

Landbou.com at digital cutting edge for SA magazines

By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

Landbouweekblad may be more than 90 years old and serves a largely conservative section of society but it is also a digital pathfinder for magazines in this country. Bizcommunity finds out from Landbou.com's digital manager, Jan Bezuidenhout, and web editor, Corli van der Merwe, how well the website is doing, how it protects the magazine's circulation and why many young farmers are at the cutting edge of technology today while they wait for the broadband ship to come into South Africa's rural areas.

■ ***Landbou.com* is doing very well and the website's unique browsers far exceed circulation. (The magazine, which is owned by [Media24](#), was at 39 447 in the most recent ABCs: for the second quarter of 2012). What are the current stats?**

Van der Merwe: We had a site relaunch (at the end of May) and we've dropped back quite a bit - which tends to happen when you relaunch - so we're between 61 000 and 63 000 unique users (a month) at the moment.

Bezuidenhout: Perhaps just to elaborate, our page impressions for July were just above 380 000. We've dropped since.

Van der Merwe: Time on site per session is three minutes, 38 seconds for July and I see August was just over four minutes. People frequently come to the site several times a day so, per user on a day, it can get quite high (about 12 minutes, which is high for a news website).

■ ***So I've poked around the website and had a look at some of the videos, which I see have quite high viewership. What was the thinking behind the relaunch?***

Bezuidenhout: About 10 years ago we created the site as a sort of a brochure. We incorporated a lot of the articles from the magazine on the site just to be able to provide content. Initially, it was an uphill battle to reach the number of 25 000 unique users - which the experts told us was the time that advertisers would start looking at us. It was a slow growth but over the past few years, everything has changed around the site. We now create most of our own content. I'd say 10% or less comes from the magazine. We really have a lot of user-generated content and we have an excellent news writer in our Pretoria office and she has really put us on the map because she's quick and she chases stories.

Van der Merwe: Some weeks we don't use any content from the mag. What we do use pretty regularly is the recipes - that's a very popular part of the magazine - but that's about all.

■ ***Surely you have more than the one writer if you're using so little of the magazine's articles?***

Bezuidenhout: Ja, we also contribute. I try write apart from the other stuff I have to do...

Van der Merwe: Also, our other journalists contribute but their primary focus is the magazine.

■ ***So did you guys start attracting advertising at 25 000 - as the experts said you would?***

Bezuidenhout: I've been with the site for most of that time and I can remember when we sold our first ad. I think it was 2004 and it sold for about R250. These days we're not self-sufficient or profitable yet...

Van der Merwe: It's growing really, really fast. We have reason to believe that the site will be financially viable in the next one or two financial years, depending on what the economy does.

■ ***I would imagine that the magazine's market is older white Afrikaans farmers. Is that true for the website or are you***



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getting a younger audience?

Bezuidenhout: Your assumption is correct - that more of the magazine's readers are in the older category. However, there is a shift to younger people going into farming. They've got their degrees and diplomas and are going back to the farms, (and they are) especially (active) with social media. Corli's in charge of that...

Van der Merwe: The most popular age group for our [Facebook page](#) (which has almost 9 000 members) is about 25 to 34 years old... You know, there's a preconceived notion that farmers aren't technologically advanced and in some instances it's true. But in some parts of the agricultural market, farmers need to be technologically adept or they won't survive. You find in the fruit and wine sectors and the dairy farmers, these guys use technology that would blow your mind... In other sectors - such as parts of the meat sector - the guys might be on a farm in the middle of the Karoo, where they don't have broadband. So there are pockets of people who use a lot of technology in farming and in their personal capacity and then a lot of guys who don't use it at all.

■ I'll bet the fruit and wine farmers all have iPads because that's an amazing tool for someone who's on the go.

Van der Merwe: Oh ja. I go to functions in the Western Cape and you sit at a table with a lot of farmers and they all have iPhones and iPads and they tell us they all use our (iPad) app. They're really excited about it and they use different apps on the farm.

■ Your iPad app is excellent. Do you have stats on that?

Van der Merwe: We launched it a little more than a year ago. It was built by [Touchlab](#) (Media24's innovation unit). It's been downloaded 5 000 times since it launched in September last year. On the app we have access to Landbou.com obviously and our Facebook and Twitter account - [@Landbou](#) - (which has more than 2 000 followers). We have an Ask the Experts division on the website where farmers can ask questions about issues on their farm and we have experts in their fields answering them. We have that on the app as well and it's very popular... (There is also a classifieds section.)

