

# He's just 'a little more Ellen'



Global National's anchor talks to **SARAH HAMPSON** about his 'emotional' audiences and his unusual choice in role models

**K**evin Newman is loving middle age. At 47, he is sitting at that comfortable apex of family and career life.

As anchor of *Global National*, he is enjoying newsworthy success. Numbers for his network's national supper-hour newscast, launched in early September of 2001, and broadcast out of Vancouver, are high, with the network saying its combined *News Hour* audience is nearly one million viewers a night from coast to coast.

"Yeah, it surprised me," Newman says in a relaxed, amiable manner over a recent lunch in Ottawa. "When you've been in TV long enough to get success, you also know failure. And I was really hoping this would be successful, because failure is never pretty."

As an announcer of his own good news, he is very measured. No gloating. No blips of hubris. No spin of facts. He delivers an interview as he would a news story. He makes it not about him.

Newman, who won a Gemini Award for best news anchor in 2005 and 2006, is one of Canada's big three, along with CTV's Lloyd Robertson and CBC's Peter Mansbridge. But he doesn't see his rise as an indictment of the competition. "Part of our success is that we didn't really carve audience away from those guys — we found our own. So if there were a million-and-a-half people watching national news before we arrived, it's now two-and-a-half million. We just grew a new audience."

Still, it took time, he acknowledges. "In the early days, we had to overcome the perceived idea that Global may be in the game, but not in the act [of news]. That took three years to change. Plus, it takes a while for people to notice you, and it takes them a lot longer to trust you. I think we got over that trust period at year five."

Mansbridge and Robertson are "legacy newscasters, and people have grown up with both of them," Newman says. "Canada, unlike America, doesn't always go for what is new and fresh. Canadians are more suspicious of those things. So the satisfaction is that we were able to overcome that and find a place."

Six years ago, Newman came back to Canada, a prodigal son of the news business. He had started his career at Global in his hometown of Toronto in 1981. He then put in a few years at *CTV National News*, CBC-TV's *The National* and

## His worst gaffe

On the perils of anchoring: "If you go on air and make a mistake, you lose credibility. It's a performance, and you're always aware of not wanting to flub your lines. The worst gaffe I made was when I was doing a live special for Remembrance Day in 2002 at the [Ottawa] cenotaph, and I called the statues of the men 'figurines'. Afterward, I was reminded that figurines are three inches tall. People never let me forget that. There's no editing to catch you on live events. It's a high-wire act." — S.H.

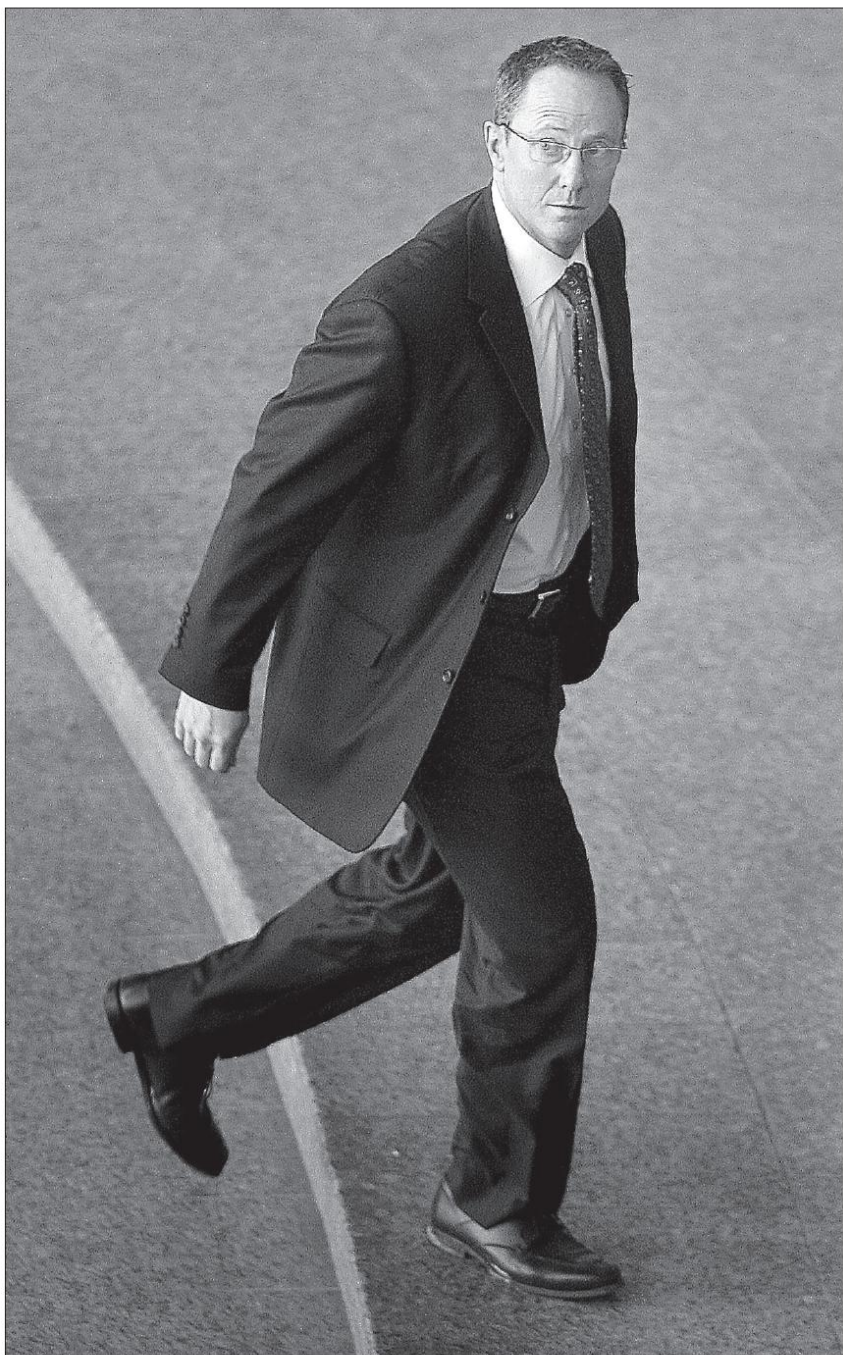
on the now-defunct CBC *Midday* show before heading south to ABC in New York.

