



NEWS MAKER

Media24’s recently appointed CEO, Esmaré Weideman, plans to strengthen the industry stalwart’s print legacy by working with its digital platform

BY KERRY DIMMER

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There is no doubt that the print media business is threatened by the rise of the web, social media and the acceleration of an internet-driven news cycle, but Esmaré Weideman is quick to point out: ‘At Media24 we see opportunities, not threats.’

Just six months into her role as CEO, Weideman’s mandate seems clear – bring the Naspers Group-owned Media24 into the 21st century but maintain the core business of print.

‘I believe the legacy of the print business in SA is of critical importance to Naspers,’ she says. ‘Yes it’s true that Naspers has diversified into many businesses and has become a global player, but all its operations – be they e-commerce, gaming or pay-TV – have media at its core. Likewise, Media24 has diversified into related fields but the print business remains a vital part of the future of Naspers and I believe we will still have print products for some time to come.’

This doesn’t mean that Weideman will be ignoring digital media. In fact, she is embracing it, saying they have ‘plans coming out of their ears’ and that they will continue providing quality content to a diverse array of markets. ‘The platforms you use to disseminate information are actually irrelevant,’ says Weideman, ‘although they all have their unique opportunities and challenges.’

NewsNow/NuusNou, the latest offering from the Media24 stable, is such an example. ‘In a way it is the embodiment of what is happening in news media today, referencing the internet and everything available on it. News consumers need sources they can trust and that is what the *NewsNow/NuusNou* team does by scanning through various media, from blogs to TV to print, to bring the most relevant commentary to readers. I’m sure it has hit a sweet spot and that it will be very successful.’

The sweet spot is something that Weideman must surely be familiar with. Her past success as editor-in-chief of the successful troika, *You*, *Huisgenoot* and *Drum* magazines, branded her the queen of weeklies. However reluctant she may be to acknowledge this title, she does say that this genre is the toughest news environment to play in. ‘And if you don’t understand the market and the role news weeklies play, you’ll go down very quickly.’

With degrees in business and journalism from the University of Stellenbosch, Weideman’s first beat was as a labour reporter at *Finansies & Tegnief* – now *Finweek* – before joining *The Star* in 1989 as a political writer. This was during the frenetic roller-coaster days that shaped SA’s democracy, and provided her with the unique opportunity and privilege of being the only journalist to accompany Nelson Mandela



on his six-week world tour after his release from prison. Her stint in the trenches continued with Media24 in Cape Town. *Drum* was the first glossy that proved Weideman’s editing skills, followed by *Fair Lady*, before being appointed as the first woman (not to mention the youngest) editor of *You* magazine.

Despite a career full of milestones, Weideman appears to be surprised at her achievements. At heart she still sees herself as a journalist. ‘I wanted to be a good journalist – I never aspired to be an editor, it was offered to me. Similarly, I never wanted to be a CEO, but opportunities arrive and you take them, simply because you were asked, and for me that means doing the best I can at whatever job gets thrown at me.’

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It’s important to Weideman that she has toiled at the bottom in busy newsrooms, which is why she finds being a CEO a somewhat lonely role. ‘I don’t really talk the talk, some of the acronyms of big business still confuse me terribly and I am still baffled by industry politicking which you encounter everywhere. That said, I’m a very direct person so can cut through the superfluous issues and focus on what we’re trying to do at Media24 and the best way we can achieve it.’

‘Leadership means you have to have the ability to take people with you and that becomes an issue of trust. Getting others to see the vision means talking, sharing, enthusing and inspiring, and more importantly living by example. My experience is that if you lead with enthusiasm, passion and drive, others will follow.’

