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| **TV Turf Wars** | **Print** | **E-mail** |

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| **Written by Micky Baca** |
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| **Will CBS4’s Worcester bureau get it out of No. 3 spot in a 3-way race?****It may be summer rerun season, but a new TV reality show is unfolding in Worcester that has media experts and network executives watching with interest. The plot goes something like this: Can a major Boston network news channel find happiness - or at least higher ratings - in an evolving former mill city that many Bostonians still think you need a passport to visit? Or will Worcester’s warm embrace of CBS4’s shining new bureau overlooking its downtown grow cold as the promise of network news fidelity fades into the Boston-centric television news market? Stay tuned.****The arrival of CBS4’s first-ever major network news bureau in Worcester is not likely to have the audience appeal of "Desperate Housewives," but media analysts are staying tuned to find out what happens next. And, they say, if Channel 4’s venture to boldly go where no Boston network has gone before succeeds in finally boosting the station out of its third-place household ratings spot against close rivals WCVB-TV (Channel 5) and WHDH-TV (Channel 7), the other networks just might follow.****"This is a move that hasn’t been tried," says Alan Schroeder, associate professor at Northeastern University’s School of Journalism. "We’ll see if it works...We very well could be seeing other examples [of network news bureaus], maybe the North Shore or the South Shore."****"If it works, it will [spur more bureaus]," agrees Mark Jurkowitz, media critic for the Boston Phoenix. "Nothing succeeds like success."****Throwing down the gauntlet****CBS4 President and General Manager Julio Marenghi openly challenges his competitors to join him in Worcester County. "Maybe I’m putting it back in their faces. I’m laying it down; I’m saying I’m going out here," he says. "The bigger question is, is everybody else going to follow?"****Marenghi, who was joined by a line-up of CBS4 personalities, bagpipers, dancers and dignitaries at a July 20 launch of the Worcester bureau on the seventh floor of the Sovereign Bank Building, insists his station’s decision to come to Worcester isn’t about gaining ratings, viewer numbers or ad revenue. "It isn’t about the numbers," he says. "We want to come there because the city needs to be embraced 24-7."****Marenghi says the move was inspired by research that shows a shift in population in the Boston TV market westward to Metrowest and Worcester County. More and more people, he says, live in those regions and work in Boston or live in Worcester area and commute to Metrowest. "I saw that as an opportunity to say, ‘Worcester County is growing; we should be living there with everybody,’" he says. In fact, Marenghi reports that 13 percent of Boston’s television market viewers live in Worcester County, compared to 12 percent that live in Suffolk County. Twenty years ago, he estimates about 8 percent of viewers lived in Worcester County.****"There’s no other calculated reason. We just want to be there. A lot of it has to do with the physical growth of the marketplace," Marenghi says. "We felt Worcester needed to be profiled in a bigger fashion." He says he is focused on moving "the ball forward" on issues like Worcester’s downtown revitalization effort and reviving its airport and not in achieving a particular increase in viewer numbers or ratings.****"We’ve always comprehensively covered [Worcester area]," adds CBS4 Communications Director Ro Dooley Webster. "What the bureau will help us do is to better know what’s important to the community."****CBS4 has stationed veteran reporter Ron Sanders in Worcester full-time, along with cameraman and editor Terry MacNamara. Marenghi stresses that the Worcester bureau is an extension of the station’s newsroom and bristles at questions like how many news stories CBS4 expects to air from Worcester or whether they’ll be segments tailored specifically to Worcester on the air or on the website. Channel 4 will be looking to partner with area print media, but hasn’t determined which publications it will link up with, Marenghi says. Worcester area stories will be a part of the regular CBS4 newscast, he says, and the CBS4 website will cover the whole viewer market. "We don’t know when we’re going to cover what," he says. "We might substitute a fire in Hyde Park for a Worcester story."****The station may consider establishing other bureaus north and south of Boston, he says, but notes that Worcester was "the most significant gap in coverage. This will be the model," Marenghi says, adding, "We are shifting the deck chairs on the Queen Mary."****Smart move or desperate tactic?****But some media analysts and competitors suggest that CBS4 could be shifting the deck chairs on a less shipshape vessel. They say that CBS4 has struggled in recent years to gain in the ratings in a highly competitive Boston market, has made a boatload of changes to no avail and is casting for some other means to make the rating needle move. "I think they are in a mode - born out of necessity - to try new things," says Jurkowitz. "[CBS4] is without a doubt the third man in a three-man field and they’ve been lagging for years now...So this is a station that has been making a lot of changes in the past years to try and break through."****Indeed, two days before CBS4 launched its Worcester bureau, the Viacom-owned station fired News Director Matt Ellis amid news reports that management was impatient with the two-year recruit’s failure to boost the station’s lackluster newscast ratings. That shake-up followed a series of changes at CBS4, as noted by Jurkowitz in a July 22 Phoenix story, including replacing lead news anchor Joe Shortsleeve with Josh Binswanger last September. A month later, the station brought in Marenghi from New York to replace longtime General Manager Ed Goldman.