

# THE BIG BUSINESS OF BREAKFAST

From the advertising dollars to the ratings rivalry - television's earliest timeslot is big business. **Brooke Hemphill** sets her alarm and goes on set to find out the perfect recipe for making breakfast TV.

It's after midnight on a Thursday evening in Sydney's CBD. The streets are largely deserted as the final day of the working week looms. While the nine to five set are safely tucked up in bed, in the heart of the city, Seven's Martin Place studio is quiet, although never sleeping. Several journalists staff the newsroom on the first level and one flight of stairs above, two producers work the overnight shift for Seven's market-leading breakfast program, Sunrise. Soon they will be joined by line producer David 'Dougie' Walters who is about to begin his day.

At a time when hospitality workers and university students contemplate calling it a night, Walters is at his desk. His morning starts at 1.30am, liaising with Seven's newsroom and catching up on breaking stories before giving the three-hour show's rundown a final once over.

Walters has been a member of the Sunrise family for a decade, acting as the unseen voice in presenters

Melissa Doyle and David Koch's ear.

"We always say he's like the third one but you don't see him," Doyle says of Walters.

Across town, Sunrise executive producer Michael Pell's alarm clock is buzzing. Despite

having been in bed for only a few hours, Pell is up for a 3.30am conference call with Walters and the overnight production team. They discuss local and international news and when he hangs up, Pell must make the decision whether to climb back into bed for a couple of hours or head to the office. More often than not, he opts for the latter.

At Channel Nine's headquarters in Willoughby, North Sydney, Today executive producer Tom Malone arrives at the office. Like Pell, Malone has been up since 3.30am. The first action on his to-do list is a production meeting. Malone then stations himself in the control room where he will stay for the duration of the broadcast. Approximately 100 people are involved in the production of the Today show across the course of the week.

"Television is a game where you're only as strong as your weakest link. You have to have the best presenters, cameramen, the best lighting director, vision switchers, directors assistants, autocue, floor managers, hair, makeup, wardrobe, link technicians," Malone explains. "There is no one singular most important person because everyone relies on each other so heavily."

Eight kilometres to the south, Martin Place is now buzzing as the crew begins to arrive. The first order of business is setting the studio for the 5.30am Early News. This is just the first of many programs broadcast live from Seven's Sydney news studio. After the



Michael Pell: competition aware





Breakfast with Today's Karl Stefanovic and Lisa Wilkinson

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Early News, the set will turn over for Sunrise. Sunrise leads into The Morning Show which transitions seamlessly to the 11.30am bulletin. The studio then has a rest before the 4.30pm news, 6pm evening bulletin and, finally, Today Tonight.

Floor manager Nick Connell is one of the first in the studio each weekday. Connell has been with Sunrise since it began broadcasting from Martin Place in 2004. He coordinates a team of seven: four camera operators, an audio assistant and two stagehands. On a good day, they have the luxury of a 4am start, but some mornings are required on deck much earlier, particularly when the show has a musical guest.

Half an hour before Sunrise, Nine's Today begins at 5.00am; a move the network made in March 2008 after seeing a ratings spike in Brisbane on account of daylight savings.

Down in Victoria, Michael Rowland takes his seat in the makeup chair at the ABC's Southbank studio. Together with journalist Virginia Trioli, Rowland presents ABC News Breakfast on ABC1 and ABC News 24. As Rowland has his makeup applied, he watches the first half hour of the Today show.

"Today has been around for many years," Rowland says respectfully. In comparison, after just three years on air, ABC News Breakfast is still in its infancy. Rowland has been the face of the show for 18 months. He describes the program as a rolling news format where segments are often repeated to cater for viewers as they dip in and out of the broadcast. He believes his is the perfect job for an "unabashed news junkie".

Back at Sunrise, the team is in place as the Early News goes to air. Taking his seat in the control room is director Paul 'Slats' Slater. Slater began his career in television as a studio cameraman and has been directing Sunrise for more than two years.

"I've got a team of people around me who are really good at their jobs," Slater says. "They know what they're doing, I'm just conducting them. From a basics point of view, I'm talking to all the cameramen, all the control room crew, the audio director making sure everything's ready to go. I'll look ahead and make sure the shots are lined up, crosses are lined up, graphics are ready to go. My job's mainly to minimise mistakes and get everybody on the same page to make the show look as good as it can."

