

## with... Neil Higgs

This week, we find out what's really going on behind the selfie with Neil Higgs, Chief Innovation Partner at TNS South Africa, Johannesburg...



Nature and numbers make Higgs tick.

### 1. Where do you live, work and play?

**Higgs:** My wife, Debbie, and I live in Roodekrans on the West Rand - a lovely area as we are on the edge of a nature reserve with great views, good birds and a wonderful deck on which to enjoy craft beer and red wine! Luckily, my office is near Cresta so the travelling is not too bad. Where do I play - well, this varies! I work a three-day week: in the office on Mondays, working at home on Tuesday and in the office again on Wednesdays. Thursdays we do a six to seven km hike at the Kloofendaal Nature Reserve, about 5 minutes from where we live - it is a favourite place and very well maintained. A bacon-and-egg rye roll on the top of the hill there is a highlight of our week. We often see hoopoes (our favourite bird), bee-eaters, the odd mountain reedbuck, dassies and sometimes hares. Last week we saw a rose-ringed parakeet and tinker-bird. Sometimes on a Sunday, we will go to Klipriviersberg in the South - a real gem - and, in winter, Suikerbosrand. We love walking and birding.

### 2. What's your claim to fame?

**Higgs:** Hard to say! 30 years at TNS and 42 years working, 40 years in research... I survived! I have presented lots of papers at SAMRA (14!) as well as overseas, and have also won ten awards at SAMRA.

### 3. Describe your career so far.

**Higgs:** How much time do you have?? I did a B.Sc in maths and stats at Wits, graduating in 1972. I joined Lever Bros in Salisbury, then Rhodesia, on a salary of \$260 or R260 - big time, I thought. I was in the Economics and Stats Dept for two years before getting into research. I left there after eight years, ending as marketing services manager. I then started my own research company, Probe Market Research, with a partner, Robin Gardner, in 1980 in Salisbury before being head-hunted by RI in Durban in 1984. I hated leaving Zimbabwe, but it was time - I did the first ever AMPS-like survey in Zim and was reprimanded by the minister of communication and the ZBC for my "incorrect" results - the independent press did better than the government-controlled media and my phone was tapped for a time.

I then moved to Research Surveys in Durban in 1985 and felt like I had come home. Butch Rice and Henry Barenblatt were the CEOs and I married a client in 1985 - Debbie worked for the *Daily News* and we were married just before my move to Research Surveys, so we have just had our 30th anniversary. We moved to Johannesburg in 1986 as there was a recession and the Durban office was downsized. After running the Johannesburg office for a time, I started an offshoot company with Steve Zietsman called ResearchWise in January of 1997, coming back to Research Surveys in 2001.

Since then I have been in various innovation and troubleshooting roles, as well as being the TNS spokesperson for ten years - a very unexpected role but one that introduced me to lots of different people and the media. It was great fun but one is on duty 24/7. I relinquished that on the grounds of burnout and on the grounds of being an old white male - not the image for TNS. I also stepped down voluntarily from EXCO a couple of years back on the same grounds. I had been on boards/EXCOs for some 30 years. Now I am in the Innovation Team doing what I love most - innovating. At almost-65, it is so exciting to be in a young, vital, passionate, bright team with wonderful bosses. Our new CEO, Rob Powell, is a true visionary. Our little Innovation Team is innovating for South Africa, the region and for TNS globally. This is the place to be! I am having the time of my life, having just had my 30th anniversary at TNS.

#### **4. Tell us a few of your favourite things.**

**Higgs:** How much more time do you have? My wife and I love hiking and birding and being outside. We love the bush and have two timeshare weeks at Mabalingwe, which we really love. Having the best of both worlds - some work for stimulation and to keep the creative juices flowing and I think I still have a contribution to make, as well as more time for us as a couple. We really are having the best time together.

Other things I love are aeroplanes, especially old ones or very big ones - my son is an aeronautical engineer at the CSIR working on UAVs (drones) so we have a common interest, and we fly model aircraft on Saturdays. I love photography - my dearest wife has given me some great cameras and lenses and I like to photograph aeroplanes, birds and very small things (macro). I have developed an interest in craft beer so we often look for interesting breweries/restaurants to go to. We both love travel and ships, and spent 20 days or so on the Queen Mary 2 from Southampton to Cape Town last year. We also we have a walking holiday in Austria, perhaps next year, in mind.

