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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 116: MARK KURTZ – THE BUSINESS OF LOCAL TV NEWS

Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, this is Leadership & Business. The podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can help make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. How do you get your Daily News? We have more options today than ever before apps, social media, podcasts, websites, feeds, newsletters, and more. As new media continue to take over the news landscape, some traditional media like magazines and newspapers are struggling. According to a Knight Foundation report released in April. One medium around for more than 60 years is the go-to news source for Americans' local television news. Mark Kurtz is News Director at WAVY TV in Norfolk, Virginia, a top 50 market. He joins us on the podcast today to talk about local TV news, how it's changing, and why people continue to choose it as their source for news. Here's our conversation with Mark Kurtz of WAVY TV.

Ken White

Mark, thanks very much for joining us. It's a real pleasure to have you here. Thanks for sharing your time with us.

Mark Kurtz

Honor to be here. Thank you for having me.

Ken White

You know, back in the day, you know when things started going online, and the Internet started kicking up. You know the word was boy local newspapers might not make it local TV news might not make it, but local TV news is doing just fine.

Mark Kurtz

Local TV news is doing really well.

Ken White

Yeah. Why? How did it happen?

Mark Kurtz

I think one of the things I think that we've embraced the Internet that's a huge part of our business. It's a growing part of the business, and we haven't shied away from it. I think that you know one of the things that local TV has, we have a connection to the market that other people don't have. You know the people on television, you know the personalities there's a face. A lot of people can name their favorite weatherman their favorite sportscaster. People will know our chief meteorologist who's been there since 1981, and they probably can't name a newspaper reporter.

Ken White

Right.

Mark Kurtz

So there's a connection to television that doesn't quite exist with newspaper. And I think that our content it plays better in all these different devices we are in the video business we're in the storytelling business whether it's on your phone or your TV at the house however you're consuming it. What we do does translate pretty well.

Ken White

Yeah.

Mark Kurtz

I think that's one reason why you're seeing TV stations continue to be profitable, and TV stations continue to chart a future is because it really is about telling stories. It's about content, and what we do really does play well on all these devices that people are carrying and using these days.

Ken White

Yeah. So when you say embracing the Internet obviously, people know that you have many newscasts over the air, so to speak. Where? When you're embracing the Internet, what does that mean? What are you doing?

Mark Kurtz

So you know it used to be you produce for the six o'clock news.

Ken White

Right.

Mark Kurtz

There was a deadline for the six o'clock. We still have that. We do a lot many more hours of news than we did before that we call it the linear world. You're going to sit down and watch at 4 o'clock and watch for 30 minutes or whatever, but everybody in our newsroom is trained and is has been gone through the training to make sure they're producing content basically all day long. Yes, our reporters have to be ready for the six o'clock news the 11 o'clock news, but they are turning content working with web producers all day long. That may be a picture, maybe information, and maybe an interview may be a soundbite. So the Website's being updated all day long in this process. And so their world has changed so much where it used to be one deadline two deadlines it's kind of constant deadline. We don't hold stuff anymore. We do special investigations and things that may run at a certain time but used to be held everything back. You know that press release came in, don't you know, don't post that right. Everything that can go out does go out almost immediately, and that's built on throughout the day.

Ken White

So, as a result, you have better insight into your viewers into who they are what they like.

Mark Kurtz

Oh, absolutely because I'm going to tell you immediately. You know it used to be you got letters now with social media it's all day long you hear you hear what they like or they don't like they're gonna tell you about it real quick and say you know exactly what they like. Also, at the Internet, the metrics are just amazing. We can see what people are consuming. We can see what they're clicking on. We know you know down to the number of people looking at it. But then the platforms are different. Television is different than the Internet and things that may bubble up on the Internet. It's a function of people clicking on their phones or looking through social media may not be the same thing that leads a newscast at night. And so you have to kind of look at that and know when to when that's information you want to use or you know take that into consideration because there may be a story that's just kind of a wild Internet you know good internet story maybe its not the most important thing in the world you're not going to lead the news with it you're not gonna lead the six o'clock news with it, but it may be just blowing up on the website.

Ken White

Yeah.

Mark Kurtz

And so you just take that into consideration and kind of have to know the audience watching each platform and know the strengths of each platform, whether it's the television or the phone or whatever it is.