Slater is joined in the control room by line producer Walters and six others who time the show, run the 'ticker', the flipping information bar at the bottom of the screen, write captions for guests and segments, vision switch as well as cue footage. "We don't roll tape any more, it's all off computers," Slater explains. "You'd think that would make life easier but there's still just as



Musical guests mean an early start for the Sunrise crew

photography by Andre de Villiers

*"Television is a game where you're only as strong as your weakest link. You have to have the best presenters, cameramen, the best lighting director, vision switchers."*

many things that can go wrong." (Indeed, earlier this month the realunch edition of Weekend Sunrise failed to make it to air because of a technology disaster.) In addition to the main control room, there are two booths for lighting and sound. In all, it takes about 30 people to put the show to air on any given day, not counting crews on the road and international correspondents.

At the ABC's Southbank studios, the production workflow differs greatly. While there is still a floor manager, the only other crew in the studio are the makeup artists. This is because the team run a fully automated studio operated by two directors who move the cameras with joysticks in the control booth.

As Sunrise audio director Jamie Carter says, "there is a lot of stuff happening in the morning". Carter works with a team of four audio technicians and together they manage more than 100 channels of audio as well as more than 20 live microphones. But it's not the number of channels or microphones that makes handling the audio an epic task. "You can have a correspondent in

Los Angeles, someone in Newcastle and a person at the airport," Carter says. "Everyone needs to hear everything and it's all happening at once."

As the Early News finishes at Seven, the Sunrise crew strap themselves in for three hours of live breakfast television.

### Live from Breakfast Central

On the studio floor, Nick Connell counts the presenters in. Over vision of the latest breaking news stories, David Koch announces what the team are covering this hour – today it's a plane crash in Papua New Guinea and the launch of the latest iPhone – before the show cuts to Mel and Kachie behind the desk at 'Breakfast Central'.

In the first 15 minutes of the program, around 134,000 metro viewers typically tune in to Seven while an additional 104,000 check in with Lisa Wilkinson and Karl Stefanovic on Nine. "First hour, our typical viewer is more AB demographic, business orientated. They would leave for work quite early," Sunrise's Pell explains. As the show progresses, the content caters to a more female skewed audience with fashion and entertainment segments in the later hours.

Over at ABC News Breakfast, Rowland's viewer is after a hard hit of news with a side serve of light entertainment as opposed to the commercial networks, who he says reverse the balance.

The Sunrise team disagrees, maintaining the show is, at its core, a news program. "I think the word 'lite' was used a lot in the early days when people used to talk about us," Doyle says. "I don't think we are 'lite'."



Andrew Rochford, Paul Henry & Kylie Rogers

## Ten lines up for the breakfast buffet

At the 2012 Ten program launch, programming director David Mott announced the network's plan to join the morning television market with their show, Breakfast. A Ten spokesman says the program will be, "a little bit daring and edgy" and The Project regular Andrew Rochford has signed on to host with controversial New Zealand personality Paul Henry joining him. Rumours abound as Ten continues to screen test for a female co-host, trialing an endless stream of faces including senior journalists from the network and beyond. Behind the scenes, Ten is getting its ducks in a row and at the start of October, Anthony Flannery was announced as Ten's new head of news and current affairs. Having spent 12 years at the Nine Network, including a stint as the executive producer of Today, Flannery looks positioned to lead the team.

The show's launch provides a new opportunity for brands and advertisers. Ten's national sales manager, Kylie Rogers, says: "It's early days yet, but building a show from the ground up gives us the opportunity to work collaboratively with our clients on developing a product that will both engage viewers and create tailored advertising opportunities for our partners. We are sitting down with a number of key clients to find advertising solutions within the breakfast format that fit their brands."

Barry O'Brien, CEO of media agency PHD, says, "Ten wouldn't be charging into this if they didn't think it was an area they needed to be in. They would have done the numbers." The timeslot is a highly lucrative one for networks and all eyes will be on the ratings once Ten enters the market.

Independent media analyst Steve Allen says, "Ten's breakfast offering will have to be as fresh and as different as The Project. Even then, in our view, the show will garner a minor share, but certainly will grow Ten's position from now."

The real question is where Ten's share will come from. Are Sunrise viewers or fans of Today more likely to jump ship? If it's the former, Today could reclaim the top spot while in the case of the later, Sunrise will cement its lead. One thing is certain, the established players will be watching the new kids on the block. Sunrise's David Koch says, "it would be good if they did something different to add to the market."

