

# Coverage of Sandy gives Weather Channel a lift

By Katie Leslie, Palm Beach Post

ATLANTA – Hours after Hurricane Sandy trampled the Northeast, a group of exhausted meteorologists and journalists gathered in the Weather Channel's Atlanta newsroom to assess the damage.

And their own work.

Tom Moore, a meteorologist with the Atlanta-based network, was succinct: "(We) knocked it out of the park."

Sandy's timing may have been rotten for the presidential campaigns, but it was very good for the Weather Channel. The outfit, whose parent company recently dropped the word "channel" from its name, becoming simply The Weather Co. LLC, has navigated its own choppy waters this year.

Viewership is down 18.5 percent from last year, and in recent weeks the newsroom lost employees to a company-wide layoff that saw 80 workers depart. It's a business that thrives on bad weather, which until this month, was at a minimum in 2012.

And then along came Sandy, a seemingly impossible blend of weather oddities. Getting it right was paramount, especially after an alert issued by Weather Channel senior meteorologist Stu Ostro prompted an outpouring of skepticism online.

Sandy "will occupy a place in the annals of weather history as one of the most extraordinary to have affected the U.S.," Ostro, a 23-year-veteran of the network, wrote in Sunday's warning.

"WHOA: The Weather Channel Meteorologist Just Completely Freaked Out About Hurricane Sandy," read a headline from

Business Insider.

Many comments to the story followed that sarcastic lead. "Our Nielsen ratings are down this year, so it's absolutely essential that you continue to watch the EXTREME weather on the Weather Channel so that my boss's boss can get his bonus," read one.

Twitter soon picked up the drum beat. "Freaked out meteorologist does his part to spread panic about Sandy," read a tweet from chriscostner.

Helen Swenson, the network's vice president of live programming, rebuffed critics.

"We never called it Frankenstorm," said Swenson, who, like her employees, has spent every day in the newsroom since Sandy's first sighting last week. "We don't need to be dramatic. Our mission is to get it out there to the masses and get it out early."

Ostro, who stayed overnight in the newsroom during storm coverage, betrayed just a touch of smugness his week when asked about the skeptics: "Wonder what they think now," he said via email.

Without a doubt, media analysts say, Sandy was a boon to The Weather Co., which was acquired in 2008 by NBC Universal and private equity firms The Blackstone Group and Bain Capital. The flagship website, Weather.com, exploded with nearly 300 million page views Monday – almost eight times its daily average.

The previous record was 141 million single page views during a massive snowstorm in February 2011, said digital president Cameron Clayton. Monday, all digital platforms combined had about 450 million views, followed with another 356 million Tuesday.

The TV viewership numbers aren't available yet, but the online stats point to a substantial bonanza.

"They seem to have reported this very well . they've done incredible numbers," said Sam Thielman, staff writer for Adweek who covers the network, noting that the staff cuts didn't seem to harm the coverage.

Thielman, like Swenson, said critics who suggest that the company trumps up stories are off the mark. In fact, he said, doing so could help company's business model.

"I don't think they're telling people the storm will split the earth open to get more people to watch the network," he said. "You may see that more on cable news, and honestly, that might be one of their problems."

In recent years, the TV channel has experimented with documentary-style programming, getting away from its original mission. No more.

CEO David Kenny – who joined the company earlier this year – said that, based on expectations that climate change will create bigger weather disasters, the network is refocusing its efforts on weather and science. One goal, he said, it to explain climate change in a way that people will understand.

"The whole realization that weather is going to become more volatile made us say there is more to do on weather. We should not shy away from it," he said. "I believe our refocus on weather is going to help us with ratings."

But when storms like Sandy are in full swing, ratings take a backseat, Swenson said.

"People will tell you I'm highly competitive. But when we are absolutely serious in warning people to get out of harm's way, I'm not here to be competitive anymore. I'm there to save as many lives as I can," she said. "At that point, the only thing

we're competing against is Mother Nature."