

Video News Releases

A media guide by Craig Seeman (New York Green Party).

What is a VNR and why do them?

A VNR is a Video News Release. Many studies show that most the public get their news from TV. Numbers seem to be around 80% getting news from TV and in many, if not most cases, it is either their main or sole source of information. TV is a visual medium. Sending a printed press release might give them your facts but TV stations really want video.

Many Greens hope for the camera crews after sending a printed press release. Many stations simply don't have the time, the staff, the resources to cover a given story. If you do the work for them they appreciate it. If you do a good job with good visuals and the story is of general interest, you greatly increase your chance of getting TV coverage.

Many Greens focus on reaching the "alternative" media or public access. The reality is that this isn't where the vast numbers of viewers are. You want to reach the general public. The great thing about a VNR is, if shown, you're reaching the public interested enough to watching a news show.

VNR Contents

Sound Bites

on the subject of the story. These are very short interviews ranging from a short response of just a few seconds to a half minute or so. Length is not a hard and fast rule but short it must be. Each bite is a complete single thought. It is NOT a long speech.

B-Roll

Video with "nat" (natural sound) of images related to the story. It can be video that identifies the locale such as front of building, Wide shot of the location. Shots of the "action" or "subject" of the story. This depends on the story. Example might be wide shot of protesters, the polluting power plant, site where the parking lot will be built, video of bodies in the street, the candidate kissing babies and addressing the crowd, the crowd reaction.

VNR Formatting

Contact Page

This should include the organization making the VNR and person(s) to contact for questions about the VNR.

Table of Contents (TOC)

A VNR should have a video table of contents listing each bite (one sentence gist of the statement) and b-roll shot (one sentence description) and the length of each. It should list the total running time. If the table of contents runs several pages they should be number 1 of 7, 2 of 7 etc. Each page should be up long enough to read comfortably but of course the person viewing the tape will pause it as needed. I prefer to keep each TOC page up for no more than five seconds.

Story Description

A one or two page written description of the story on video. This helps the TV station understand what they are about to see and why it is important. It gives them context and maybe some facts.

Biography

One or two paragraphs describing the person who contributed the sound bites. It should also include any titles for the individual(s) so the TV station can create a lower third (ID) for the person. Each person should get a separate Bio page.

The Bites

Each person's bites should be grouped together. Each bite should have a slate making the bite's contents clear. The name of the person contributing the bite should be on each slate. You might want to make a mini TOC. If several bites are closely related you can just have the mini TOC then each bite has one second of black between them. At no point should you include the interviewer's audio or video. You can include the question as part of the slate. You should NEVER talk over the person giving the bite. Ideally the answer should make the question obvious.

B-Roll

After the bites, include the B-Roll shots. There should be a slate listing the B-Roll shots and their durations. Depending on contents closely related B-Rolls can have one main slate miniTOC and then each shot followed by a second of black.

End Page

The organization making the VNR and person(s) to contact for questions about the VNR.

The total running time of a VNR should be about five to ten minutes. Keep it as short as possible. It can certainly be less than five minutes if that's all that's needed. The structure can vary but the objective is, it must be easy for a news producer to understand the story and find all the bites and b-roll easily in a high pressure deadline work environment. As implied above, description must be text on video slates. Papers and labels may be separated from the video tape in a hectic deadline environment of the news room.

Story

Many VNRs include a pre-edited “news” story of about one and half to two minutes in length. I tend to think this is unethical but I’ll mention their forms. The story is supposed to give the TV station something to use if they don’t have time to edit it. One form includes an “on camera” reporter you include. A 2nd form uses a voice over (reporter’s voice only). A 3rd form includes a reporterless story in which the sound bites and b-roll tell the story. This is the most ethical. In all cases the reporter’s voice is on a separate audio track from the sound bites and b-roll nat sound. This makes it easy to dub in their own reporter’s voice. These stories include a “script” so they can have their reporter basically repeat the words you’ve used. You can see why this raises ethical questions. I prefer NOT to include the story. The opening story description and the video clips should be enough for them to create their own story.

Why are VNRs aired?

The news show has time to fill because another story was killed or won’t make deadline. They didn’t have the resources to cover the story but still find it relevant. It’s related to another story they did cover and presents an interesting angle or depth. They didn’t send a reporter because they thought the story wasn’t important but after seeing the content, they now feel otherwise. They had no idea the story existed but decide it’s relevant. They decide they can use the bites and b-roll as part of another story they’re running and it presents things they wish they had. They interview the developer of the parking lot for a story they’re doing. Your story shows up on their door step and there’s a bite with the opposing point of view followed by your shot of the park that’s about to be dug up.

TV News stations like the professional courtesy of receiving a VNR. You’ve done work that they, for one reason or another, didn’t do. You’ve saved them money and resources. If it’s good, you’re helping them increase their ratings. If they have a hole to fill because another story didn’t work out, you’ve filled the hole for them.

When are VNRs aired?