Ken White

Now being in a top 50 market. You've got the technology you've got things you need. Where are you with mobile? What's local television news doing in terms of the phone?

Mark Kurtz

You know wavy.com is an app, mobile, web. Almost all Web sites now are built for the mobile phone anyway.

Ken White

Right.

Mark Kurtz

Because almost the vast majority of people are watching us and accessing us through the phone, not sitting at a computer like they used to. But yet we have a couple of apps that we have that you download those apps, and you get all the info you can get everything we put on online every newscast is streamed there. That's a huge part of our business. And it really is where people are you want to meet them where you are in that mobile app when people download that you talk about a superuser you talk about a brand loyalist that's the one that has made the decision I'm going to download your product. I want it on my phone. I trust you, and a lot of times, you know they'll opt-in for push alerts you get those alerts on your phone.

Ken White

Yeah.

Mark Kurtz

And we can use that as a way to one tell the important information but also tell them maybe what we're doing stories they should be aware of weather that may be happening. We can tell them hey watch the news tonight. We have a really cool story that you'll see it on at 6:00 and try to actually push them to the TV side. Those are the people that really are with you. Those are your true brand loyalists because they have opted in to get your content. They're not passively consuming it. They have gone and downloaded that that app onto their phone. And so we try to always make sure we take that seriously and don't you know don't inundate them with stuff that they might not want to know.

Ken White

Sure.

Mark Kurtz

But we do know we they trusted us to be a part of their day. Really.

Ken White

This is available everywhere because it is the internet, and it isn't on social media and so forth. But you're still very local.

Mark Kurtz

Yes.

Ken White

How do you, how do you? What. What is your philosophy in terms of as the news director, and as then as the news organization at WAVY, what your philosophy and your goals for local coverage?

Mark Kurtz

So you can put stories out there that will get huge numbers, and then you look at where they're consumed, and they kind of went out in the world and they went viral, and it's people all over the country, and those are not really the folks that are going to watch the local newscasts. They're not the community they're not going to buy from the advertisers that are on our station that are not going to buy a local car. They're not going to go to a local restaurant. And so we really focus very highly on the local consumer of news the local stories our entire company's philosophy is just local.

Ken White

Hmm-mmm.

Mark Kurtz

Local content and that sounds simple, but it's not. You can get really pulled into stories that are very catchy. They're big nationally, but they may not have a lot of impact here. Right.

Ken White

Sure.

Mark Kurtz

So. So everything we do is is enterprise journalism local stories whether they're hard you know investigate investigative stories that really hard news or even lighter stories that have you know people want to see here locally in their communities. And that's really the filter we go through. Is it local? You know people pitch stories, or you know you'll get press releases from things and it's kind of a national or maybe a east coast type thing and is it really a story that affects someone in Williamsburg or in Norfolk or Virginia Beach and

really doesn't it's easy. It's out there, but we really focus local content, local people, local stories, and I think that's one of the things that sets us apart. It's one of the things that sets local TV apart in general and one thing that sets us apart as a news organization in the market.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Mark Kurtz of WAVY TV in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at William & Mary's School of Business. In order to retain top employees, the best companies and organizations invest in their people by offering high-quality professional development, and some of those companies and organizations turn to William & Mary and our Center for Corporate education for their needs. The Center for Corporate Education offers professional development programs for all levels of employees, from executives to managers to emerging leaders to new hires. The programs are taught by William & Mary's MBA faculty. The faculty rank number one in the nation by Bloomberg Businessweek magazine. To learn more, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with Mark Kurtz News Director of Norfolk's WAVY TV.

Ken White

You started out your reporter, you're an anchor, and you've been news director for a while. What does that job entail?

Mark Kurtz

So as news director, I mean, I have basically ultimate editorial control. You know what we're do what we do day in and day out. What leads a newscast long term projects. So anyone in the newsroom falls under me.

Ken White

Hmm-mmm.

