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TELEVISION

'Today' and the high cost of weddings

The show gives one couple a dream wedding, and gives others some expensive ideas.

By **ROXANNE ROBERTS**
The Washington Post

Like any bride, Sarah Raley believes it's bad luck for the groom to see her wedding dress before the Big Day, and she brought along her mom to look at the final four choices. Unlike most brides, she shared this special moment with 6 million people.

Raley is the *Today* show's latest bride, which means viewers selected her and fiance Mark Dale to receive an all-expenses-paid wedding planned entirely by the morning show audience. When she walks down the aisle Friday, Sept. 16, Raley will wear the gown, cut the cake and dance in the ballroom that received the most votes.

"When you thought about getting married, was there a particular dress you had in

mind?" asked Katie Couric. Luckily, the answer is no. "This is kind of go-with-the-flow," said the bride-to-be.

Raley, 23, and Dale, 26 — both from St. Mary's County in Maryland's Eastern Shore — are the sixth couple to be married in *Today's* wedding series. When they entered the contest, they agreed to turn over every decision to the show's staff and audience, and exchange vows live on national television. In return, they'll receive a fantasy wedding, reception and honeymoon worth at least \$50,000.

But the biggest smiles will be in the wedding industry. Thanks in part to the *Today* show, and the reality wedding imitators that followed, brides will spend billions on weddings this year. Not everyone can get married with Katie and Matt, but every bride can have her 15 minutes of fame — at a price.

'Today' says 'I do'

It started in 2000, when *Today* teamed with TheKnot.com, a bridal Web site, to host a free

wedding for one engaged couple. Viewers would select the winning couple and all the accouterments for a live wedding in Rockefeller Center.

There had been ceremonies on television before, but *Today* asked its audience to plan a wedding over 12 weeks, and put gowns, invitations, flowers and reception sites on center stage.

"It was groundbreaking," said Rebecca Grinnals, president of Engaging Concepts, a wedding marketing firm.

Each week four options were presented and viewers voted for their favorite online, where they also found more information about each product. Virtual discussions sprang up, and message boards debated the options. More than 11 million votes have been cast for elements of the show's five previous weddings.

Today's producers combed bridal magazines, Web sites and books to narrow the choices to four distinct trends in any given category. They tried to push the envelope a bit, said TheKnot co-founder Carley Roney, offering not just four round cakes but one white cake with flowers, a modern square cake, a chocolate concoction and playful cupcakes . . . and viewers came along.

If the free publicity was good for A-list vendors, it was great for lesser-known figures. Atlanta designer Anne Barge was one of the four gown finalists in 2003, and more than 40,000 University of Georgia alumni received e-mails asking them to vote for her design. They did, and the bride wore Barge's \$4,400 silk satin gown embroidered in sterling silver. "It definitely boosted her up to another level," Barge spokeswoman Stefanie Williamson said.

After four years of ceremonies in New York, producers last year jumped on another hot trend by throwing a destination wedding. Viewers selected Cap Juluca in Anguilla, and its sun-soaked beaches figured prominently in the final three-hour broadcast. Currently, 9 percent of all couples exchange vows in

an exotic locale, and invite friends and family to join the wedding/honeymoon.

A lasting effect

The average American bride is 27, her fiance 29, and they will be engaged for 17 months before exchanging vows. That means more than a year of poring over their options. She is an older, smarter and more demanding consumer who wants, needs . . . no, deserves her day in the spotlight, and the bridal industry is happy to oblige.

While the number of weddings has remained fairly steady, the amount spent on ceremonies, receptions, honeymoons, and other products or services continues to spiral upward — \$125 billion on 2.1 million weddings this year, according to a new survey conducted by the Fairchild Bridal Group.

The average American wedding now costs \$26,327, plus another \$10,000 or so in cities such as New York or Washington. Only 25 percent of brides' parents pay for the entire shebang, 27 percent of couples pay all the costs themselves, and the rest some combination thereof. Almost half the couples spend more than planned, and many go into debt to fund the festivities.

"In the last four years, everything bridal has gone through the roof," Williamson said. "It's become more mainstream, and the *Today* show definitely had a hand in that."

Anguilla was already popular for destination weddings, but the exposure on the show was "worth millions," said Grinnals. Even runner-up Lake Placid estimates the on-air mentions during just one week were worth \$300,000 in free advertising to the Adirondack Regional Tourism Council.

"The whole thing about reality weddings is that it gives people the ability to peek over the fence to see how others are doing it," says David Adler, founder of BizBash, the industry resource for corporate parties.

And, increasingly, couples

want someone else to pay for it — demanding cash-only gifts, or asking guests to "sponsor" wedding expenses such as flowers or photos in addition to a gift from an expensive bridal registry.

Just check out bridal Web sites, where previously sane women descend into the lowest circles of wedding hells.

Consider the bride who justified her one-night stand with a bridesmaid's fiance by saying, "I'm the bride. I outrank you." But it's tough to beat the Chicago bride who posted her vendor reviews on TheKnot last month. Her reception was "A++" perfect, even though one guest died of a heart attack during dinner. "I didn't know him," she wrote. "People die everyday. Would you have rather my wedding day was a disaster because of it? Please." When others accused her of being "heartless," she replied that when she opened cards, she got to his and ripped up the check. "So, I am not a monster!"

Today show brides are anti-Bridezillas. They cede control entirely and in return are guaranteed a showcase wedding, decided by a committee of thousands, in front of 6 million guests.

"The options out there are overwhelming," said Raley, the latest bride, a director of sales for the local Hampton Inn. When she and Dale, a health club manager, found out they were chosen, it took a massive load off her shoulders: "No research, no decisions, great options."

Last week, viewers were presented with four options for the site, including the garden of St. Mary's College, which Raley attended. The college's vice president for marketing contacted *Today's* producers and drafted a letter to alumni, staff and students to drum up support. About 20,000 local people voted, but viewers opted for the Chesapeake Bay Beach Club, on Kent Island.

And so it will go each week, until the day of this modern fairy-tale wedding — a bride's and marketer's dream.