It could be the day you give them the tape. They might hold it for day or even months until it relates to another story or they have a hole to fill. It depends on how timely the story is. If it’s a time sensitive story you really need to get it to the TV station that day if possible or the next day the latest. If it’s an ongoing story you have a little more time. There are “evergreen” stories which they may hold until they’re needed. These are stories that are not time specific. Imagine handing in a VNR which includes an interview with the Green Candidate followed by baby kissing shots. It might air weeks later during an election story.

Green facts of life about the news media

Commercial TV stations make money by getting higher ratings so they can charge advertisers more. Their main criteria is whether your story or point of views interests people. Is it controversial enough to increase ratings? Will it anger advertisers? Of course advertisers like higher ratings because it means more people see their commercials. This means aggravating one advertiser might be acceptable if it means the station gets more viewers.

Let's be CLEAR. They have NO "FAIRNESS" obligation or even courtesy to present YOUR SIDE. Your story has to be of general interest and/or controversial enough to increase ratings. That's how they make money. You, of course, want to reach as many people as possible with your story. Give them a GOOD story to cover and they will. VNRs use is COMMON. The best ones fit in so well that most of the viewers, including you, might not even realize the story was actually a VNR handed to them rather than covered by their own news crew!

What Equipment do I need?

You must use at least minimally acceptable professional equipment. You can not use VHS or Hi8 video for broadcast. The VNR must look like it could have been shot with the TV station's equipment. You can shoot on miniDV and hand in either DVCAM or BetaSP tapes. You need to ask some of the local stations whether they'll accept DVCAM. Some want BetaSP. Most news departments use either of these two formats (or DVCPRO which is related to DVCAM).

You should have a "3 chip" miniDV camera, a tripod, wireless hand held mic for shooting. For editing you should have a computer based NLE (Non Linear Editor) and an NTSC monitor (NOT a TV set) to check video output. You can master back out to the camera used as record deck or use a DVCAM deck. If you can't create a master on the format the local TV stations need, you'll need to find a reliable and fast local dubbing place to bump to DVCAM or BetaSP.

What should the Camera setup be?

The camera should be 3 chip digital (miniDV or DVCAM) and should have professional XLR connectors for mic input. The camera should record good video in low light. If not, you can use on camera light if shooting in a dark environment. Problem is in some circumstances a light draws unwanted attention and person giving bite can have the "deer in the headlights" look or may actually get nervous. 3 chip miniDV cameras start at about \$2000 but those cameras often don't have XLR mic inputs. You MUST use a handheld mic for sound bites. Built in camera mics are HORRIBLE for interviews in almost all news situations. If your audio is bad the shoot is NO GOOD.

Camera Sony PD-170 is my camera of choice. It's about \$3200. It is the system that CNN uses in Iraq and Frontline uses them as well. It's common among "run & gun" situations. They're light weight hand held and take great professional

video. They're GREAT low light cameras (you don't want to use a camera light in Iraq, they tend to draw gunfire). It has XLR mic inputs. I can often use a handheld mic on one channel and the camera mic on the other to pick up nat sound. It can shoot in miniDV and small DVCAM mode.

Wireless Mics

A handheld wireless mic is a must. You can get by with a wired handheld mic but the cable tethers you to the mic and it can get tangled in things and people can trip over it. I like Sennheiser's EW-100 wireless system for about \$500 with a Shure SM57 or SM58 handheld mic for another \$100 or so. Sony also makes a good wireless mic system for a little less.

Tripod

Bogen makes a good basic tripod system with a fluid head. The Bogen 3001BN legs with the Bogen 501 head is about \$230. There are many good tripod systems but make sure it has good fluid had for panning and tilting and legs strong enough to be stable in a crowd of people.

Headphones

Sony makes good field usable headphones between \$50-\$100. AKG is another good brand. I like the Sony foldable version you can fit into a camera bag. You MUST use headphones to monitor the audio! It's the only way to trust you're getting a good recording.

Camera Bag

I prefer one that looks like a back pack since they're the most inconspicuous. I like Lowepro. Expect to pay about \$150 for a basic professional video camera bag.

Total cost of basic professional camera setup is about \$4300.

What should the Edit setup be?

Non Linear Edit system

Computer

You'll need a fairly powerful computer with a 2nd hard drive for video only. You'll probably want to get extra RAM too. You'll also need an NTSC Video Monitor to check video quality. It's not good to use a TV set for many reasons. The picture is rarely accurate for professional video. You'll need NLE (Non Linear Editor) software. You'll also need good speakers to monitor the audio. They should not be "computer game" speakers since they exaggerate the base and the treble. You can master to the video camera but that causes ware and tear on the video heads and transport. Cameras are not meant to be used as tape decks regularly. So you should get a DV/DVCAM tape deck. NLE. I like Final Cut Pro \$1000 on the Mac. You can also get by with Final Cut Express \$300. A Mac G5 computer with computer monitor and extra hard drive and RAM is around \$3500 - \$4000.

You can certainly get a \$1000 Emac with external hard drive and extra Ram for around \$1400 and it would be perfectly serviceable. I find Final Cut and easy and professional edit system to use. On the PC side Adobe Premiere Pro, Video Vegas, Pinnacle Liquid are all good edit system. Avid DV Express works on both Mac and PC. I like Macs because they're easy to use and easy to trouble shoot when you have a problem.

