "unethical" if it would help a station dramatically

improve in the ratings, and increase the amount of money that station would spend with their firm?

Attitudes about consultants are certainly changing, and future study is recommended to keep up-to-date about these attitudes among those who are their clients, i.e., news directors and television general managers. Consultants also admit their industry will undergo numerous changes in the coming years, so further research will be constantly needed to remain in touch with these competitive firms. Ironically, this business that relies so heavily on research has been largely untapped in terms of academic and scientific research about itself, and further research projects will undoubtedly uncover new, interesting and helpful data.

Final Analysis

It would seem the television news industry could exist without consultants, but consultants could not exist without television news. In fact, according to the results of this project, many stations are getting by without consultation advice, and in the interviews with representatives of the major firms, the consultants admitted some stations are cutting back on their services. Yet it is also quite clear that many stations want consultation advice and research, and at least two of the major consulting firms continue to prosper, even during difficult economic times. So what might the future hold for both groups?

The only certainty seems to be the roles of both local

television news and consultants will continue to change. Local network affiliates will likely always struggle against increased competition. The days of three choices per viewer and fifty and sixty percent profit margins are a part of broadcasting's past, and will stay there. Television news directors know they not only must convince viewers to watch their newscast over the broadcast of the other local affiliates, they must now convince viewers to watch them instead of dozens of choices in entertainment. It is an enormous challenge to be met.

The major consultation firms also know this is a period of change. No longer are they able to take for granted that a client will stay with them and always purchase their services, no matter the cost. In these lean economic times, stations are struggling to maintain the advertising revenues of the past, and may not be able to spend the money it wants, or should, on consultation advice or research. The solution, or perhaps the dilemma, for the consulting firms is to offer more work, more personal visits, more advice and certainly more research and data, for the same amount of money paid by clients in the past. It is not a choice for consulting firms, it is a necessity of the times, a *demand* by their customers.

Yet it is the strong belief of the writer that both local television and the consultation business have a solid future. While there are certainly many network affiliates around the country struggling to keep a news department in operation, it

is the general view of many broadcasters that, as the old saying goes, the strong will survive. In the Knoxville market, for example, it is quite possible that WBIR-TV may be the only station doing news at the turn of the century. Certainly this would be a disservice to the people of East Tennessee, to only have one or perhaps two alternatives for local television news. (Already this is a reality with the late local news, as WKXT-TV dropped its 11 P.M. newscast in April of 1991). However, even with all the competing forms of entertainment, the writer believes there will always be an audience for local news. People will want to know what is happening in their town, and they will want to know *immediately*, which is the chief advantage broadcasting will always have over the print media.

If there is a need for local television news, then there should be a need for experts in the field to offer advice and research. While in the future, there may be decreased competition in the number of local affiliates producing newscasts, the competition from entertainment should always be a threat. As long as there is competition for viewers, there will be a need for consultation advice. The belief that competition will always necessitate a need to improve is a *realistic* hope. An *optimistic* hope is that local news departments will always have the desire to improve, to make their presentation of the news better for the viewer.

Consultants and news directors must work together in the

future to make these improvements. Television news has made enormous gains in recent years, both from the perspective of growing technology, and, in the view of the writer, in terms of quality. Small and medium markets, like Knoxville, now appear to be on the same plane of quality as much bigger cities, and consultants can accept some of the accolades for this improvement. In short, if consultants continue to work *smartly* with their clients, the goals for both can be met.

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Appendixes

Appendix A

****QUESTIONS FOR NEWS DIRECTORS****

- 1). How long have you been a news director? Less than 2 years? ____ 2-5 years? ____ 5-10 years? ____ More than 10 years? ____
- 2). How long with your current station? Less than 2 years? ____ 2-5 years? ____ 5-10 years? ____ More than 10 years? ____
- 3). How many years in the television news business for you? Less than 5 years? ____ 5-10 years? ____ 10-20 years? ____ More than 20 years? ____
- 4). What is your market size? Top ten? ____ 10-25? ____ 25-50? ____ 50-100? ____ Over 100? ____
- 5). How many people on your staff? Less than 20? ____ 20-50? ____ More than 50? ____
- 6). How many newscasts do you do per day? Early Evening? ____ Late evening? ____ Morning? ____ Noon? ____ Cut-Ins? ____ Cable newscasts? ____ (Check more than one if applicable).
- 7). Overall, combining the numbers, where do you stand in ratings competition with the other stations in town? First? ____ Strong second? ____ Distant Second? ____ Strong third? ____ Distant third? ____ Other? ____
- 8). What were your May 92' numbers (ratings and share points) for your early evening news? ____ Late evening news? ____ (Please fill in the blanks).
- 9). Does your station use a major consultant? Yes? ____ No? ____ (ARD, Magid, MuHugh & Hoffman?)
- 10). Does your station use the services of more than one consultant? Yes? ____ No? 90 ____
- 11). If "yes," which one(s)? ____
- 12). Has your station cut back on using a consultant because of the economy or budget concerns? Yes, cut back a great deal? ____ Cut back a little? ____ No cut backs at all? ____
- 13). How much money did your station spend on consultants in 91'? Less than \$5,000? ____ \$5,000 to \$10,000 ____ \$10,000 to 20,000? ____ \$20,000 to \$30,000? ____ More than \$30,000? ____

