

[COVER STORY]

BROAD CASTING THE VALUE OF OT

**Promoting the
profession through
public-access television**
By Rhoda P. Erhardt

Back in 2006, I had planned to shoot my first on-location television show, interviewing a colleague who was an OT entrepreneur. I usually hosted the show in the studio in White Bear Lake, a suburb of St. Paul, but wanted to be able to show the audience this woman's actual business office in Stillwater, MN. I had deliberately planned the shoot for 5 p.m., after business hours.

We were about 10 minutes into the filming of a 30-minute show when we heard a door slam, then another door open and slam again. It was an employee, working late, coming out of her office and leaving the building. We had thought no one was there!

So we began again. I tried to repeat the same questions and she gave similar answers, both of us trying to sound as spontaneous as we did in the first take.

I learned that day how field production can be fraught with complications. But I also knew that television could be a prime medium to use in getting the word out about occupational therapy, and well worth the frustrations that accompanied production. Today, it is even more important.

The Centennial Vision of the American Occupational Therapy Association — which sets out the ways in which AOTA wants occupational therapists to articulate their profession in order to make it well recognized by the public by 2017 — includes the strategic goal of “demonstrating and articulating our value to individuals, organizations, and communities... people understanding who we are and what we do,” (Amini, 2009). The “health” of occupational therapy in the 21st century is dependent on that recognition, and it is considered the professional responsibility of every OT practitioner to help make it happen.

I had been trying to promote my profession for more than 40 years in just that way, to all those groups, plus some unique ones such as law enforcement officers, to discuss the offender with disabilities.

SCOTT DERBY

And in 1994, I came across a really new way to get the word out. An article in my local newspaper announced new, low-cost classes in television programming at a public-access television studio not too far from my home.

Public-access Television

Federal law requires every community in the country to provide its citizens with the opportunity to communicate through their own television shows. The mission of public-access television is grounded in the First Amendment — every citizen's right to free speech. It is accomplished by offering the community the tools, knowledge and access necessary to use the medium.

It is important to understand the difference between “public television,” which is a network of privately programmed channels paid for mostly through grants and donations, and “public-access television,” which operates locally and covers only the community in which it is produced and others nearby that may wish to use it.

Programming spots are offered to those who apply for them, and in each community a public-access committee provides immediate oversight of the operations (Suburban Community Channels, 2009).



Erhardt with Bob Anderson, who helped her produce the show, at the public access studio.

Jumping Right In

Anyone can produce a public-access show, but in order to do it, he or she must attend video-production classes and become certified in the use of equipment such as TV cameras, lighting, microphones, studio production (control room), field production (on-location) and editing suites. The community makes the facilities and equipment available; its use must result in programming to be cablecast on public-access channels. Your show can be broadcast live — an advantage when you want to have call-in phone calls — or it can be videotaped, which is less stressful and allows insert editing of photographs and other graphics more easily.

My first venture with our local public-access studio was in 1995, when I edited some of the videotapes I had produced since 1981 into a child-development series of seven one-hour programs. The series had a running title, and one episode was broadcast each week until the series was complete. It went into re-runs for several years.

Next, in 2001, I produced a new video program, *Emerging Hand Preferences and Congruencies*, which won an award for excellence in programming that year.

In 2006, I was asked to create a new show. This time I decided to interview women whom I thought were interesting, productive and involved in their communities in novel ways, sharing their ►►

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unique activities and talking about how they have enriched their own lives.

This talk show was titled *Sharp Women: We Get the Point!* It currently can be viewed on four public-access television channels in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. The 13 segments I produced and hosted were each broadcast for a month in a weekly time slot, and have continued in syndication.

Planning the Show

A TV crew can involve from one to five or more people, to operate one or more cameras and direct the show from the control room. I was fortunate to meet my assistant producer, Bob Anderson, at a producer's club meeting (a free educational session offered by the studio several times a year). Bob was hosting and producing his own show, *Inside Mental Health Issues*, with a small crew, but was looking for someone to help him edit. He agreed to assist me with the camera work and control room. In exchange, I helped him edit his programs.

I knew so many interesting women! My 13 guests included the director of Minnesota Habitat for Humanity, a college professor in leadership studies, an early childhood education teacher, a church volunteer, a show-dog breeder, a pair of quilters, a personal trainer, a hairdresser, a nurse, a financial advisor, an occupational therapist clinic owner, an OT professor in a university program, and an OT entrepreneur.

After each guest agreed to be interviewed, I emailed these instructions:



Eileen Richter, MPH, OTR, FAOTA, co-owner, PDP Press, Stillwater, MN. Erhardt checked out a portable camera, lighting equipment and microphones for this on-location filming

- Date and time of videotaping;
- Map and directions to studio, where to park, etc.;
- What not to wear: the camera does not like total white or total red shirts, or wild patterns;
- What to bring: photos relating to our discussion that can be edited into the final program; and
- General structure of the interview (topics and questions): introduction, how we know each other, mutual projects, where you grew up, education, professional life, what led to your job, what you do on a daily basis, the most interesting things about your work, family, hobbies, how you find balance in your life, future plans and wishes, and, in the case of an on-location shoot, a tour of the facility.

My assistant producer and I always arrived at the studio 30 minutes early to set up the area with two chairs, a table, our backdrop, lighting, microphones, cameras (one set for close-ups and the other for longer shots of both people) and a big clock to help me monitor the time (under 30 minutes).

When the guest arrived, we did voice checks, focused the cameras, and started filming the show when the assistant producer gave me his hand signal through the window of the soundproof control room. After each shoot, I took the guest to dinner (my only cost, except for the blank videotapes and DVDs) for the entire production).

The videotape then was edited with Final Cut Pro, graphics/subtitles inserted, and the tape converted to DVD format. Copies were given to four studios in the Twin Cities and each guest.

I was surprised to learn how many people in our community were watching the show, despite no specific listing in the on-screen TV guides (only on the local public-access website). Neighbors and friends told me they found it accidentally while channel-surfing.

Did the interviews with the occupational therapists help viewers gain a better understanding of the profession? My assistant producer, Bob Anderson, was so intrigued by my interview with clinic owner Nancy Lawton-Shirley that he invited her to be on his own show to explain the role of OT in



Linda Buxell, MA, OTR/L, assistant professor and level-II fieldwork coordinator in the department of occupational science and occupational therapy at the University of St. Catherine, St. Paul, MN, talks with Erhardt.

mental health. When she described how sensory-processing problems may contribute to children's anxiety and/or depression, Bob said, "I wish I could have known someone like you when I was younger and dealing with those issues myself."

Now it's your turn. Would you like to create either a single program or a series that would run all year long, with subject matter that describes the unique role OT plays in helping individuals of all ages live life to its fullest? Let me know what your ideas are and if you need a little coaching. You can email me at RPErhardt@ErhardtProducts.com.

I love to see the creativity of my colleagues. Together, we can make the Centennial Vision a reality. ■

References available at www.advancweb.com/OT or upon request.

Rhoda P. Erhardt, MS, OTR/L, FAOTA, has a private practice in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. She consults with health agencies, educational systems and national corporations, and teaches courses both onsite and online. Contact her by email at RPErhardt@ErhardtProducts.com or visit her web site: www.ErhardtProducts.com.

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