

Telling the 30-Minute TV Message in One or Two Minutes*

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IT IS MY BELIEF that TV and radio, if used properly, can help the farmer and consumer to select the information they want and need from that which is available. If we will use radio and TV to create awareness and interest in a subject, then refer those interested to other detailed sources of information, we'll be making the best use of these media.

Perhaps a more accurate title for this paper might be "How We're Reaching Larger Audiences on Commercial TV With One- and Two-Minute Spots." So that you'll understand why we've done what we have in Utah, let me give you a brief background on our situation.

In Utah, we've used the commercial TV stations more than the ETV stations because they provide a much better coverage of the entire state (via translators). Since Utah's population is primarily urban rather than rural (and therefore so is our legislature) our messages are aimed primarily to the consumer or the general public rather than to the agricultural producer. All the commercial TV stations in Utah are in Salt Lake City, so they prefer this "consumer" approach too. Let me add that ETV is developing rapidly in Utah—and we are using those channels too—but that's another story.

For years Extension has been supplying television programs to local commercial stations in various formats, program lengths and frequencies. The form of these programs generally has been determined by some combination of the following (not necessarily in

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this order): the persuasive ability of the Extension media specialist; the public service interest of the TV station; and, the quantity of unsold time available on the local television station's schedule. Too often the latter has been the primary factor determining when, how and in what form Extension messages appear on television.

During my 15 years of experience in Extension TV, I have seen our programs pushed from the noon hour on Saturday to 11 a.m.—to 9 a.m.—to 7 a.m.—and finally into the TV graveyard of Sunday morning, between 7 and 8 a.m.

During this same period of time, I've observed the same TV program directors who welcomed our hour-long—or even two-hour-long—Extension programs in the early days of television suggest that perhaps we should/could “tighten up” our presentations a little and fit them into a 30-minute slot, or even cut them a bit more and share a half-hour period with another “public service” client.

Over the years there have been many changes—some good, some not so good—from our point of view. But it has not all been a loss for those of us in Extension production. Along with the changes I have mentioned, there have been other changes which have tended to counteract the loss of minutes-on-the-air, choice broadcast schedules, etc.

For example, the television audience has been growing tremendously over this same period of time. More people have television sets, there are more TV stations on the air, and people are devoting more time to watching television every year.

Thus I was intrigued—not threatened—when one of the commercial TV channels in Salt Lake City suggested that they'd like to abandon our two one-hour Extension television programs on the weekend in favor of 35 two-minute TV spots—five per day, seven days a week. This involved around-the-clock scheduling—not much Class A time but considerable daytime TV.

Although I'll have to admit that I didn't “jump at the chance to change,” I did give it careful consideration and discussed it with my associates and supervisors. After much deliberation, we concluded there were several potential advantages including greater

exposure, more frequent messages, ability to get into color (via film), shorter but more timely production time involved, etc. We decided to accept the offer. (Not all those potential advantages developed as expected! Production, for example, did not require a lot less time as we had expected.)

We began to produce two-minute *features*—sound, color films on a variety of subjects—and submitted them to the station. (We do hard news on TV too, but today I'll confine my remarks to features.) Needless to say, we had problems—cost, film breakage, color balance, poor production. But we had excellent assistance, constructive criticism, and strong encouragement from the TV station, KCPX-TV, Channel 4. And slowly but surely we learned how to do it. Our production techniques vary, from “quick and dirty” to traditional production systems. Thus our costs will vary too.

Scripts were written, edited, rewritten, and often abandoned and started again from scratch. Extension personnel who had presented a 30-minute program with little more than a one-page topic outline for a script—and ad libbed as necessary to fill the time—were now sweating blood to get the essential points of their message in the time limitations of the spot format.

Essentially, that is precisely the format that our programs assumed, the style and approach of a one-minute commercial. But instead of selling soap or shortening—the guarantee of romance which comes with whiter teeth, non-greasy hair, or from drinking a low-calorie drink—we began selling tips on how to care for your lawn, understanding how children grow and develop, good nutrition, and insect control.

Of course, it is impossible to give much detail on these or any other subjects in 60 seconds. So, again we took our lead from the commercial advertiser. We built our message on a pattern that's as simple as A-B-C.

Basically it goes like this.

A. *Here's a problem.* For example:

How can I have an attractive lawn?

Why be concerned about snack foods?

What can I do to encourage my child to grow and develop?

What is eating the leaves of my roses?

Why should I be concerned about the alfalfa weevil?

B. *We have a solution.* For example:

Water lawn deeply, not too often; don't mow short; and fertilize properly.

"Snack" foods are "empty calorie" foods—filling and fattening but not necessarily nutritious.

Observe, encourage and praise the child.

Grasshoppers.

The weevil can destroy alfalfa crops—Utah's largest cash crop—raising the price of hay and thus of meat and milk.

C. *Here's how you can get assistance.* For example:

Write for our free lawn bulletin.

Stop in county Extension office for nutrition guide.

Call Extension office for advice or assistance.

Follow ideas presented here.

In my opinion, there are several reasons for the effectiveness of our short segments. I'd like to list them, not necessarily in the order of their importance.

1. *The messages appeal to a select (limited) audience.* This is true of every message. You sell the listener/viewer on your product/service most effectively only when he is in immediate need of that product/service.

2. *Short messages can be repeated.* Offsetting the cost of production of good one- and two-minute spots is the ability to repeat these many times over a period of several weeks, months or even years, depending on seasonal limitations, audience appeal, etc. They can also be rotated and used in many time periods for broad exposure.

3. *There are fewer good TV program times available.* The commercial demand for TV time (even marginal time periods) has made it difficult to obtain public service time for longer Extension programs when the audience is large enough to justify the cost and the effort.

4. *The mass media are most effective in creating "interest" and "awareness."* Bohlen and Beal, in a 1957 study, determined that it was in these earliest stages of the adoption process that mass

media made the greatest contribution. Subsequent studies, and several years of personal experience in communications, support these findings. Use mass media to make people aware and interested in a problem or situation, then direct them to a source for answers or assistance. Leave the complete details to those media which excel in this process—primarily the written media.

5. *Extension is better able to compete for the viewer/listener's time and attention against all of the other competing messages/activities.* Every day the typical viewer/listener is bombarded with hundreds of messages from every side. Each of these is competing for his time and attention. The questions become: what do you listen to/see; what do you remember; what do you ignore; what do you hear—but quickly forget? I believe we can be more successful in getting the viewer/listener's attention—and in having him remember our message on TV and radio—if we keep it very brief, attractive and simple.