14). In 1992, will the amount your station will spend on consultants . . . Increase a great deal? ____ Increase a little? ____ Stay about the same? ____ Decrease a little? ____ Decrease a great deal? ____

15). How do you feel about the amount of money your station spends on consultants? Would you like to see it spend . . . A good deal more? ____ A little more? ____ Keep spending about the same amount? ____ Spend a little less? ____ Spend a whole lot less? ____

16). How often does your consultant visit your station? Once every two weeks? ____ Every two to four weeks? ____ Every one to three months? ____ Every three to six months? ____ Once or twice a year? ____ Consultant never visits? ____

17). How often do you hear from your consultant, i.e., phone calls, tapes in the mail, etc? Once every two weeks? ____ Two to four weeks? ____ One to three months? ____ Three to six months? ____ Once or twice a year? ____ Never hear from consultant? ____

18). Do you primarily use your consultant . . . As a talent scout? ____ For advice on improving the "look" of your newscast? ____ To learn what other markets are doing? ____ (Answer more than one if applicable).

19). If you've used the consultant as a talent scout, have you hired someone the consultant recommended?
Yes ____ No ____

20). If "yes," did you hire a(n) . . . Anchor? ____ Reporter ____ Producer? ____ Photographer? ____ News Administrator? ____ Other? ____ (Check more than one if applicable).

21). Generally speaking, are you pleased with the talent your consultant recommends? Yes, very pleased? ____ Marginally pleased? ____ Not very pleased? ____

22). Does your consultant work with the talent in your newsroom to help them improve? Very often? ____ Sometimes? ____ Very seldom? ____ Never? ____

23). Do you worry that a competing consultant in your market will try to "steal" your talent?
Yes, worry about this a lot? ____ Worry about this a little? ____ Never worry about this? ____

24). Does your consultant give you ideas on ways to make your newscast better? Very often? ____ Sometimes? ____ Seldom? ____

25). Do you respect the advice of your consultant?
Always? ☐ Most of the time? ☐ Sometimes? ☐
Not really? ☐

26). How often do you apply ideas or advice from your consultant? Very often? ☐ Sometimes? ☐
Very seldom? ☐ Never? ☐

27). Have you ever felt pressured by management to use the advice of a consultant -- even though you felt the advice was not in the best interest of the newsroom? Yes ☐ No ☐

28). Do you feel your consultant has a great deal of influence at your station? Yes, a great deal? ☐ Some influence? ☐
Hardly any influence at all? ☐

29). In your opinion, has your consultant ever made a recommendation or offered to do something that you felt was unethical? Yes ☐ No ☐

30). What is your personal relationship with your consultant? Very good, lots of mutual respect? ☐ Very businesslike? ☐
Neither good nor bad? ☐ Strained or awkward? ☐

31). Do you sometimes feel threatened by your consultant, i.e., they may recommend a change in leadership for the newsroom, etc.?
Yes, very threatened? ☐ Sometimes feel threatened? ☐
A very slight threat at times? ☐ No threat at all? ☐

32). Do you think your station will continue to use its current consultant in the future? Yes, almost certainly? ☐
Not sure, that's up to management? ☐ No, we will not use this consultant? ☐

33). Since the consultant came on board, have ratings . . .
Gone up? ☐ Stayed about the same? ☐ Gone down? ☐

34). If up or down, did the consultant play a role?
Yes? ☐ No? ☐

35). Since the consultant came on board, have station revenues . . .
Gone up? ☐ Stayed about the same? ☐
Gone down? ☐

36). If up or down, did the consultant play a role?
Yes? ☐ No? ☐

37). Would you like to see your station change consultants?
Yes, we need a different consultant? ☐ No, I'd like to keep the same consultant? ☐ I don't think we should use a consultant at all? ☐

38). Would you ever consider a career change to a consulting role? Yes, I'd like to be a consultant? ____ Never really thought about it? ____ No, I would never want to be a consultant? ____

IF YOU HAVE ADDITIONAL COMMENTS OR THOUGHTS ABOUT CONSULTANTS, PLEASE ADD THEM IN THE SPACE BELOW. MANY THANKS FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION.