****Still, Jurkowitz and others say the Worcester bureau could be a smart move. Worcester County does have a growing population that, if convinced to view CBS4 as catering to news in their back yard, could hike viewing numbers that would translate into better ratings. One of the things that moves the ratings is to invest in on-the-ground reporters, according to Jurkowitz. "So in theory this is a logical move," he says, but adds, "I think it’s still a long way from Boston’s western suburbs to Worcester."****"I applaud them," says Jim Thistle, director of broadcast journalism at Boston University. "I think Worcester has been traditionally under-covered." While Boston TV will likely remain a less-than-efficient buy for Worcester advertisers, Thistle says if CBS4 can increase its viewer numbers in this area, it will translate into better ratings that will, in turn, increase revenue rates. "A rising tide lifts all boats," he says. Still, Thistle doesn’t expect the other Boston stations to begin opening suburban bureaus and the longtime debate over whether mobile trucks are a better suburban coverage strategy will remain.****Thistle, himself a veteran of Boston TV, notes that Boston stations have ventured west to Worcester with bureau-like efforts before. Channel 7, he says, stationed a reporter at a desk in the Telegram & Gazette between 1986 and 1992 as part of its regional New England News Exchange. He says the concept was a good one but dissolved because the station had other problems at the time. And back in the early 1970s, when Thistle was news director for Channel 4, he says a reporter was assigned Worcester as an everyday beat. "Boston TV stations have always had a guilt thing about Worcester being under-covered," he says. "Every once in a while people realize it’s a big place."****Long-time WTAG radio personality and former Worcester Mayor Jordan Levy also sees the bureau as a smart business move for CBS4 in its quest to move the ratings needle. "Channel 5 has been tucking it to them so they have to look at the market," Levy says. If they can pick up viewers in Metrowest and Worcester by establishing themselves as better serving those areas, he says, it might do the trick.****The challenge, Levy says, is if Channel 4 can devote enough time to Worcester area stories to capture that viewer loyalty. "The problem is, how much do Boston people want to watch stories about Worcester," he says.****Levy says he wouldn’t be "overly shocked" if CBS4’s bureau met the same fate as Channel 7’s Worcester efforts in the past when they "packed up their tent and left."****"It’s all about head counts and it,s all about how many people are tuning in," says Schroeder, and getting more Central Mass. viewers to think of Channel 4 as more local is a good strategy that could give it an edge in a "very close" market between it and Channels 5 and 7. The Boston television market - which is the fifth largest in the country viewer-wise but comparatively small geographically - has a lot of television coverage, including the Fox affiliate and cable news. "It’s a very competitive market and I would say it’s a fairly sophisticated market," he says.****Dooley Webster notes that, while CBS4 does come in third in the households ratings for its local newscast, it is a "very tight race" in which her station has made some gains in recent years. Channel 4’s news has come in first in ratings that look at certain key demographics, such as adults ages 25 to 54, in some months over the past few years, she points out, which she counts as a significant achievement. "We’ve made great success, but we’ve got work to do," she says.****Schroeder points out another reason the bureau may make sense. The viewer tuning in to television news these days tends to be older and stations are seeking ways to bring the younger population into the fold - for one thing because that is who many advertisers need to target, he says. Boston area viewers moving out to the suburbs in search of more affordable housing and a good place to raise their families represent that younger generation, so CBS4’s Worcester-area efforts tap into that need to reach out to thirtysomethings.****Both Schroeder and Jurkowitz say they were surprised by CBS4’s investment in the Worcester bureau at a time when television stations are cutting back on resources and geographical areas. Jurkowitz notes that TV news has been retrenching in recent years, using more satellite stories and generating fewer stories on the ground.****Marenghi declined to say how much CBS4 invested in the Worcester digs, beyond saying it was "substantial."****Competitors size up Worcester coverage****Competitors are, not surprisingly, downplaying Channel 4’s Worcester move. Coleen Marren, news director at Channel 5, says its seven news vehicles provide "portable bureaus anywhere we choose" and WCVB doesn’t need a physical bureau to provide balanced coverage of the region. And, she and Vice President of Programming Liz Cheng say, their station does more news from the Worcester area than any other Boston channel does. In May, Cheng notes, "Chronicle" did a full half hour on Worcester and the efforts to revive the Blackstone Canal. In July, Channel 5 did a real estate program on Spencer. It has also done recent segments on an effort at UMass Medical Center to use spices to help cure cancer, covered the debut of the Worcester Tornados live, and spotlighted a Shrewsbury student who got a perfect SAT score, Marren points out.****"The proof is in the pudding," Cheng says, noting that the technology is there to cover the region by trucks and has been for a long time. "Do you cover the story in Worcester because you’re there, or because there’s a story?" she adds.****What’s more, WCVB has staffers that live in Palmer, Sturbridge and Leominster. "We feel like we really have the tentacles out there," says Marren.