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**Big Election Night Results in Networks Drubbing VNS**

By John N. Frank

Election-night coverage lacked predictions due to VNS' reporting overhaul. And the silence since then hasn't helped VNS or its TV network owners.

What if they held an election, and no one made projections about the winners or voters' attitudes?

That's pretty much what happened earlier this month, at least as far as Voter News Service is concerned. The consortium - which is jointly owned by ABC, CBS, Fox, CNN, NBC and AP - announced on election day that its new computer and voter-projection systems wouldn't be able to turn out reliable predictions of that night's voter attitudes. Early predictions of who won which race also wouldn't be possible, as those predictions are based on exit-poll data. The announcement created PR difficulties for VNS, already beset with image problems from the 2000 elections when it mistakenly gave Florida to Al Gore. Media speculation since the election has swirled around whether the networks might give up on the service and turn to other sources of election-night information.

'I don't know if it's a knockout punch for VNS, but it certainly gives them a black eye,' says Peverill Squire, a professor of political science at the University of Iowa. Carole Kennedy, a professor of political science at **San Diego State University**, agrees: 'I think for VNS it really is a disaster. This kind of problem should be identified way in advance.'

But announcing its latest problems early on election day was a smart PR move. And the consortium had already been telling reporters that it wasn't sure if its new system would perform well on election day, so the word was out in the media even before the actual announcement.

Tom Goodman, whose firm Goodman Communications was brought in before the election to handle media calls at VNS, says, 'This wasn't a total shock to reporters who had covered what was developing.' He won't comment on whether a PR plan was in place to handle an announcement of problems, but 'they made the announcement as soon as they knew what they had,' he says.

VNS is in the middle of a four-year makeover of its systems that is costing it between dollars 10 million and dollars 15 million. The renovation came after flawed data and underestimating the number of absentee ballots led to the Florida problem in 2000.

VNS occupies a unique place in American politics. Although not a government entity, it functions as a public service by providing exit-poll data to its owners and political analysts that details why Americans voted the way they did. 'Not having that is a very serious loss,' says Alan Abramowitz, a professor of political science at Emory University.

Some of its network handlers have been saying that this year's problems were just part of the testing phase for VNS' new systems, but that's a difficult thing for the public to accept on election night. Anyone who works with computers will say it is best to test systems before they are needed, because something is always bound to go wrong with a new system.

#### Opening up to scrutiny

What the service needs to do now is throw its operations open to media scrutiny, and show the American public it will get it right the next time national elections roll around in 2004, PR pros and political scientists agree. 'It would be nice to find out what happened and what they're going to do to fix it,' says Abramowitz.

Treating VNS' problems as issues only its owners need to understand will not garner public trust.

Increased openness could be difficult, though, given the service's fractured PR setup. VNS has no staffer whose sole job is PR. Eileen Murphy, quoted in media reports as a VNS spokesperson, actually works with Goodman, and had only been at the service a few days before the elections, she says.

She wouldn't comment on future VNS PR plans.

PR strategy for the service is handled by a committee of PR people from the six owners. And of course, PR by committee is often a recipe for trouble.

The lack of one dominant owner means no one has to take sole responsibility for VNS' problems, and that could make communicating how they'll be fixed extremely difficult, says Abramowitz.

VNS also needs to be open with the public about exactly why it couldn't do its job on election night, and about steps being taken to correct the problems, says Lloyd

Trufelman, president of Trylon Communications in New York. 'I would suggest that they fix the problem, then have an open house to discuss it,' he says. Taking a 'no comment' stance from here out will only lead to more negative press, he adds. 'If VNS is not anticipating a lot of 'Will VNS work this time?' stories before the next election, it's kidding itself,' Trufelman says.

There's no sign of any openness yet. Of the six PR people who serve on VNS' PR committee, two - those from Fox and CNN - refused to comment to PRWeek, while the others did not return calls for comment.

Goodman, himself a former head of PR at CBS and a veteran of ABC's PR operations as well, would not comment on future PR strategy, saying only, 'I'll leave that up to others who want to make recommendations.'

But VNS has to realize that although its first obligation may be to its owners, it occupies a unique and important position in American politics.

'This is not a government entity, but it reflects on the media and the whole election process,' says Ron Dresner, president of Your PR Department in Farmington, CT. Dresner should know, having been involved in politics since the Carter years. 'Everybody there seems to be keeping their comments to themselves,' he says. 'Right now, we're in the 'I don't know' stage.'

Questions about the media's ethics in predicting the winners of everything from local races to the Presidency - in some cases before polls on the West Coast have closed - have been an ongoing election issue in this country for more than 20 years. Repeated breakdowns at VNS will only make the public more suspicious of the media's election coverage.

Indeed, some election watchers say the networks actually gained credibility this time around by not having VNS data. It forced their election-night teams to do some old-fashioned reporting, letting political experts rather than exit polls do their analysis.

'Ultimately, I think the networks responded admirably given the position they were put in,' says Kennedy. 'It made for a very interesting election night.' Agrees the University of Iowa's Squire, 'I'm not sure it damages the networks very much.' Rather, it tells them that viewers will watch election coverage whether or not a network is first to predict the winner of an important race.

Networks need VNS

Also, in the past, the public probably didn't think too much about how the networks gathered their election-night predictions. Now that VNS is news, the perception is out there that since all the networks use the same source, there's nothing about VNS' predictions that distinguish one network's coverage from that of another. That could actually harm network image rather than help it, much as putting different brand names on similar cars once hurt major automakers like General Motors.

The networks 'are going to have to figure out a way to generate some numbers,' predicts Squire. But Kennedy doubts the networks will go back to doing individual exit polling. The costs have gotten too high, particularly in an era when network news is doing everything it can to cut costs. 'In terms of economies of scale, it makes absolute sense for VNS to continue,' she says.

But to do that, the service needs to work hard at building credibility.

'They should be having daily media briefings,' counsels Dresner. 'You've got to be open to the public. They have to be very open about what happened and what they're going to do.' But that's something VNS has not shown that it has a willingness to do.

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