Appendix B

Questions for Consultants

- 1). What is your company's history? How did your consulting firm come about?
- 2). How many consultants work for your firm, and how many stations do you serve?
- 3). How often do you visit each client? Is that by request, or do you invite yourself from time to time?
- 4). Do you typically find all three major consulting firms working at the same time in the same market?
- 5). Are some stations cutting back on your services because of the sluggish economy?
- 6). How much influence do you have in the quality of a news department?
- 7). What are some of your "tried and true" formulas for success in television news?
- 8). What are some trends we are seeing these days in television news?
- 9). Do you recommend shorter stories and a high story count in a newscast?
- 10). Do you recommend fewer "meeting" stories and more stories that are more visually interesting?
- 11). What about series work (several stories on the same topic)? Do you recommend a good bit of this type of news coverage?
- 12). How receptive are TV news directors to your recommendations?
- 13). How carefully must you handle these situations?
- 14). What about general managers -- Are they usually more receptive to your ideas about how to improve a station's news product?
- 15). How do you improve on a newscast that is already high in the ratings?
- 16). What is the role of the consultant in coming years? Will the influence of consultants increase or decrease?

17). Will we see a growth in the number of consulting firms across the country?

18). What is your personal background? Have you worked in TV news yourself?

19). How many markets do you serve personally?

20). What is the typical amount of money a station will spend with your company?

21). Do you see your job as primarily being a talent scout? To tell clients what other markets are doing? Or to improve the "look" of a newscast?

22). How often do you recommend talent to stations? Is the role of talent scout being de-emphasized now with consulting firms?

23). Do you think there are situations where a General Manager favors you over his news director -- and may insist the news director use your advice?

24). The findings of the survey indicate news directors do not believe consultants are unethical? What is your reaction to that?

25). How effective do you think you can be in improving ratings for a client?

Appendix C

227 Countryside Circle 58-C
Knoxville, Tenn. 37923
July 15, 1992

Dear News Director,

Please don't let the impersonal heading to this letter fool you -- I'm really a friendly guy. It's just that I'm sending out about two hundred of these letters to news departments across the country. My name is Chuck Denney and I'm a reporter at WBIR-TV in Knoxville and a graduate student in Communications at the University of Tennessee. I'd like to ask for about five minutes of your time. And no, it's not to apply for a job.

I'm working on a masters thesis on the impact of television news consultants and what news directors think of them. I've included with this letter a survey of mostly "checkmark" and short "fill-in-the-blank" questions. I would be very grateful if you would answer these questions for me. If you would like to make additional comments, I'd like to make that part of my paper as well. I value your opinion. There's also a stamped envelope with my name and address on it that you can drop back in the mail.

As you can see I won't know who says what on the questionnaire. Lots of surveys claim they're confidential, but this one really is. The intent is not to embarrass or insult anyone -- it's simply to get some good information on attitudes news directors have about consultants. This should take just a moment to complete and I would appreciate your honesty and candor.

I'll look forward to adding your responses to my research. If you are interested in learning the results of this project, please contact me at (615) 691-3296. Give me a few weeks to put it all together.

Thanks again for your time.

Happy ratings,

Chuck Denney

Encl.

Appendix D

227 Countryside Circle 58-C
Knoxville, Tn. 37923
August 10, 1992

Dear News Director,

About mid-July I sent many of you a questionnaire on your feelings and attitudes about the effectiveness of consultants. It's part of a research project I'm doing for my Masters Thesis. The response has been pretty good -- about thirty-three percent -- and I want to thank all of you who have helped me out.

For those of you who haven't responded, please search the mound of paperwork on your desk and see if the questionnaire might still be there. If it is, please take a moment to fill it out. These are almost all "checkmark" answers and should take about five minutes of your time.

As for the results so far, generally speaking, you guys seem to like your consultants and what they do for you. I would appreciate hearing from you. Your opinion is valued.

Best Regards,

Chuck Denney

VITA

Charles M. Denney was born October 20, 1962 in Lebanon, Tennessee, and completed this thesis on his 30th birthday. He attended public schools in Wilson County and graduated from Lebanon High School in 1981. In high school, his love of journalism was born as he began working as a sports reporter for "The Lebanon Democrat," the town newspaper. He moved on to Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky, where he worked as a reporter and anchor for the campus radio station and a student-produced news magazine program that aired on a local cable channel. In 1985, he graduated from W.K.U. with degrees in both Broadcast Journalism and Speech Communications.

After a brief stint in cable and radio sales, the author began his career as a reporter and producer with WKYT-TV in Lexington, Kentucky in the summer of 1986. Denney covered a number of key stories in his three years in Kentucky, including the Governor's race in 1987, the presidential campaign of 1988, the NCAA basketball investigation of the University of Kentucky, and the supreme court ruling declaring the state's public school system unconstitutional.

In late 1989, Denney accepted a reporting position with WBIR-TV in Knoxville, Tennessee, and continues to work there today. The author won reporting awards in 1990 for his coverage of a shootout involving the FBI, police and bank robbery suspects. In the fall of 1990, Denney entered the UT

graduate school.