****And, they note, Channel 5 is the No. 1 news station in Massachusetts, according to Neilson’s household ratings.****Asked if Channel 7 is likely to consider a bureau if CBS4’s succeeds, Cheng says he station already considered the ramifications of the shift of the viewing population out of Suffolk County. It decided, she says, that mobile trucks are the best way to serve that population, given today’s technology that make mobile broadcasting so much easier. "The industry has changed the need from being in one place," adds Marren. "24-7-365, we have trucks available rather than being tied to an expensive bureau."****Channel 7 did not return our calls at press time for comment on this story.****On the local television news front, Bob Spain, spokesperson for Charter Communications, which contracts with New England Cable News to air local newscast "Worcester News Tonight" on local cable, says CBS4’s arrival in Worcester only validates what Charter has known for a long time – "The Worcester market is a very important market." Spain says there’s plenty of news to go around in Worcester and that Charter won’t be doing anything differently in response to CBS4’s bureau.****Charter has five reporters who work out of its 95 Higgins Street, Worcester facility, according to Spain. Asked if he’s concerned Channel 4 will compete for viewers or advertisers, he points out that that is unlikely. "They insert one story a night into an all-Boston newscast," Spain says, noting that NECN provides all local news in its nightly 5:30 p.m. and 10 p.m. newscast, with morning and evening rebroadcasts on Channel 3.****Media buyers unaffected****Those in the local marketing and public relations scene who make media buys for clients are still sizing up the CBS4 bureau but don’t expect it to spur local clients to increase their advertising on the station. John DiPietro, managing partner of Holden-based Advanced Business Concepts/DiPietro and a 30-year veteran of the local PR scene, termed Channel 4’s move "a bold step" that could improve network coverage of the area. "It’s great to have a major affiliate in town. Hopefully, they’ll have a local reporter who gets to know the area," says DiPietro, who spent 17 years working at local radio stations WTAG and WSRS. "It’s still way too early to figure out what the quality of their stuff is."****Of the motivation, DiPietro says, "I think Channel 4 is doing anything now to try and kick-start themselves."****DiPietro says he doesn’t think the CBS4 established the bureau to go after more Worcester area advertisers. Aside from a few area companies, Boston area television doesn’t tend to be a practical market for local companies, he says. And, he says, the bureau is not likely to affect his business serving local politicians PR needs. It’s not cost effective, he says, to put local politicians on network television.****Still, DiPietro says, coming into Worcester is a smart move that could produce returns where it counts in the TV news business - delivery of revenue based on the viewer numbers. "Everybody will be watching these guys to see what’s going on," he says. "In the news business, it’s follow the follower."****Warren Palley, president and owner of Palley Communication which owns Palley Advertising in Worcester, deemed the CBS4 Worcester bureau "a good move," though, he says, it’s unlikely to inspire more Worcester companies to advertise on Channel 4. "Nobody’s going to say, ‘Channel 4 is here, let’s go out and advertise with them,’" he says. There are also fewer Worcester area companies left to advertise, Palley points out, since some local retailers have gone out of business due to chain competition and many local banks have been bought up by out-of-area companies. And local companies whose market is broad enough to warrant a Boston TV ad tend to use more than one station, he says. But, Palley says, if CBS4 can gain viewers and boost their ratings, that will translate into higher ad rates for all advertisers over time. "It’s a ratings thing; it’s all about the ratings," he says.****Local newscasts, Palley says, are crucial revenue sources for stations because advertisers know that, while viewers may channel flip for other programs, they tend to watch the same newscast each day. "There’s a lot of money to be made in local news," he says.****Local media buyer Roz Weitz, owner of Roz Weitz Media, says she thinks CBS4’s bureau "is a great idea if they market it properly," but, so far, she says she hasn’t seen that marketing push. In fact, Weitz says, she hasn’t heard anything from the media representative she deals with about the bureau. "Just knowing about it would make a difference to me, knowing about my customers’ customers," she says. "I should have gotten a call from somebody; I should have gotten a call from my sales rep."****Weitz admits that most of her clients opt for cable television advertising because it is less expensive and more geographically targeted. While she does sometimes do network TV for her clients, she says, "It’s a pretty tough sell." But, she says, if Channel 4 came up with some special packages to draw area advertisers and promoted their added coverage here, it could become more attractive to some of her clients.****"If some sales person convinces them that more people in Worcester are watching Channel 4, then I think they would be more likely to look at Channel 4," Weitz says. "I think that we can all be persuaded, if we can see it."****CBS4’s Dooley Webster says all potential advertisers, including those in Worcester, "should expect to hear from us very soon."****In the meantime, Levy says he expects the Worcester area to continue to rely on the media that have always done a good job telling the region’s story - the local cable newscast, radio and local print media. "We’ve got our niche ...as long as we don’t try to be them."****"I don’t think we should get too excited about it," Levy says. "They can talk all they want about Worcester, but most stories are about Boston."** |