It's just that we do things in a different way that is more relatable. We speak like normal people; we use normal language. We don't sit there clocking up seven syllable words. One of the things we're most proud of is that..."

"We're not a bunch of tossers," Koch chimes in. This is a sentiment that echoes within the team both on and off air, forming the basis of the Sunrise culture. In Koch's words, there are no wankers.

"We were virtually all here from the start and the network didn't give a toss about us back then because we were being beaten so comprehensively," Koch explains. "It allowed us to build this team that have stuck together."

But for how much longer will the winning team remain together? If recent rumours are anything to go by, not very long. According to a report in Sydney's Sunday Telegraph, Doyle and Koch are looking to move to primetime, triggering a domino effect across Seven's lifestyle and current affairs lineup. The report also tipped a slate of new producers to drive both Sunrise and The Morning Show. According to Seven, the speculation is without basis.

"It is completely untrue," Pell says. "I don't even have enough producers to go around at the moment."

Back on set, the presenters' welcome leads into Natalie Barr's news bulletin before a live cross to reporter Edwina Bartholomew. Next is charismatic weather correspondent Grant Denyer who will spend the show relaying the day's forecast while dodging paintballs in Sydney's outer suburbs.

At 6.10am, the program cuts to the first ad break. "Commercial breaks are a chance for us to breathe, get our senses for the next segment and make sure everything's ready to go," Slater explains.

While the crew draw breath, the ads are busy fulfilling their intended purpose – raking in the big bucks for the networks.

Barry O'Brien, CEO of media agency PHD, says the breakfast timeslot is a major money-spinner for Seven and Nine. "It's a highly competitive area and very lucrative for networks. We use it with a whole host of clients. Does it work? Yes it does or we wouldn't keep doing it."

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Tom Malone: plots own path

products into the show as demonstrated by regular brand-driven segments. Today's executive producer Tom Malone says: "Each Monday we do our Mortgage Monday where we give away \$10,000 cash thanks to Westpac and on Friday's \$10,000 worth of Coles vouchers as a part of Feed your Family Friday."

While Coles and Westpac are recent additions, Today has long-standing relationships with Optus, David Jones and Qantas. Similarly, Sunrise has ties with Telstra, Myer and Jetstar: facilitator of perhaps the most well-known breakfast brand integration to date - the 2010 trip to Hawaii for the Sunrise 'family'.

Pell says sponsors allow the team to go beyond their means. "At the end of the day we're trying to make the best, biggest, most exciting event television and the way to do that is by getting sponsors on board." He admits that breakfast television is highly profitable. "The Seven Network is a business so we're trying to make money and breakfast is at the forefront of that revenue gain."

But there is one occasion when revenue becomes a secondary consideration for both shows and that is at times of major breaking news. In the past 12 months, a series of national and international news stories have seen Sunrise and Today break format and move to rolling coverage - minus the commercials. The decision isn't taken lightly as a number of factors need to be considered.

Malone says, "if the story is unfolding then usually that means looking to drop commercial breaks and that's a decision made by the director of news and current affairs along with people further up that chain."

From a production perspective, Sunrise director Paul Slater says, "if you go too early you might end up looking silly because you don't have enough content to fill. Often Dougie, our line producer, will make the call when he realises we've got enough to go with."

While uninterrupted news coverage will result in a revenue deficit for the networks, it also means a change of pace for the crew and presenters. "You get into work and all of a sudden you go six hours commercial free rolling coverage because something's breaking," David Koch explains. "That's when you really get tested."

"So many times things have happened and the network's supported us and dropped advertising," Doyle adds. "And we've just stuck with it as long as required. I think that's a fantastic thing nowadays. We're no



ABC News Breakfast relies on an automated studio

longer constricted by our timeslot or the need to have a word from our sponsors."

### The competition

Michael Pell sits in his office, a small television in the corner of the room providing a window to the competition. "You don't operate in a bubble, obviously," Pell explains. "I like to say that we're competition aware. I tend to know what they're doing on a broad level but if the Channel Nine TV broke, I wouldn't be running out to get a new one immediately. I'd be fine just doing what we're doing."

Over at Today, Malone also admits to staying informed about his rivals. "We sort of plot our own path and we've been doing that for several years but you always keep an eye on what your competitors are doing, definitely."