Mark Kurtz

And it's certainly a group process is it's you know it's a lot of discussion a lot of debate but ultimately someone has to be the person that says this is what we're doing today. And that falls under me. You know hire the reporters I hire the producers, and you know two parts of the job there's the day to day there's what's happening right now. And then there's looking down the road there's going to be an election there's going to be something in the water festival in Virginia Beach is going to be two weeks out. What do we need to do to be prepared for that? And I've got managers that helped me do that it's certainly not a one man operation. I've got some very talented people on the technology side the content side the digital side. We all come together and say, okay, we want to cover this

event. We want to cover a snowstorm or whatever it's going to be or maybe stories we want to do we want to go after a certain topic of stories the opioid crisis something like that we say how do we want to cover this and what can we do online versus television. So my job really is to bring those folks together and make sure we're covering things appropriately. We're covering it with the right you know the right amount of you know being aggressive about stories we should be aggressive about knowing when to back off, and we should back off of things. You know the shooting in Virginia Beach was a great example of that. You want to be very aggressive in getting information out and finding out what happened, but you have to do that with compassion and tact.

Ken White

Right.

Mark Kurtz

And just make you know you need someone that can step back from it and not be you know in every little detail kind of step back look what we're doing as a whole.

Ken White

Hmm-mmm.

Mark Kurtz

What are we doing on all of the platforms we control. And you know and that's one of the reasons I love the job is because when I was a reporter I worked on one story and every day was different. But I really worked on one or two stories.

Ken White

Right.

Mark Kurtz

I anchored a newscast. I get to see kind of all that I can see the content. I get to see the way it's produced. I get to work with the people that actually put it on the air, the production folks the people that promote it. People that sell it. That's one of the reasons I love that job is it does cross over all those different departments.

Ken White

Yeah, you mentioned a reporter back in the day one or two stories day. What's your typical reporter doing now what's what is our day like?

Mark Kurtz

If you're a general assignment.

Ken White

Right.

Mark Kurtz

A dayside reporter It's an all-day process, and it really depends on the story, but it there's the newsgathering portion of it, which is all day really, but the internet the social media has changed their day so much. And knowing what to put on social media versus what you can't put on social media as far as I may have this confirmed, but I don't know these details yet. So walking through that, but the average reporter their day would start with a morning meeting they would pitch a story if they have a story idea. There are obviously things you're going to cover, and they may already be pre-assigned. You know you were going to cover the big trial today, but their day is a constant gathering of information learning details and sharing it in the appropriate way, whether it's with a web editor. So they could put it on the website. They may be shooting video on their phone while the photographer is out getting other video. They may be doing their own interviews. They promote themselves through social media, and then they have to be ready for those traditional deadlines. There's going to be a deadline for five or five thirty-six or a ten or eleven whatever it may be and getting their reports ready getting approved and then being ready to go live for that minute and a half.

Ken White

Yeah.

Mark Kurtz

You know that's the shortest part of their day.

Ken White

Right. And the best part of their day probably.

Mark Kurtz

Probably the best part hopefully if everything goes right, but its the shortest part. All this work. You know eight and a half hours work and they are on TV for a minute, a minute and a half.

Ken White

Yeah. Weather it's just it's such a main, it's a staple of local TV news. Well, how much time is devoted to weather saying in a basic newscast?

Mark Kurtz

You know whether it's if a newscast is 30 minutes long, you're probably going to have at least a main weather that's three to four minutes.

Ken White

Hmm-mmm.

Mark Kurtz

And then you'll have it depends what the weathers doing that day. But you know it's the old joke about the weather. Everyone cares about it. Everyone cares, and we may do stories in Williamsburg or in Virginia Beach, and if you don't have a connection, we cover a large area.

Ken White

Yeah.

Mark Kurtz

You might not necessarily care what the school board in Virginia Beach is doing if you don't have kids there. Everyone cares about the weather, and it's probably going to affect everybody. It's going to blow through, and it's going to everyone's going to get rain not get rain be cloudy be you know get snow knock it snow. And there's that everyone cares about. But there's also a real public service. We are licensed to operate in the public interest, and I know that you know we'll get comments about why are you on TV why you're interrupting my show. We're not doing it because we want to you know as much as the meteorologist love the weather. They they're not doing it to interrupt your programming or to have to bother you. They feel there's really a need they're scientists they have seen something that's worrisome to them, and they want you to know about it. And so we will all we always air on the side of safety. You know you want people you never want to have someone say I didn't know something was going to happen and we had some wild, crazy weather events. You know that we look at what happens in other parts of the country. And so weather is very popular. Everyone has an opinion about it. Everybody has something they want to say about it. They've they like this the hottest or the coldest or they you know they remember when that happened 20 years ago. I remember this is the storm that came through. And so there's that natural interest in it. But then there's also a real public service part of it. And you know it's funny. We'll have a snowstorm, or we'll have you know severe weather. And you know people will say why aren't you covering X Y or Z. Well, there's six inches of snow on the ground. That's the story.

