



Why Weather Matters:

Sunny or Stormy for Local News?

Weather forecasting has been around since the 1700s, when the nation's livelihood literally depended on the weather. Benjamin Franklin published his own weather reports, as did Robert B. Thomas, whose Farmer's Almanac is still published to this day. As technology supported new media like radio, television, and the Internet, weather was always a staple of any news broadcast—though today's audiences are more concerned about school closings and an icy rush hour than they are about crops. The weather itself has taken on a blended role of news story and entertainment.



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Weather Can Make It or Break It

Weather has become a major consideration for local stations and audiences alike. Once, weather was an incidental part of local news coverage.

To increase interest in weather segments, stations relied on “weather girls,” young, attractive women that brought audiences short, cheerful forecasts. Today’s weathercaster is one of the big four local news personalities, along with two news anchors and a sportscaster. This person can be trusted and beloved or a polarizing joke.

While likability and good looks are important for weathercasters, accuracy is even more crucial. 78% of audiences say that local news is their top TV source for weather forecasts, and studies show that an accurate weather report (delivered by a likeable meteorologist) is a highly influential factor in choosing a station. In a 2010 year-end survey by Hearst Television and Frank M. Magid Associates, 53% of respondents said they tune into a local newscast specifically because they prefer the weatherperson. Compare that with 50% who report that they trust the news anchors. That’s a lot of pressure for the weather, which accounts for only about 9-13% of the total local news time (including advertisements).



Powerful Weather Branding

Local networks rely on their news programs as the foundation of their brand image. As weather takes a more central part of the newscast, it can be used to support branding.

Honolulu, HI station KGMB worked with consulting firm AR&D to brand itself Hawaii’s Severe Weather Station. While most of us think of Hawaii as a tropical paradise with pleasant weather year round, local residents asked for better coverage of severe weather—heavy winds, hurricanes, tsunamis, heavy rains, flooding, earthquakes, and volcanoes. Even though such dangerous conditions are infrequent, KGMB included its new tagline, Hawaii’s Severe Weather Station, in every station ID and opened its newscast with the weather.

In the months following their new branding mission, Hawaii saw some of the worst weather it had seen in years—a major earthquake, heavy winds, flooding, and a close call with a hurricane. Audiences turned to KGMB for coverage, and the station lived up to its brand. Four years later, the station was number one in brand recognition and had seen a 9-point increase among locals naming their favorite station. Their 6 p.m. newscast was up 29% in the demographic and they became the top late news station (among both households and the 25-54 demographic), which was no small feat considering the same station had held this spot for over 20 years.

Since then, KGMB has changed its slogan, but it still maintains a Severe Weather page on its website, complete with a hurricane tracker, interactive radar, satellite images, and a section about tsunamis. The weathercasters have kept the name Hawaii’s Severe Weather Team.

One of the strengths of KGMB’s approach was that it decided to brand itself as Hawaii’s Severe Weather Station, but it didn’t trump up weather reports with sensationalist forecasts. KGMB aimed to focus its branding efforts around newsworthy weather events, which drew in viewers and kept them coming back, even on sunny days. Such separation between daily forecasts and serious weather stories establishes a station as reliable and trustworthy, which is what audiences want from the weather report.



Branding Approaches

Weather is a versatile feature to use as a foundation for a local newscast's branding strategy. While most markets aren't in agricultural hubs, the weather still impacts everyone, from the office worker wondering if she should go to the car wash on her lunch break to the elderly couple deciding to sleep in the basement during a tornado watch to the parents worried about missing work if school is canceled.

Reliability is important, and accuracy alone can increase viewership for a particular newscast. If your station has more accurate reporting than other networks, a branding strategy that highlights this is a great place to start. Track weather accuracy compared to other local networks, and decide what needs to be done to make your station the area's number-one weather station.

The weather affects our daily lifestyles, and a weather segment that promises to deliver forecasts with specific viewers in mind will fare well. For instance, a station hoping to brand itself as a healthy living station should cover air quality conditions dealing with allergies, pollution, and fitness. A station going for a more active approach could offer regular features on fitness, boating, and camping forecasts, using popular recreation spots as temperature points in reports. This does not mean a station needs to pigeonhole itself. A general healthy living or recreation approach encompasses endless possibilities that can change with the seasons.

These types of reports can generate more interest in the weather by giving it a practical application. They can also support a station's overall brand. To connect with a range of local viewers, stations can match a weather segment's focus to the target demographic of its newscast. For instance, early evening news (6 p.m.) is popular with baby boomers and older Americans, so special gardening and arthritis forecasts would appeal to these viewers. Late news audiences are generally younger and might be interested in beach, barbecue, and commuter forecasts for the following day. Morning audiences are likely to enjoy fitness and allergy reports that help them plan their day.

Sponsorships and Tie-Ins

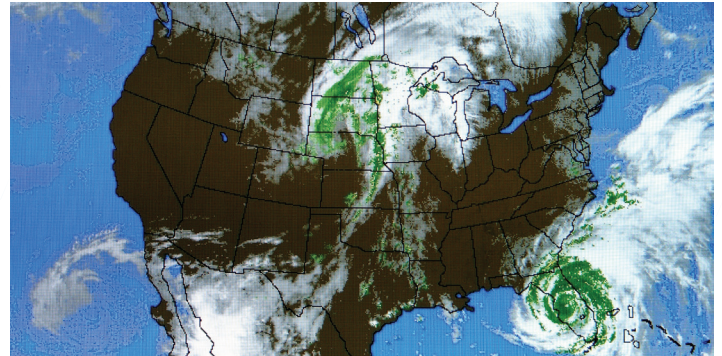
A reliable weather report can also facilitate revenue by presenting advertisers with an opportunity for promotions and tie-ins. By being sponsors of a weather or school closing report, advertisers will be on viewers' minds when people are planning their days around the weather. Here are just a few examples of industries that depend on weather—and a reliable weather report. Depending on the climate and businesses in your local market, you can probably think of a few more potential weather sponsors.