Each morning at precisely 8.30am the metro OzTam ratings for the previous day drop into Malone and Pell's inboxes and if there's one thing the two producers agree on, it's the importance of the ratings.

"We pretty much live and die by the ratings," Pell admits. "That's your ultimate report card."

"Certainly that's the thing we all strive for," Malone says. "Anyone who tells you any different is kidding themselves because no-one ever puts out their latest figures for Twitter or Facebook or whatever. Everyone is concentrating on those ratings."

Ratings figures reported for the timeslot can be misleading as unlike primetime shows, few viewers stick with breakfast programs from beginning to end:

the average audience member is more likely to tune in just long enough to wolf down a bowl of cereal.

On account of this, Pell and Malone rely on the ratings breakdown for their respective shows in 15 minute increments and the actual daily reach is closer to 1,264,000 for Sunrise and 1,133,000 for Today, well in excess of the reported average audience figures of 358,000 and 276,000 per show.

In the ratings game, the competition is fierce between the two major players and for good reason. Independent media analyst Steve Allen says, "there has been occasional PR outbreaks of how Today is reeling in, or beating, Sunrise. From time to time this happens, but the broad pattern is that Sunrise still comfortably leads Today by 14 per cent based on all demographics for the year to date."

Currently, ratings for the two shows are the closest they have been since 2004. "The trend is Today pegging Sunrise back by attracting extra audience while Sunrise is not growing," Allen explains. Ten's entry into the breakfast market in 2012 will raise the stakes further with an audience shift resulting in one of two likely outcomes - either Sunrise takes a greater lead or Today will close the gap. Few expect Ten to get to number one, or even two.

With such a focus on the commercial aspect of breakfast, it's easy to forget ABC News Breakfast. Executive producer Tim Ayliffe says, "it's nice to know people are watching, but ratings are not a driving force of the show. I don't think we've ever tried to compete with the commercial networks."

### Style

- Baroque (65)
- Oriental (521)
- Contemporary (49)
- Native (244)

[Show more](#)



### Material

- Timber (278)
- Glass (791)
- Grass (226)
- Brick (174)

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### Landscape Features

- Pools (188)
- Decks (103)
- Gazebos (403)
- Spa (112)

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### Decorations

- Outdoor Furniture (112)
- Pot Plants (72)
- Outdoor Lighting (216)

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### Layout

- Landscaped (182)
- Multilevel (194)
- Indoor - Outdoor (202)



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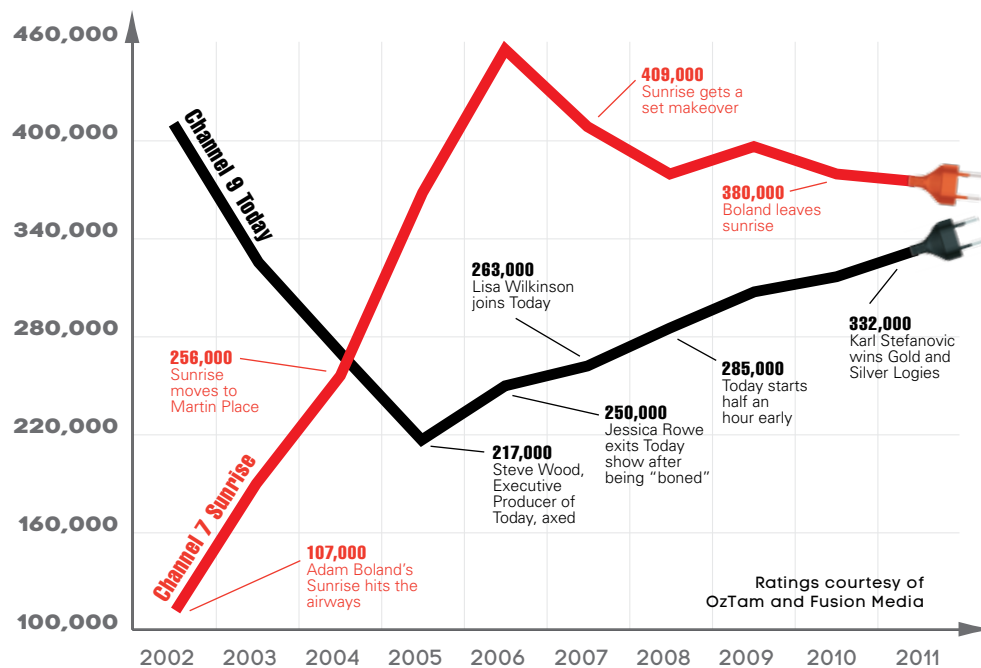


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## Breakfast TV ratings



four hours of non-stop television. "At 9.30am you suddenly feel a draining of energy," Rowland says.