Ken White

Yeah.

Mark Kurtz

That weather is the news at that point, and it would be a little silly, almost cover something else. But yeah, we employ four meteorologists and all the great meteorologists who they're scientists. They have the TV they have the ability to be on television.

Ken White

Right.

Mark Kurtz

To communicate but they are scientists, and they see themselves as that, and you know they'll come in and tell you all the scientific fun detail then we talk about you know how do you tell the viewer that

Ken White

Right.

Mark Kurtz

So they understand it, you know because they're kind of geeking out on the science portion of it.

Ken White

Sure.

Mark Kurtz

But yeah weather huge weather is just one of those things that everyone cares everyone wants to know about it, and you have to win that space you know to be successful.

Ken White

How about sports. How big is that it?

Mark Kurtz

You know there's the diehard sports fans. You know if I would say that sports really when it transcends just X's and O's and you know scores then people care. They love a good story. They want to know about athletes and sports. You know local sports does well. People do care about that. And so I think sports has actually seen a bit of a resurgence in the past few years. You know there's probably a time when some stations were killing sports or dropping it altogether. I know that our company thinks it's very important because it's so local.

Ken White

Right.

Mark Kurtz

And you know we try real hard to cover local course you're going to see the big you see the big national teams you're going to see that stuff. But if you're waiting for us to tell you the score from yesterday's game, no one's doing that. I mean no one's doing that, but they will turn us on to see a story about maybe William & Mary you know team what they're doing, how are they doing it who's on the team. What's something about the coach.

Ken White

Yeah.

Mark Kurtz

They want to see that stuff. And so sports you know there are some people who are never going to just never be sportspeople. But I think that if you tell a good story, people will watch it. And that's what you see a lot of times used to be always at the end of the newscast and now sometimes you'll see sports stories creep in at different places. If it's a good story, it could be at 5:00 or early earlier in the newscast because just a great story about a great person or a great team that did something. And so it's kind of a different way of thinking about sports as opposed to three minutes into the newscast that you know you still do that.

Ken White

Hmm-mmm.

Mark Kurtz

But a lot of times if someone has a really great story about a player or something we'll put it elsewhere in the show just because.

Ken White

Interesting.

Mark Kurtz

It's just a great story.

Ken White

Yeah.

Mark Kurtz

You should know about it.

Ken White

So what's the next big thing where is local TV news going do you think in the next few years.

Mark Kurtz

Well, you know it's being driven by the technology. Streaming online streaming is a such a huge you know I don't think we know the true impact of that yet. The Netflix of the world and that sort of thing the Hulus of the world. I think that you know will the streaming space is going to be huge for us because it's going to you know the people are it's just shift the consumption patterns is shifting they still want the content they still want to watch local TV, and local content weather and they want the stories people are just kind of getting their news, and they're getting their TV in a different way. So being in that space is the next big thing I think when you talk about the viability of television, you know as long as we're there in those spaces which we will be it's going to be good for us because you know it's there'll always be a six o'clock news. There will probably always be. You know you're going to wake up in the morning at seven o'clock six o'clock, and they'll be morning news there how you get it just may be totally different it may be through a streaming service or you know they'll be the people to watch it on their phone there's gonna be traditional folks there still people that get us over the air it's free it's HD looks great and I think that you know you see younger people discovering that and realizing I can stream this and I can watch wavy over the air with a little antenna for free. And people are doing that more than they used to. So you know the number of people who get TV over the air is actually gone up.

Ken White

Wow.

Mark Kurtz

In the last few years because to them, it's this really cool thing they stream their movies and they watch local TV over the air. But streaming is really the big place where it's going. And the thing about that that provides you that's an on-demand world. So that really changes how do you think about the day when it's you you may have newscasts, but now I can watch you in my big screen TV, and I can pick anything I want to watch. You know we feel like we're gonna be thinking about the on-demand viewer as well, and we may be producing content for a newscast, but we'll probably be producing content all the time they're really the deadlines will just be whenever it's available and available for you to watch it.

Ken White

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