Agricultural supply	Hotels and resorts
Airlines and airports	Ice cream shops
Amusement parks	Laser hair removal
Auto repair shops	Lawn and garden centers
Beachside businesses	Motorcycle dealers
Bicycle shops	RVs and campers
Bridal shops	Shoe stores
Ski resorts	Sporting goods stores
Camping stores and campgrounds	Stadiums and sports teams
Daycare centers	Surf shops
Diet Centers	Swimming pool contractors
Doctors	Transportation businesses
Parks departments	Travel Agents
Environmental services	Vascular surgeons
Exterminators	Veterinarians
Golf courses	Zoos and aquariums
Gyms and health clubs	
Hot tub retailers	



Balanced Weather Reporting

It's no secret that severe weather is big news. Most local stations pull out all the stops when a blizzard or hurricane hits, with constant reports about what has happened, what's going on now, and how weather conditions will change. A hurricane can double ratings for local newscasts, which is an incentive for some stations to provide sensationalist weather forecasts. Ratings, after all, equal revenue.



This is when things get tricky for stations. Audiences want two things from their weather forecasts: 1) accuracy, and 2) entertainment value. The truth is that weather, while difficult to accurately predict more than three days out, is quite stable in most places. Average temperatures and precipitation levels are available for cities, states, and regions, as are the average number of days of rain and snow each year. Rain, clouds, and sunshine are as exciting as most weather forecasts will be.

Audiences complain about weather hype, but they also enjoy watching it. Why else would viewers stay glued to weather reports for extended periods of time even after the worst of a storm has passed? To find success, stations need to strike a balance between accurate reporting and event coverage. Practical weather tips (picnic days, baseball forecast, fitness forecast, sledding report, etc.) can make a mundane weather report more exciting.

A quandary emerges. Typical weather is not entertaining to audiences. The same viewers who want smooth commutes, sunny days, and predictable weather conditions want to watch something entirely different come news time. They want to see something exciting—Gusts! Gales! Tempests! They want reasons to stock up on canned goods and buy new pairs of boots. The potential of having a blizzard so huge that school or work is canceled is thrilling. And stations want to give their viewers the thrills they want.

A station looking to buck the current weathercast trend for local network news (weather teaser then, eventually, a half-hyped 7-day report that's only half accurate) might win viewers by taking an unusual approach. One strategy to try is giving audiences the best of both worlds: local weather and emergency coverage of weather news that happens somewhere else. This is the approach taken by The Weather Channel. Perhaps a station taking a balanced approach could offer the tagline "The No-Hype Weather Station," "Weather without the Hype," or "Real Weather, No Hype."





People Follow People

The personality of a weathercaster is also an important part of the equation. A strong meteorologist can make weather worth watching, even when skies are clear and temperatures are mild.

Likeability is important for all news personalities, especially in the digital era. Local news is one of the top items accessed on the Internet and social media sites. The social media adage is that people follow people, and a likeable weathercaster will get more followers and viewer interaction online. This instills loyalty among a local audience.

Stations use social media and mobile sites to find stories, follow up on leads, communicate with audiences, get viewer feedback, and provide a community discussion forum. The weather is a great topic for social media and mobile sites. Users can share photographs and increase the on-the-ground coverage for their station. They can also get up-to-the-minute weather updates, when they're away from home, which is one of the reasons why weather is the number-one topic checked via mobile devices.

Mobile devices are powered by battery, giving people access to weather and emergency news even if the electricity goes out. This multimedia mobile technology helps stations keep up with radio as well.



The recent tornadoes in the South and Midwest highlighted the importance of social media in today's weather coverage. Entire regions were without power. While television stations had backup generators and reporters working throughout the storms, they worried that people wouldn't be able to access the information they were producing without television. But mobile media saved the day, and possibly lives. "We had people tell us stories about hiding in the bathtub, the power off, watching us on their iPhones, hearing the reports and warnings. They saw it as a lifeline," Tom Henderson of WTVN in Chattanooga told TV News Check.

Sources: AccuWeather, www.accuweather.com, Audience Research & Development, LLC, www.ar-d.com, 5/11; Boston Globe, www.boston.com, 2/21/10; Flint Journal, www.mlive.com, 2/4/08; Freakonomics, www.freakonomics.com, 4/21/08; Northwestern University, Media Management Center, "The Local TV News Experience," 7/20/07; Pew Research Center, "2011 State of the News Media," stateofthemedias.org, 5/11; The Sport Journal, www.thesportjournal.org, 12/04; The New York Times, www.nytimes.com, 2/16/10; USA Today, www.usatoday.com, 8/8/10; The Washington Post, www.washingtonpost.com, 2/6/10; The Weather Channel, www.weather.com, 5/11; TV News Check, www.tvnewscheck.com, 5/4/11, 3/28/11.

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