### The show must go on

In Willoughby, Martin Place and Melbourne's Southbank, the show is over but the day is not. First stop for each of the crews is a debrief before looking ahead to the next program in the constant cycle of breakfast television production.

By late afternoon, many of the cast and crew have left their respective buildings making the conference call a staple for all three shows. Sunrise's Pell holds a 5pm call with his presenters and producers where stories for the day ahead are pitched and debated.

"If a story doesn't quite cut it on the conference call, it's not unusual for us to drop it as late as five o'clock," Pell says. "Some of the best production meetings are the ones where you've got to fill 10 spots and you end up filling 20 just with the amount of banter and discussion that's happening."

"We talk about a story having sex appeal," says Sunrise supervising producer Paul Richards who is responsible for the editorial content of the show. "That doesn't mean flesh." More so, Richards explains, a story needs to grab the viewer.

After the conference call, line producer David Walters calls it a day. "I normally watch the first break in the 6pm news then fall asleep," Walters says. "My three-year-old puts me to bed. She thinks that's what kids do to their fathers."

Malone is also ready to clock off. "That's about it for me, and the late team sees things through." While Malone is content to hand over the reins, Pell prefers to see both ends of the day. "I like to be working on the writing of the show, finessing scripts," Pell says. "I don't normally log off until about midnight." Having been up since 3.30am, this makes for a long day. When asked what hours he works, Pell says, "For me, it's 24 hours. The Blackberry is always with me, even in a movie or at the gym."

While the days are long and the work often stressful, those on the breakfast shift wouldn't have it any other way. "I've done drama. I've done sport. I've done everything," Connell says. "But live television just has an extra edge to it. And that's what keeps us all going."

"It's just so exciting and every day is different," Pell says. "I guess there is a lifespan to it but I think I'm in the early stages of that lifespan - there's a few years in me yet. It's a natural fit for me but other people are like, what are you doing? Are you crazy? Don't you just want to have some sleep?" ❖

\* Book extract: *How Sunrise saved Seven*, page 26

At Seven, Doyle and Koch are wrapping up their audience driven segment 'Sunrise on Demand' where viewers are presented with three potential stories, one of which the team will cover on the next show. Today's options: pill popper – do vitamins work?; people power – when can you make a citizen's arrest?; busted – how to know if your partner's cheating. Facebook responses are tallied to determine the segment.

"I don't think of us as producers," Michael Pell says. "I think of us as vessels. It's actually our viewers who are the real producers which is why I think Sunrise has been so successful. They feel like they're part of the show because they're the ones deciding the content."

Koch agrees. "So often the show is hijacked by viewers. They set the agenda, they set the segments."

In lounge rooms across Australia, the students and hospitality workers who were coming home as line producer David Walters started his day have flicked on the box to catch the last hour of the program.

"As the show progresses, you do get a more female skew as everyone else tends to head off to work," Pell explains. "In the later parts of the show and post 9am, we also get a lot of university students, a lot of shift workers." Malone says Today's audience is, "a woman in her late thirties or early forties, married or single, two or three kids. Works part or maybe full time."

On the Sunrise set, the end of the show is fast approaching and with a tight turnaround to prepare

the studio for The Morning Show's Larry Emdur and Kylie Gillies, Mel and Kochie make their way out to Martin Place allowing the crew to reset. "We have two commercial breaks to get ready for The Morning Show. In that turnover period there can be 30 people on the floor," floor manager Connell says.

The presenters wrap up the program amid a sea of fans that have made the journey from across the coun-

*"I normally watch the first break in the 6pm news then fall asleep," Walters says. "My three-year-old puts me to bed. She thinks that's what kids do to their fathers."*

try to gaze through the Martin Place windows.

In Melbourne, ABC News Breakfast is also drawing to a close. Rowland and Trioli take turns reading the 9am news. On big news days, Rowland can still be on air an hour after the show ends.

Without the luxury of commercial breaks, that's