Bezuidenhout: One of the outstanding features on the app is the weather feature, which a farmer can use to type in his farm's name and he will get a weather forecast for the next week based on that. It is really that localised.

■ The big picture here is that Landbouweekblad is an old magazine - about a century old so you must be very proud to have taken it into the digital age - and faster and more successfully than many other publications, I must say.

Van der Merwe: Ja, the magazine is 93 years old and it's not seen as being on the front end of digital development but we really do try new stuff. We do social media and we've got a well-running website and there's the app. We're trying to go into e-commerce now... and recently we've been trying our hand at multimedia, which we do in-house. We're also starting to use [QR codes](#) in the mag to get the link between magazine and mobile. We're really excited about that but we're not quite sure what the uptake will be because QR codes are not so well known in some parts of the market.

■ What kind of e-commerce are you looking at?

Van der Merwe: With the classifieds ads we now have an online presence as well as in the mag so we try to give the advertiser both options. Also with ["BoerSoek"](#), which is a listing, we're trying to build a basis where anyone that's interested in agriculture can look for whatever they need. We want to be the reference point for farmers, for people who run businesses in the agricultural market. We want to fill the gap.

■ When you consider the level of technology some of the farmers are using today, it sounds to me like the development is being led by the needs of your audience. It seems that you're very aware of the community and what they're doing.

Bezuidenhout: Yes, but on many farms there is really limited access to broadband (most use 3G) and that's a limiting factor for us. I was on a farm recently and you had to almost get on top of the roof to get a signal. So that's problematic. However, there are many farmers - like fruit farmers in the Orange River region - who have Wi-Fi installed on their farms to be able to communicate with the markets in Europe. But we really are trying. We've got projects running to give farmers access at places such as co-op shops... so that they can see our products and what we offer...

■ **Well, broadband on farms can only improve. South Africa is not big compared to Australia, for instance. As far as I know, online is a huge part of the Australian farmers' world because they are so physically isolated on those huge sheep stations. You must be watching the development of broadband very closely in SA.**

Bezuidenhout: Yes, we really are. It is very important to us.

Van der Merwe: You often hear about different companies that are trying to get internet access to rural areas because there's a big market there actually. It's just going to take a bit more work to get people online.

■ **But I wonder, isn't the market ultimately shrinking? Aren't there fewer farmers because globalisation makes it harder to farm and then we have uncertainty about land reform in South Africa?**

Van der Merwe: Oh ja, there are definitely fewer farmers than there used to be... This has especially been a problem for the magazine's circulation figures. The magazine's circulation is holding pretty well at the moment but there was a steep drop after the 1994 election because a lot of farmers closed up shop and land reform and farm murders are problems.

Bezuidenhout: What's also been happening is that farm groups get bigger because you need more land to be productive and profitable.

■ **You mean you need more economy of scale?**

Bezuidenhout: Yes, every year you have to increase your farm by "x" amount of hectares to be profitable. So some farmers are selling out and the neighbours are buying it up so you get bigger farm units.

■ **So what's the big picture for how print and digital fit together?**

Van der Merwe: We're trying to cover all our bases, to provide good content on any platform that the user would like... We try to complement the magazine because they are the biggest source of income for us. We can't take away from their content. We try to protect their content which is why we produce mainly our own content. At the moment we're really trying to connect the two as much as possible.

Bezuidenhout: Bringing the website to profitability is a big priority and then, apart from providing daily news and breaking stories, to go one level up and to avail to farmers really expert knowledge. We've got experts who answer questions on the website but we're looking into a more in-depth offering, for instance, to help a farmer on an Excel Spreadsheet to be able to calculate input costs for, let's say, cucumbers. So he can put everything in and work out if it will be profitable and if it's not profitable he can tweak something - that's the sort of higher level of information and advice that you can provide.

■ **What's your sense of the emerging-farmers market? Are they reading Landbouweekblad and coming to the site if it's in Afrikaans? ([Farmer's Weekly](#) is owned by Caxton and reported 15 999 circulation in the most recent ABC figures.)**

Van der Merwe: Well, you'd be surprised. I get emails from black farmers and English people who read the mag. A lot of emerging farmers come to us for help and advice and we try to point people in the right direction. A while ago the magazine presented a cattle workshop with the aim of bringing together emerging farmers and established commercial farmers so that the commercial farmers could teach the emerging farmers. The feedback from that has been excellent. It is quite interesting that the magazine is Afrikaans and the language is not easy to read but, still, we have a lot of readers that you wouldn't say would be traditional readers of the magazine... I think in most farming households you find a *Landbouweekblad*.

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