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Smelser pilots successful “interim editing” model amid proliferation of pubmedia news director openings

Launches Partnership with Livingston Associates

Orlando, FL - There are at least a dozen openings for news directors or managing editors in the pubmedia system right now, with more listings coming out each week. ***A third of those positions have been vacant for more than a year.***

For most stations, that means more than a year without professional editing or news coverage guidance and more than a year of strain on existing staff.

WKSU Program Director Ele Ellis arrived at the Kent, OH station last year in the midst of its news director search, and she was determined not to make that mistake.

“We weren’t going to get from here to there without a new plan,” Ellis said.

To hatch that plan, she reached out to veteran pubmedia newsroom leader Judith Smelser, who was then in the process of launching an independent editing and newsroom consulting business.

Ellis and Smelser chose WKSU reporter and web editor M.L. Schultze to serve as in-house daily editor and coordinator, while Smelser took on the role of remote features editor.

“My goal was to lay the groundwork for the next news director,” Smelser said, “by helping the newsroom maintain high journalistic standards through a rigorous and collaborative editing process.”

“Our editing is so much tighter,” Ellis says, five months into the arrangement. “I really get behind the idea of people having a new editor - somebody that edits with a little different style and somebody that asks different questions.”

Ellis also says not having to worry about the editorial side means she can focus on staff morale and fundraising during the news director search, which took longer than she ever imagined.

“Take whatever time you think it’s gonna take for you to get a news director hired and in the chair, and *quadruple* it,” Ellis said, by way of advice to other stations in her situation.

After the successful pilot with WKSU, Smelser is now making the interim editor model available to those other stations, both through her independent business and through a new partnership with pubmedia recruiting firm Livingston Associates.

"When WKSU engaged us to help with their news director search," said Founder and CEO Tom Livingston, "I saw how well the interim editor model was working there. It seemed a natural fit to start offering it to our other clients as well."

Livingston also offers interim CEO services to his firm's executive search clients.

"Our clients for interim services believe standing still or slipping backwards strategically is not acceptable in this environment," he said. "Our interim solutions solve that problem, typically for a cost equal to or less than the vacant salary line."

WKSU Program Director Ele Ellis agrees the interim editing model with Smelser has been worth the expense:

"We've gotten great value for the money," she said.

About Judith Smelser:

Judith is an award-winning public media editor, newsroom leader, reporter, and producer with over a decade of experience in large and small stations, and working with national and international networks and shows. She now provides editing, training, and newsroom consulting services to pubmedia clients around the country. More at judithsmelser.com.

About WKSU:

WKSU is an award-winning public radio station and service of Kent State University that broadcasts to 22 counties throughout Northeast Ohio from the station's primary signal at 89.7. WKSU content can also be heard over WKRW 89.3 (Wooster), WKRJ 91.5 (Dover/New Philadelphia), WKSU 89.1 (Thompson), WNRK 90.7 (Norwalk) and W239AZ 95.7 (Ashland). The station adds WKSU-2 Folk Alley, WKSU-3 The Classical Channel and WKSU-4 The News Channel over HD Radio and as streaming audio at www.wksu.org.

About Livingston Associates:

Livingston Associates provides executive search, strategy and coaching services to Public Media, University and other mission-based non-profit clients. Since 1997 the firm has conducted more than 200 searches in Public Media and provided strategy services to more than 50 clients. More at livingstonassociates.net.