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NBC will air Virgin Galactic's first space flights, passengers and date still undecided

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Virgin Group founder Richard Branson and son Sam Branson with 'Today' show's Savannah Guthrie and Matt Lauer. (Photo: ...)

Sir Richard Branson is traveling to space next year, and he's taking us with him — via television, that is. On Friday morning's "Today" show, Branson announced that he and NBCUniversal have cemented a partnership to broadcast the inaugural commercial flight of Virgin Galactic's SpaceShipTwo (SS2) in 2014.

"It was an awe-inspiring moment when we sat with the Virgin team for our first meeting — not unlike what the Wright Brothers must have felt all those years ago. It started as a dream but turned into a new era of commercial flight," Sharon Scott, president and general manager of Peacock Productions, told Yahoo Travel. "Virgin Galactic now hopes to provoke an era of commercial space flight for everyone, and we at NBCUniversal and Peacock Productions are thrilled to chronicle the adventure."

Who will join the inaugural space flight? Of eight total seats, two are reserved for pilots. Branson and his adult children, Holly and Sam, have already spoken for three. The remaining three space travelers' identity is anybody's guess. Virgin Galactic has reportedly accepted nearly \$80 million in deposits — \$250,000 each from about 700 hopefuls looking to experience suborbital space flight — and [is still taking applications](#).

Branson has been vocal about his desire to open space travel up to the public, and his latest partnership with NBC is one way to take his message to the masses. "Virgin Galactic is thrilled that NBCUniversal will join us on our exciting first journey to space. In this first chapter of commercial space travel, we will help make space accessible and inspire countless more people to join us in the pursuit of space

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exploration and science innovation,” the billionaire businessman said in a statement on Friday.

Peacock Productions, a unit of NBC News, will be catching the SS2 action from Virgin Galactic’s terminal at Spaceport America in New Mexico through a series of broadcasts

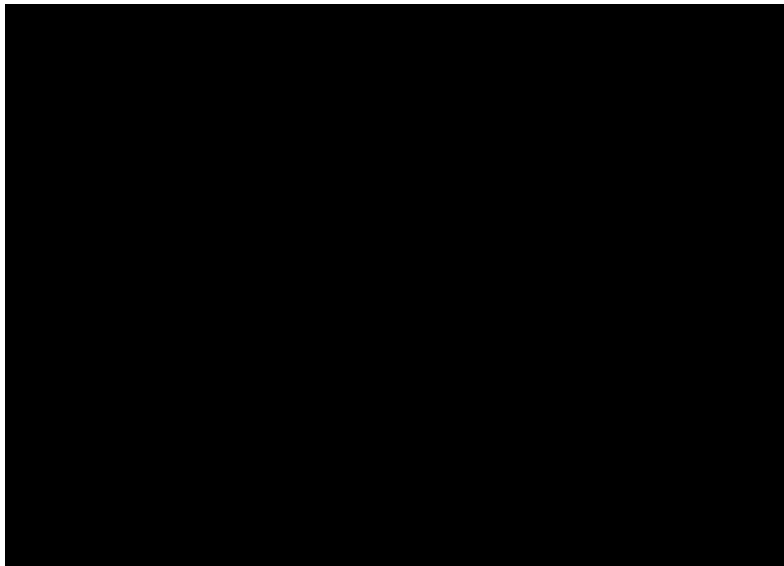
including a three-hour live “Today” show event on the day of the inaugural flight. A prime-time special will air on NBC the night before. Other coverage will be on CNBC, MSNBC, NBCNews.com, SyFy and The Weather Channel.

When might the live event be airing? That’s still to be determined, a spokesperson for Virgin Galactic told Yahoo Travel. “Depending on the progress of the last portion of the experimental test flight program and the FAA licensing process, commercial operations are anticipated to begin in 2014.”

Testing leading up to this flight has been successful thus far. The most recent milestone was on Sept. 5, when SS2’s second rocket-powered supersonic flight left the Mojave Air and Space Port and achieved its highest altitude (69,000 feet) and greatest speed (Mach 1.43) yet. Another achievement during that flight: the ship’s use of a high-altitude deployment “feathering” re-entry mechanism.



Flight preparations prior to the first powered flight of Virgin Galactic’s SpaceShipTwo in April. (Photo by Mark ...



Mark Stucky and Clint Nichols of Scaled Composites (the company that designs and builds Virgin Galactic aircraft) piloted the September flight. Virgin Galactic Chief Pilot Dave McKay and Scaled co-pilot Mike Alsbury were at the controls of WhiteKnightTwo, [the aircraft created to launch SS2 into sub-orbital space](#).

This isn’t the first time Virgin Galactic and NBCUniversal have partnered on a project: On Oct. 3, they announced collaboration on an unscripted series, “Space Race.” Helmed by reality maven Mark Burnett, producer of “Survivor” and “The Voice,” “Space Race” will be an elimination competition series with participants vying for a trip on SS2.

“Virgin Galactic’s mission is to democratize space, eventually making commercial

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space travel affordable and accessible to all," Branson said at the time.

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Saudi Arabia now open to foreigners

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