



CASE 8-2

The Talk Show as News Lead-In

Dexter Followell was not fond of news consultants. As a twenty-year veteran of television news, he had ruefully witnessed what he considered to be a rather sinister assault on his industry's journalistic integrity. Beginning in the 1970s, Followell had seen local TV news evolve from serious hard news and commentary to soft features and station self-promotion masquerading as news—mostly as a result of consultants' recommendations. Nevertheless, as the news director for Channel 7, a CBS affiliate in the twin cities of Helena—St. Vincents, Followell had reconciled himself to the inevitable intrusion of entertainment values into his professional domain. Local news figured prominently in his station's bottom line, and economic pressures competed with deadline pressures for his managerial attention.

Followell had been hired by general manager Richard Rosenberg just eighteen months ago with one mandate: restore Channel 7 to number one in the market for the early evening news segment, which consisted of a 5:00 news magazine, fol-

lowed by the *CBS Evening News* and then the local news from 6 to 6:30. The station had languished in the number two slot for almost two years behind Channel 4, the market's ABC affiliate. According to the latest ratings book, Channel 7 was number one in the 4 to 5 time position occupied by *Myron Casteel*, the latest and currently most popular among the entries in the already crowded talk show marketplace. And like most programs of this genre, its audience feasted on a daily diet of sexual perversion, social misfits, and uninhibited public declarations of abnormal personality traits. But despite *Casteel's* appeal, Channel 7 was unable to hold its audience, which quickly defected to its competitor's 5 P.M. offering, a loyalty that carried over to the *ABC World News Tonight* and the 6 P.M. local newscast.

Rosenberg had promised Followell the full support of the station's resources in overtaking Channel 4's increasingly sizable lead in the 5 to 6:30 time position. The first "resource," much to the news director's chagrin, was to seek the advice of Mason & Associates, Channel 7's consulting firm that had guided the station's journalistic destiny for eight years. As the station approached the next ratings sweeps, Rosenberg reviewed the consultant's carefully crafted advice with his cautiously optimistic subordinates. Mason had recommended a new set design, reversing anchors for the 5 P.M. news magazine program and the 6:00 news and the incorporation of several new feature segments in the magazine show that had worked in other markets. As the staff reviewed the consultant's recommendations, Followell told his colleagues that, as news director, he had no strong objections to most of the recommendations, which were based on solid research and success stories in other markets. If these changes helped Channel 7 to recapture the ratings lead, he reasoned, then he could make the case for greater expenditures to expand what he considered to be more serious news coverage.

However, Mason's last recommendation gave Followell pause. To hold the station's audience from the popular *Myron Casteel* for the 5 P.M. magazine show, the consultants advocated regular news tie-ins with the syndicated show. For example, if *Casteel* featured child molesters on a given

episode, the follow-up magazine show might include a segment on state laws requiring that convicted child molesters notify their neighbors of their conviction once they're released. Or a *Casteel* segment on teenage prostitutes would be followed by a local feature on that topic.

"I know what the consultants recommended," said Followell. "But I have reservations about using *Casteel* as a tie-in for the five o'clock magazine. In effect, this talk show would be dictating our news assignments. Let's face it. Entertainment values already determine a lot of what we do. But *Casteel* should not serve as a cue for our news content."

"I don't see any real ethical issue here," responded Thomas Moreland, Channel 7's general sales manager. "We get ideas for news stories from a lot of sources. Localizing our news coverage based on national events has always been an acceptable—even a desirable—journalistic practice. And it certainly makes our news program more attractive and more appealing to our audience. If we can spin off of a popular lead-in talk show, I don't see anything wrong with it as long as we consider the story worthy of our audience's attention. And let's face it—sales for the 5 P.M. show have been soft. This tie-in could be a great angle to help sell the show."

"I agree," said program manager Tony Oliver. "The tie-in will probably help our audience flow, especially if we promote it properly. After all, most of the topics discussed on the *Casteel* show—including the offbeat ones—are of interest to our audience. I see no problem with giving them a local spin on the news magazine show. This could help shore up our entire early evening news position. And the increase in ratings will show up on the bottom line. We all benefit, including the news department."

"I don't have a problem with using ideas from entertainment shows, as long as they have news value," replied Followell. "But it's *this* particular show that's the problem. It specializes in the offbeat, sensational, and bizarre. I realize that *Casteel* is popular with our audience. But a direct news tie-in with this show could cost us in terms of journalistic credibility."

"But as long as we don't resort to tabloid treatment of these stories—that should separate us sufficiently from *Casteel*," said Rosenberg. "We can still deal with these issues in a responsible manner, regardless of whether the topic is sex slaves, wife swapping, or child molesters."

"I'm not concerned about our treatment," replied Followell, undeterred by his manager's confidence in his staff's sense of journalistic propriety. "But some topics are simply not matters of legitimate public concern. And I'm afraid that this tie-in will result in our coverage of topics that are nothing more than attention-grabbers, with no news value."

"That is a danger," conceded Rosenberg. "But your staff can guard against that kind of temptation by making an independent judgment as to whether a particular story has any real news value. If it does, then what's wrong with taking advantage of a strong lead-in to boost the magazine show? In any event, it's your call, Dexter. I don't care what you do as long as we see some ratings improvement in our early evening news positions."

THE CASE STUDY

As noted earlier in this chapter, the marketing concept holds that each division of a media organization should contribute to the organization's profitability. In the case of a television station, that includes the news department. And as the source of most of a station's local programming, news has tremendous profit potential. Thus, the economic pressures to subordinate journalistic values to entertainment values are relentless. But are the two necessarily incompatible?

In this case, the station's consultants have recommended that a popular syndicated talk show be used as a journalistic cue for the 5 P.M. news magazine show. The rationale is that if the topic captures the interest of the *Myron Casteel* audience, it will continue to do so for the following time position. And this in turn could have a domino effect for the 5:30 network and 6:00 local newscasts. From a programming perspective, this is good strategy.

But the news director's concern focuses on two consequences. First, he fears that the often sensational and salacious content of the *Myron*

Casteel show will influence the news judgment for the 5 P.M. magazine segment. Despite his best efforts to ensure that each story is evaluated on its own merits, he is concerned that entertainment values driven by economic pressures will prevail. Second, even if his news staff is convinced of the journalistic merit of specific subjects featured on the syndicated talk show, Followell is still concerned about the public's perception and loss of credibility as a result of the regular tie-ins.

His colleagues, none of whom are journalists, believe that the news department is just as responsible as other departments in contributing to the station's economic viability. They also feel that the news department itself stands to benefit from any move that will boost the ratings of the locally produced news shows. They also are convinced that the news department can maintain its credibility, because many of the topics covered on *Myron Casteel* interest the public. Why should the news department, they wonder, feel uncomfortable with treating journalistically the rather offbeat subjects featured on a popular talk show?

Station manager Richard Rosenberg has left the final decision on the controversial consultant's recommendation in the hands of the news director. As the moral agent, Followell must weigh his journalistic concerns against his responsibility to the overall economic welfare of his employer. Assume the role of news director Dexter Followell, and decide whether you will accept the consultant's recommendation to use the syndicated talk show as a regular tie-in for Channel 7's 5 P.M. news magazine show.