Your Growing Role as a TV Station Scientist

I don't normally use vegetable analogies, but it just seemed to fit this article. We all know the term "getting blood from a turnip", right? I have to wonder just how many broadcast meteorologists feel a lot like…well… a turnip.

Even on a "non-severe" weather day, our workload can be rather mind-boggling. Along with the responsibility of forecasting, producing, and performing our on-air broadcasts, we are also graphic artists, web bloggers, tweeters, speakers, and even on occasion, a station tour-guide. Are you feeling like a turnip yet?

So is there room for another role?

A recent online survey of AMS television broadcasters shows that even with your crazy workload, the majority of you are welcoming your new role as "station scientist" and comfortable with the responsibility. And that's great news, because your viewers want to hear and learn about important science and environmental information and they prefer to hear and learn about it from someone they trust…you.

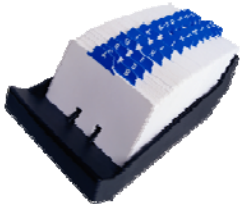
Of course, another huge benefit of being your station's science "guru"… job security. As stations continue to slash budgets and streamline to stay in the game, there aren't many newsrooms left that have a dedicated science/environmental reporter. In fact, it's likely there is no one in your station more scientifically trained than you.

What does it mean to be a station scientist?

It means many things….

First, you must do your homework and know the issues. Example: In order to accurately communicate the IPCC's latest report on climate change, you have to take the time and make the time to do the proper research. Be the watchdog. Try to have your producers run any environmental or science-related story by you first. This team-related approach serves many purposes. It will ensure accuracy. You may be able to find more creative ways to present the information, and you will be prepared for the chit-chat and to make comments once the story airs.

Second, you need to be the rolodex of information. Create a key list of websites you trust to access information quickly. Let's face it, most of the time you are needed most as the station scientist in times of breaking weather and breaking news. Having your references ready will reduce your stress level and make you look even smarter when the camera is on and all eyes are on you to deliver.



Third, you need to stay in the loop. Subscribe to feeds and religiously check environmental, space, climate and science related websites, journals and newsletters to see what's new.

There are a growing number of resources out there to help you keep up with the latest science and environmental news. For example, the National Environmental Education Foundation (NEEF) is a great resource. It's a non-profit government organization that caters to the broadcast community to educate the public about the environment. NEEF has partnered with the AMS to create Earth Gauge. A subscription service that provides different types of quick-access environmental and science information broadcasters can use both on the air and on the station's website. Both the Society of Environmental Journalists ((http://www.sej.org/) and Science News magazine (http://www.sciencedaily.com/) post excellent daily science news email blast. Once a week, the Science News magazine posts an email as well (http://www.sciencenews.org/). There are of course email posts from NASA too.

StormCenter Communications (http://www.stormcenter.com) is also a pioneer in the business of providing broadcast meteorologists quick and easy ways to educate viewers about weather and climate news. Check out their Envirocast® suite of products that are specifically developed for on-air and on-line use by providing environmental and remote-sensing imagery, graphics and information for the television industry and others.

COMET has many interactive and educational modules available that you can access straight from their MetEd website. Of particular interest is the Broadcast Meteorologist community page (http://www.meted.ucar.edu/broadcastmet.php) that has many relevant modules, including the newest release: "Climate Change: Fitting the Pieces Together". By taking these modules you also earn CEU's which can be used to keep your NWA and/or AMS certification current.

Fourth, Think KISS (Keep It Simple Sam). Even if your name isn't Sam, you are a broadcaster, and you got the job because you have the gift of being able to take complicated scientific information, make it easy to understand, AND fit into a 30-second news story.

Finally… have fun with it! When you are passionate about the information you are delivering and finding creative ways to deliver it, your viewers can sense that. You feed them information they want and they'll come back for more. It's a recipe that can help you and your station win the ratings game together.

So all you TV station scientists/gurus/turnips out there….get ready…get pumped…get that blood flowing ….it's not just about the weather anymore.

It's your time to shine!

Our thanks to Mish Michaels for her contributions to this article.

Kristine Kahanek, Veteran and Former Broadcaster, CBS 11 KTVT
Greg Byrd, Professional Development Committee