







November sweeps a \$200M news contest

Advertisers make buys based on percentage of viewers for local broadcasts

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The local television market is a \$214 million pie, and news can be the knife that cuts a bigger slice of it for a station.

That's what is at stake with each ratings "sweeps" period, when local news operations pull out all the stops to offer hidden-camera investigations and attention-grabbing features. The November sweeps are seen by insiders as the most important of the year, so the initial ratings available last week were the subject of keen interest at bottom-line-conscious local stations.

KCRA Channel 3 maintained its decades-long dominance in the local TV news market, but its competitors are gaining ground, the latest numbers show.

Changes in the market have led to tighter competition among local news stations in the Sacramento-Stockton-Modesto TV market, 19th-largest in the nation. "It's starting to become more of an even playing field," said Vicki Mattocks, a senior media buyer with [Runyon Saltzman & Einhorn Inc.](#) in Sacramento

Added Russell Postell, president and general manager of KXTV Channel 10: "The playing field has significantly changed, and on the demographics that matter the most, it is more even, a lot more level, than it has ever been."

When it comes to stations' finances, local news shows matter most. Stations make the most revenue selling air time in local news shows because they belong to the stations; they typically sell only a fraction of the air time during network shows.

The more people watch, the higher the ratings and the more money stations can charge their advertisers.

Ratings track the percentage of TVs in the market tuned to a particular show. One rating point is worth 1 percent of the households in the market. In this region, that's about 13,458 homes per point, according to [Nielsen Market Research](#), which tracks TV viewing. Electronic meters in about 365 households -- a sampling of the 3.7 million potential viewers in 1.3 million local households -- determine ratings.

If a station can improve its annual share of viewers by 1 percent it means a revenue boost of more than \$2 million. So far this year, the local market is worth \$214 million, according to Nielsen.

How they use news

The news is used to build a station's identity as a community citizen, and local stations rely on the news to attract viewers, said Barbara O'Connor, director of the Institute for the Study of Politics and the Media at California State University Sacramento and professor of communications.

"It still really is kind of the flagship of a station," she said. "It attracts audiences and builds communities for other shows, and it's their most expensive function."

As stations have moved to large corporate ownership, they face more pressure to meet profit-margin targets, she said.

Karen Friedman, a former anchor in Philadelphia who runs a media and communications training firm in Blue Bell, Pa., said as newscasts lose viewers to cable and other media it becomes more important for them to boost ratings to be profitable.