

INFORMATION AND EDUCATION HUNTER SAFETY SESSIONS

THE USE OF TELEVISION IN CONSERVATION AGENCY PROGRAMS

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The discovery that successful communication is best achieved when the message is transmitted through a variety of sensory medium is hardly new. The realization of this age-old fact, even among professional communicators, is much more common however than is its execution. Conservation agencies across the country generally strive to disseminate their propaganda through "balanced programs", consisting of printed matter, personal contact, radio, television, etc. The use of television in recent years as a major component has slowly but surely occupied a greater percentage of the overall information and education programs throughout the country. Recent studies have shown that 75 percent of this country's population experience their exposure to wildlife through television, establishing this medium's potential as one of the greatest available to conservation agencies.

As a communication channel, television offers several different types of programming. Among these are: public service announcements, news spots, feature film airings, live interviews, and seasonal and/or weekly series. Currently there are 2 basic systems through which these types of programming may be utilized. They are commercial and public broadcasting systems (PBS). Both have advantages and disadvantages. Commercial stations typically reach much larger audiences than do PBS stations but are often much harder on which to gain time. PBS stations on the other hand are often eager to cooperate in productions done by outside groups.

In Oklahoma, as most other states, most television productions emanate from stations in the larger metropolitan areas. In Oklahoma City, the state capital, most of the department of wildlife conservation's television efforts center around the state's public broadcasting system. Ninety-five percent of the state receives a common signal from a network of stations belonging to this PBS system. In Tulsa, the state's second largest city, extensive work is done with one of the city's major commercial stations.

In an effort to find out how other state conservation agencies were taking advantage of television we surveyed the remaining 49 continental states. Specifically we asked about their use of public television and through comments from the respondents we also found out much about their commercial station efforts.

The primary goals of the survey were to find out what types of programming are most frequently being utilized, to accomplish what goals, over what limiting factors, and to ultimately what degree of success.

The types of programming most frequently used, as the percentages of television effort in the overall information and education programs, were primarily determined by the different opportunities and circumstances each state encountered. The range of opportunities available to agencies to use public or commercial stations was wide. Some states

had no opportunity to work through PBS since no such system existed within that state. Others had PBS stations but no state-wide network. A few were simply not interested and others, as in Oklahoma, were very receptive and cooperated well with agency efforts.

The type of programming potential was not as wide in the commercial stations and was more restricted to the public service announcements, short news features and feature film production airings. Those states with significant PBS efforts outnumbered those with commercial station efforts more than 3 to 1. Thirty-five states replied to the questionnaire. Of the 14 states that did not respond, one would be inclined to assume that most had little or no major efforts in either PBS or commercial programming.

Combined PBS and commercial programming types consisted of 6 year-round weekly shows, ranging from 5 to 30 minutes and 9 series productions from 3 to 26 weeks a year. Almost everyone produces from 3 to 30 public service announcements, numerous live interviews and short news features for airing.

The goals each state attempted to attain were quite similar, consisting of informing and educating the public to outdoor opportunities within the state, improving the understanding of conservation, the natural environment and its components and the agency's responsibility of managing the state's natural resources. Some states had specific goals such as hunter safety certification and boating safety education.

The limiting factors slowing the accomplishment of these goals were also quite common. Manpower, equipment and budgetary restrictions were almost unanimous answers. Another factor, although it did not show up in this category, was also quite obvious. Many stations simply do not desire productions from outside agencies.

Often these limiting factors dictated the type of programming the states produced. The more ambitious programs were obviously those with more manpower, equipment and a greater chunk of the overall division budget. Those with the larger budget allotments tended to produce more frequent and longer shows and greater numbers and distribution of news stories and public service announcements.

Each state obviously must feel their television efforts are successful to a satisfactory degree or they would not be utilizing them in their overall program. Reaching a higher degree of success is the continual goal of each state and with each accomplishment new goals are established. To reach these goals wise decisions in replacing existing equipment or purchasing new types of equipment may offer the greatest hope because substantial increases in budgets or manpower appear unlikely.

While television is no longer in its infancy, its technology is still expanding at a rapid pace. The use of film is still an important part of the medium but today video-tape is much more commonly found in studios and on location. Its advantages are speed and, after the initial cost of purchase, less expense. That initial cost however has prevented many of the states agencies from purchasing this type of equipment. Several states are now using it in their television programming and express satisfaction with it but most states are still restricted to film. While there is still some debate, the trend in television production today is definitely headed in the direction of video-tape.

One method of moving into this new field without major cash outlays is to commercially lease camera equipment and editing time. Close work with your cooperating television stations may also produce new potential and some states also have specific state information service agencies which serve as public relations arms for other state agencies. They may well have the latest in video-tape equipment and be glad to work with you. Another potential exists within the state universities media departments.

There are other trends in television developing which may also be technologically related. One is the simple numerical expansion of television stations. In addition to the traditional network affiliated commercial station we see today growing numbers of UHF,

cable and satellite stations. With increased competition for programming among these stations popular and attractive topics like wildlife and conservation may bring representatives of these stations to your doorsteps.

Each state's conservation and natural resource agency does operate in a different set of circumstances. Therefore there is no single answer or outline by which to develop your overall television program. A good start though is to take advantage of the opportunities you currently have available and then create new ones.

The potential of television as a communication tool is awesome. Like it or not, it is today's chief informer and educator of the masses and we, as conservationists and especially as conservation communicators, must utilize it to the best of our abilities. You can bet that other groups will not pass up a single opportunity.