In the late nineties, he was co-host of *Good Morning America*. With a salary in the million-dollar range, two Emmys and a Peabody Award, his face on the side of buses, and a profile in *People*, he had the American dream by the tail. After leaving *Good Morning America*, when ratings slipped, he was substitute anchor and correspondent for *World News Tonight* with the late Peter Jennings, another Canadian who had cracked the U.S. market. He also worked with Ted Koppel as a senior correspondent for *Nightline*. He left in 2001 to take the helm of the Global start-up newscast as anchor and executive editor.

Part of the decision involved the desire to spend more time with his wife of 22 years, Cathy Kearns, whom he had met at Global at the start of his career, and his two children, Alex and Erica, who are now on the cusp of adulthood. "I was home for dinner the last six years for the first time in my career," he says. "And I've been in one place, so we haven't had to disrupt their high-school years." His wife was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1998, but he says that her condition has "stopped in its tracks" and is "not much of a factor in our lives."

Still, while those years were more "settled," they were far from relaxed: Work on a start-up, in which Global had invested close to \$9-million, is full of challenges.

*Global National's* supper-hour audience is "on the move," he says. "Well-educated and 85-per-cent female. If they're working women, they've worked the earlier shift, and they're home earlier. Or if they're at-



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home moms, they want to stay tuned in and plugged in. Local news has been an important part of people's lives, but I'm pleased that we've been able to instill the idea that they can get credible national news at an earlier hour. It's hard to change habits, but we've changed a couple of them, which is nice.

"We changed people's perceptions of where they get national news, who they get it from, and how they get it — the nature of it, the style."

Some of that style can be attributed to the time of day, Newman points out. "You're in a different frame of mind at 5:30 than you are at 10 or 11. You're more contemplative. You're quieter. The audience at 5:30 is emotional. You're making dinner. You're tired. You sit down. The TV competitive environment is very different at that hour. At 10 o'clock, your competition is serious drama. At 11, it's local news. At 5:30, it's talk or game shows.

"Too often in TV, [network execu-

tives] look at their show in relation to what else is on the network. But the truth is, at that hour, you're in competition with *Ellen* [DeGeneres], *Dr. Phil*, with *Jeopardy!*, so one of the things that we did, with style, was try to make it a little more energetic, a little more colloquial, a little more *Ellen*, to match the type of television that's in other places." The show has garnered several industry awards since it began.

Over the course of six years at *Global National*, Newman has learned a lot about Canadian news habits. "I've learned that there are stories that resonate in the West that don't resonate in the same way in the East, and vice versa. On the days when we lead with political news, our numbers are strongest in the East, weakest in the West. And days when we lead with crime news, we're stronger in the West than the East."

But he says he isn't obsessed by ratings. "I block most of it out. I ask for rating updates once a quarter.

The danger is you become ratings junkies, and you begin to second-guess yourself."

Middle age has a way of softening the edges. Success, after all, is like failure: something that sometimes just happens. And so you take it in stride, always aware that it could change. "CBC and CTV are growing fast, so, you know, next year, this could be a different story," Newman says, smiling.

Life has made him a better journalist, he feels. He tells me the story of how Kelly, one of his two younger sisters, died suddenly of brain cancer at 34, just six weeks before Diana, Princess of Wales, perished.

"I was put in the chair as anchor on ABC that day," he recalls. "I had to use my grief and contain my grief at the same time. That might have been something that made my coverage a little more personal, with the words I chose, because I have suffered grief. When you do cover misery, you're not callous about it. . . . Your empathy is increased."