

'Good Morning America' expands to Sundays

Anchor, producer happy
with prospects for new show

By Suzanne Gill
"This is on the record, right?" asks Bill Ritter, ABC's newest anchorman. Ritter is a 20-year veteran of print and broadcast journalism who's nothing if not cagey in a question-and-answer session.

What's "on the record" in this case seems innocuous enough: It's just Ritter's response to a comment by his new producer, Jerry Liddell, that the Los Angeles-born reporter-anchorman was entertaining more than one offer of a network job when he accepted the post of co-host for ABC's latest news venture, *Good Morning America/Sunday*.

Read an "Aw, shucks," into the record, followed by an "I was in a very flattering position." Not that Ritter isn't enthusiastic about his new job on a show debuting Sunday, Jan. 3, on most ABC affiliates.

"I think the different thing about this job is gonna be getting people who don't watch Sunday-morning television to watch it. The overwhelming majority of people in America don't watch Sunday-morning TV at 8 o'clock."

True enough. Fully 80 percent of U.S. homes leave the TV off at that hour. The 20 percent who do watch already have two network talk-show choices: the long-established CBS *Sunday Morning* show with Charles Kuralt and NBC's 6-month-old *Sunday Today* show, anchored by Scott Simon and Jackie Nespral.

Producer Liddell takes a realistic view of the competition.

"We were never going to compete with Kuralt directly. I'm not going to go after his audience; I can't, he owns them; they're his."

The *Today* audience, however, is fair game.

"By default, 41 percent of (*Sunday Today*) viewers are (weekday *Good Morning America* viewers. So, we want 'em back.

"I don't think they're necessarily addressing the weekend audience," Liddell says of *Sunday Today*. "They're giving you what you get Monday through Friday. I think they're not taking advantage of the Sunday audience in particular."

Sunday morning, according to

Liddell, is "when you take time" to enjoy family, newspaper and breakfast. So he plans to open *GMA/Sunday* with a few minutes of conversation between Ritter and co-anchor Dana King on a "modified, cosier" version of the weekday set.

"We won't necessarily be driven by events of the news," Ritter adds. "We're gonna try to be looking ahead as much as we can."

To Liddell, this means leaving political heavyweights to David Brinkley, whose roundtable show airs later in the morning. "You can let other people talk to the suits, and we'll talk to the people the suits affect."

With just an hour to fill, Liddell plans for a news segment to follow the opening. Then he'll give the middle of the show to feature stories generated by his anchors.

"What I hope to be my signature pieces," Ritter says, "are what I call day-in-the-life pieces. I've done it several times and found it very rewarding."

Speaking of King, Ritter fairly gushes. "We get along really well. It's really a blast to be with her. She's funny and she's smart and

she's very quick. We get along, I would say, much like a brother and sister get along.

"She has the ability to talk directly to people the way that few people have. People really enjoy her."

Such camaraderie may be a key to the show's success; certainly *Sunday Today* has suffered without it. The differences behind the scenes at each show are telling, too. *Today* formed a separate staff for weekends, while budget-conscious ABC simply hired a few more staffers for the established *GMA* crew.

"Our staff," Liddell says, "is totally integrated; they (*Today*) created this guerilla outfit on the side, and I think logistically that was probably a mistake."

For the record, then, Ritter is as happy as a newsman can be with the prospects for his untried new product.

"We are not under any pressure (from the network) to pull this off in a month. We have one-hour show, not a four-hour blockbuster with two hours a shot (like *Today*). They're very smart about this. It's a long haul kind of thing."

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