

MARKETPLACE

February 5, 2004 Thursday

Copyright 2004 Minnesota Public Radio. All Rights Reserved

LENGTH: 721 words

HEADLINE: People Meter could eliminate sweeps week

ANCHORS: DAVID BROWN

REPORTERS: JOE ZEFRAN

BODY:

DAVID BROWN, anchor:

Tonight the cast of "Friends" welcomes Danny DeVito to the show. NBC hopes a guest appearance will boost ratings and set the table for bigger ad revenues down the line. This so-called 'very special episode' is just the start of a month-long effort by the networks to attract viewers. They call them the "sweeps." In the local TV ratings game, the only game in town is the local news.

MARKETPLACE's Joe Zefran reports these seasonal stunts could become a thing of the past if a little electronic box has anything to say about it.

JOE ZEFRAN reporting:

Sound familiar?

Unidentified TV Announcer #1: Low-carb diets are all the rage, but are you getting what you pay for?

Unidentified TV Announcer #2: Kitchen wonders. Do they work?

Unidentified TV Announcer #3: Imagine, no more scrubbing those pans. The test.

Unidentified TV Announcer #4: Seven sexy tips to make your room more romantic, tomorrow at 4.

ZEFRAN: Every February, May and November, sweeps series invade most local TV newscasts. Some of them are hard-hitting investigative reports about the hell of wearing high heels, others are consumer-friendly stories in which strippers test sunless tanning creams. So why do news departments dish this out to audiences? Ratings.

Mr. MARTY KAPLAN (Media Analyst, University of Southern California): And they do it, not by giving them the broccoli end of the spectrum, but more the ice cream.

ZEFRAN: That's Marty Kaplan, a media analyst at the University of Southern California. He believes local news already offers a steady diet of junk food. So now ACNielsen company, the dominant ratings calculator, is pedaling a solution to sweeps. It's the People Meter, an electronic box that can monitor everything you watch all 12 months of the year. Many TV journalists say they welcome the change, including Mark Suppelsa, an anchor at Chicago's Fox affiliate.

Mr. MARK SUPPELSA (Anchor, FOX, Chicago): Because if there are ratings boxes plugged in year-round, news directors would be forced to just do the news year-round. It's hard enough to fight those guys when they ask you to do some dumb sweeps story and you want something that you think is more substantive.

ZEFRAN: Or it could lead to a flood of dumb sweeps stories year-round. The president of Chicago's NBC affiliate, Larry Wert, thinks so.

Mr. LARRY WERT (President, NBC affiliate, Chicago): We're no longer going to be incentivized to have those just during sweeps. When news breaks, you almost have to think about holding it for a sweeps period to maximize the ratings potential. And that's something that we're going to get away from.

ZEFRAN: And media analyst Marty Kaplan worries that could make bad local TV news even worse.

Mr. KAPLAN: In the past, a city council story or a board of education story had a chance of getting on the air outside of sweeps, but not during it. Now my fear is that the only thing that will lead will have to bleed year-round.

ZEFRAN: The leads bleed. In other words, crime and mayhem top newscast because research tells news managers that's what people want to see. But long-time Chicago news anchor Ron Magers dissects the data a different way.

Mr. RON MAGERS (News Anchor, Chicago): Sometimes research doesn't tell you what people want. Maybe it needs to be read as 'things you're doing wrong.'

ZEFRAN: He remembers when research at a station indicated viewers weren't interested in news about the state legislature. But instead of cutting the coverage, Magers doubled it, and made it better.

Mr. MAGERS: And in the next year's research, state legislative news was near the top of the list of things people were interested in.

ZEFRAN: If that translates into ratings the People Meters can detect, USC's Marty Kaplan says newsroom management might respond.

Mr. KAPLAN: Local station ownership has become the most profitable part of the entire entertainment business. And so if you get a fraction of point more, then you can rake it in over the coming months.

ZEFRAN: People Meters are expensive to operate, so Nielsen is testing them in some of the biggest cities first. But if they're as effective as the company claims, the local news you see and the way advertisers count ratings could be in for big changes. I'm Joe Zefran for MARKETPLACE.

LOAD-DATE: February 6, 2004