

Low Budget Color Production for Commercial TV

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Abstract

Educational TV in the United States, in general, has been a failure.

Low Budget Color Production for Commercial TV*

Gary Nugent

EDUCATIONAL TV in the United States, in general, has been a failure. Despite millions upon millions of dollars poured into university studios, community stations, and even state educational networks, the ratings from all reliable sources show that educational TV is not reaching many people. There are always faint glimmers of hope which show that the possibility for educational TV reaching the masses is just around the corner. These dying embers are fanned by the vested educational TV interests who need to perpetuate jobs and to find new rationalizations for building vast technological empires.

Most recently, *Sesame Street* has been touted as an indication of the new public demand for education programs. It is interesting to note, however, that *Sesame Street* is much closer to entertainment television than most universities would care to admit or care to emulate in production. *Sesame Street* is also the rare classic example of how millions of dollars are being devoted to programming instead of hardware. More important, *Sesame Street* selected an audience and then found out how to reach that audience.

University produced educational television continually assumes that a ready audience will consume whatever it cares to televise and that the high degree of expertise presented to the educational TV audience will be graciously received and appreciated. The ratings and even in-depth surveys, show that nothing could be further from the truth. The American general public has not demonstrated a preference for most educational television programming even

*This talk was presented by Mr. Nugent at the 1972 AAACE meeting, Tucson, Arizona.

when equal reception has been available. The situation is so pathetic that the new Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) made special precautions to prevent the word *education* from being incorporated into its name. PBS also decided to hire some people who were good communicators. The results are encouraging, but still not as desirable as most of us would like to view. One of the problems with PBS is that it maintains, like most educational stations, a snob appeal which repels most of the less affluent masses. Instead of turning the masses on, snob appeal, under the guise of high quality, turns off sets or turns the TV dial to more interesting channels where people and programs are more identifiable with the viewer.

At Purdue, our extension television efforts attempt to forget the snob appeal and we try to use the old extension philosophy of starting where the people are. For us, this means an avoidance of educational TV stations and the snobbish image they project. We know that people watch commercial TV stations by preference and by habit, and we want to be where the people are.

In addition to divorcing ourselves from the image of educational television, we like to work with commercial TV stations for another important reason—they have color and we don't. They are also willing to let us have access to their facilities and personnel if we will meet them halfway and provide a continual supply of program material. We have found that when we bring the program, they will help us produce it, record it, and give us air time all free of charge.

One example of this cooperation is our statewide show called AGRISCOPE. For more than three years, we have been producing this half-hour program in cooperation with an AVCO station in Indianapolis, WLWI-TV, Channel 13. While we have many different extension weekly shows throughout Indiana, this is the one program which has multiple-distribution to ten stations.

For many reasons too numerous to mention here, we selected an illustrated talk show format, perhaps not the most ideal format, but one which we could realistically accomplish with non-professional academic talent and with the expenditure of bare minimum resources. Each week, 52 weeks a year, we supply a

different university guest who plans the content for his own show under consultation with our Department of Agricultural Information. We do not, however, give the Purdue guest a chance to address the TV cameras directly. Unlike educational TV, we do not want our people speaking "at" the audience. Instead, we insist that the TV station provide one of their regular personalities to serve as host. Now, the station also insists on this measure as they like the cross-promotion for their personality. The host asks his own questions, but he does this from an outline prepared and mailed to the host in advance.

In addition to the outline, the host also receives background material on the topic for each show. With this advanced information prepared by the guest, both the guest and the host feel more secure and they are then headed in the same direction. However, we do not allow scripts or rehearsals. The guest does arrive at the studio one-half hour in advance to review the outline with the host and to answer last minute questions.

When the program is recorded, the host does all the introductory comments, transitions, and watches the time signals. The guest does not look at the cameras, but responds to the host and answers the questions which he knows he can answer because he has predetermined the content. To maintain spontaneity, the half-hour show is taped in exactly one-half hour. In three years, we have never had to stop, except for an occasional technical mistake by the production crew. Visuals are either on the set or in the film chain. Studio monitors are hidden behind and to the side of both the guest and the host so each can see the slide and motion picture illustrations without losing eye contact.

The topics for AGRISCOPE cover the complete range of work being done in research, extension, and teaching within the Purdue agricultural complex and all the guests are from the Purdue main campus. We tape the show on our tape, so we own the show. After each program is aired twice on Channel 13, once to a weekend afternoon audience and once to a weekday morning audience, we circulate each tape to one commercial station in every TV market in Indiana.

Each station runs the show free and our total cost per half-hour

show is two dollars per play per station, or twenty dollars total per week for out-of-pocket production expenses. One of the two dollars goes to renewing our tape supply when tape wears out (usually after about 100 plays and it costs about \$100 per half-hour reel) and the other one dollar goes to the host as a token preparation fee. The last fee is not absolutely necessary, but we do this to help maintain the host's interest and encourage him to read the guest's prepared material. He *does* read the material and the \$500 annual bonus is appreciated.

So, for about roughly \$1,000 total production cost per year, we have a half-hour quality-produced show on ten TV stations in every Indiana television market. By adding the total from each audience rating at each station, we know we reach roughly 100,000 people per week of which half are non-rural. When we are adjacent or near a sports feature on Saturday afternoon in Indianapolis, our audience on the one station for one showing often exceeds that number.

AGRISCOPE is successful not because it is a super production, but because we have met our commercial friends halfway without sacrificing content. The station has given us their air time and their host. This helps us to dispel the negative stigma of educational television and we look better from both a technical and content standpoint. Their host and their time also dispels the propaganda image as well as the educational stigma. Frankly, we are an information show which most people stumble across while watching their favorite channels. We don't assume that our show is so captivating that people will set their dials and wait for us. A few do, but most people see us by accident because we are where they are. The same show on educational television would have less than 1 percent of the same audience.

AGRISCOPE is not the only TV effort conducted by Purdue agriculture. We have a weekly four-minute taped feature on ten farm and TV talk show programs, which has been used as an insert for more than five years. We also provide live guests for TV talk shows and we counsel our extension agents who have several half-hour color weekly shows on commercial channels throughout Indiana.

In addition, we work with commercial TV stations for occasional documentary specials for prime-time broadcast; as I am writing this I just made a reminder note to watch an Indianapolis originated documentary this evening which will feature Purdue agriculture for about six minutes on a special called *Pollution Solution*.

We also do some cable TV experiments and occasionally send color film clips to TV news shows. We would like to do more, but staff time is limited and we have to put out a lot of fires coming from administrative and field offices. However, we feel we are getting our money's worth from our TV effort because we don't waste our valuable time on educational TV operations, but prefer to go to our commercial friends who have the audience.