Video Monitor

JVC TV13ASU is a good cheap 13 inch video monitor for about \$200. Both JVC and Sony make higher end monitors with color calibration features starting around \$700. I find the cheap JVC monitor is color calibrated out of the box though.

Audio Monitors/speakers

There are many good audio monitors in the \$200-\$300 price range. VCR (Video Cassette Recorder) Sony DSR-11 DVCAM VCR is the bargain workhorse of the industry at \$1650. It can play and record miniDV and DVCAM and can even play and record PAL tapes (Europe). There's lots of variety for the edit setup but expect to spend between \$3000- \$10,000 including software. My Mac based NLE setup is about \$8,000.

Total Shooting and editing system is \$8000-\$15,000.

Remember I didn't say this was going to be "cheap" just a cheap basic PROFESSIONAL system which can produce BROADCAST quality VNRs. A higher end VNR setup can cost about \$40,000-\$50,000 used by a typical corporate VNR company.

How do I distribute a VNR?

What Format Tape

BetaSP still seems to be the tape format most preferred by TV stations receiving VNRs. The problem is BetaSP decks tend to be very expensive. Record decks start at over \$7000. Since most TV news crews shoot on DVCAM one might expect more stations to accept this format. I think they can be persuaded. Ask the TV stations you contact if they accept DVCAM (even if they prefer BetaSP). There's no good technical reason for them to accept BetaSP over DVCAM unless they lack the equipment. Basic DVCAM decks are much cheaper and start at about \$1650. If they insist on BetaSP you'll have no choice to pay for dubs. In NYC, BetaSP dubs can range from \$30-\$50 for a ten minute tape. The DVCAM tape used for your own dub could be about \$15. BetaSP is an unfortunate financial hit no matter how you do it. The media tends to strongly dislike miniDV, even though it is basically DVCAM running at a slower speed. DVCAM decks play miniDV tapes. MiniDV tapes are prone to "tracking" problems and jamming in their tape machines, develop tape damage and tape "dropouts." If you have the ultimate shoot of the car blowing up they'll take it. Otherwise

giving them a miniDV tape creates an inconvenience for them. Something you really don't want to do.

Send the Tape

Delivering the tapes can range from sending a messenger if the station is near by, to sending it by mail or shipping service such as FedEx. If the story is time sensitive clearly messengering it is best. You may have to pay for overnight delivery if you use a service such as FedEx. If it's not as time critical you can certainly save money by shipping two day or more.

Following Up

After allowing time for the TV station to receive the tape, you should make a follow up phone call and ask if the producer/reporter has seen the tape. If they haven't, the call might prod them. The phone call will also give you a chance to "pitch" the story. You'll be able to explain why the story is important and relevant to their viewers. Be aware they often DO NOT CARE how important YOU think it is or how fair it is to show your side. They care about its value to their viewers (and how that helps bring in advertising revenue through ratings).

Advantage to sending the tape is the media doesn't have to be proactive to get it. Disadvantage is the high cost of dubbing and shipping.

Satellite Transmission

We can't afford but I'd thought I'd mention this anyway. You have to rent satellite time, send out a notification that pitches the story and lets them know when they can download it. Large corporations do this because it's cheaper than dubbing and sending out hundreds, if not thousands of BetaSP tapes. They then have to hope they're interested enough to download and view the story during a very narrow transmission time frame.

VNR on the Web

This is great if you have limited resources. You can send out a fax and an email release with the web link. They can view the story online and then order a Broadcast quality copy of the VNR if they like it. The Disadvantages: The media has to be proactive to go to the website. Depending on how quickly they need the tape, this could drive up your dub and shipping costs per tape. You have to respond almost immediately to the request by letting them know the tape is being sent. The "pitch" is in print rather than a personal phone call. The advantage is you only make the tapes you need. Request is a high level of interest so you increase the likelihood that such response will lead to air time. If the media doesn't respond you have a way to get the public to view your story. You may find you want to do some combination of sending tapes to key TV stations and faxing/emailing the rest to notify them of the Web VNR.

Who do I send the VNR to?

A Video Media list.

You can call every TV and Cable station in your viewing area or the state and find out who you can send VNRs to. It's not very time efficient. You can buy media lists. Media lists range from just the names, address, main fax number of the station to lists which include every producer and reporter in every subdivision of the news department and their "specialties" as well as phone, fax and email addresses. This is the kind of list you want ideally. Since personnel change often this kind of list needs to be updated regularly. The lists range from tens of dollars to several hundred. They're worth it if your time has value. The most extensive national TV/Cable media lists have over 10,000 contacts for something like 3000 TV/Cable outlets. Target your list whenever possible. Send to all main producers of news shows and then send to specialists such as politics, environmental, financial, etc. depending on the issue.

- **<http://www.lacp.com/medialist.htm>**
Seems to be affordable and has very detailed contact lists.
- **<http://www.gebbieinc.com/index1.htm>**
Seems to be the cheapest of general TV Station lists but they don't seem to have a good Cable TV list.
- **<http://www.bacons.com/>**
Is very expensive but very good.