My wife ran an NPO, Africa Food for Thought, which grew from feeding 70 children once a week to feeding 14,000 children every day and assisting 140 families with monthly food parcels. That really woke me up to how people live as it has been a big part of our lives and a 24/7 job for her, which has fuelled a huge interest in understanding people's lives and culture. She has stood down from that but is an avid gamer and is now teaching bridge to township schoolchildren. I am a news addict so I keep a close eye on Twitter. Between us, Debbie and I have fully kept up with technology, despite my advanced age - my job also helps!

#### **5. What do you love about your industry?**

**Higgs:** The industry can be political but, if one can look beyond that, it is the most exciting place to be. Research is undergoing a huge revolution - not an evolution, a revolution. Those that embrace this are having the best time as the pace of innovation is huge. The chance to make a difference has always been there in research, but even more so now. I have

been presenting papers at SAMRA since 1982 and they have always been about new ideas.

The chance for youngsters to make a difference has never been greater. I work in a female-dominated company and I have been so lucky in being with some of the best minds in the industry - we have no issues of glass ceilings or any nonsense like that and it really changes one's view of society. I have been lucky to work with a succession of excellent bosses, male and female, and can truly say that I have had a great working life. The amazing thing is that I am having the best time of my working life right now. What I also love is finding out how people think, feel and behave. I was never a 'people person' but now, people's lives, thoughts, feelings, habits, cultures all fascinate me. I get to play with data about all of this all the time. I also get to help clients make better decisions - decisions that should benefit both themselves and people in society. I get to see how people react to communications, to new products, to new ideas and to how brands are presented. It is all great fun.

## 6. What are a few pain points your industry can improve on?

**Higgs:** Politics can be a pain, but that is probably true for many industries. I think there are two main issues: one is the low barriers to entry. Anyone can call themselves a researcher. The SAMRA accreditation scheme is a great way of keeping up standards and promoting expertise but, nonetheless, this can be an issue. It is an issue that is growing with the increasing availability of DIY research software that allows people with no training to "do research". The same is true in the statistical sciences. People who don't know how to ask proper questions and interpret the results can, nevertheless, do so with increasing frequency. The dangers are immense. Some clients are making this mistake and the day will come when a truly big marketing decision will be made based on poor DIY research. In today's world of short questionnaires and mobile research, the need for expertise has never been greater.

The other issue is the need to integrate traditional research with data from other data streams: social media, big data, mobile studies, neuro methods and more. Traditional research needs a complete re-think. Some companies - TNS SA is one - are already well-advanced in doing this. But many companies - and clients - are clinging to the old traditional research protocols. One today needs to understand the pros and cons of each of the data streams and when and where they are appropriate or not. Any researcher - be it in a supplier company or a client company - who is not conversant with the latest thinking on the brain, memory, decision-making processes and how we think is out of date.

## 7. Describe your average workday, if such a thing exists.

**Higgs:** Mondays are a bit admin-heavy as I catch up with e-mails sent on Friday, Saturday and, yes, Sunday. I have to do time-sheets (aarrgghh!) and catch up with people with blood in their eyes from some problem. Tuesdays I work at home, these are by far my most productive days in terms of innovation. Wednesdays are my main consulting days in the office.

But, a typical work day involves getting up at 05h45, coffee (!) and then going for a 50-minute walk with Debbie. Then we have breakfast (in winter, we reverse this order) and then it's off to work - a 45-minute drive. In the office or at home, I first catch up on e-mails and any crocodiles they bring. If I am in the office, I do my timesheet (Mondays) and plan the week ahead and the detail of the day. Then I probably have a meeting with some of my team on any issues to do with sampling; the pan-African measure of socio-economic status we developed last year, and about which we have lots of communication from around Africa; our latest Worldview model, Prism; any input the research teams need for proposals on any of our innovation streams; any statistical issues that have arisen and any troubleshooting. 11am is apple time. After that, I work on marketing Prism, reading and writing for my upcoming statistical handbook update, looking for material for a series of essays I am planning on understanding people and catching up on the numerous articles and feeds the whole team circulates on various aspects of our innovation projects.

Currently, we are involved in new mobile research techniques; new measures such as the PA-SES, Q-LSMs and Prism; sampling issues; neuro methods; GIS and all manner of research using social networks, the web, and more. So we do a lot of reading and research into research. I try to get a 20-minute walk in at lunch time. I get home around 6pm for a game of crib and some snacks with Debbie that acts as a really nice transition time from work to home. After some health issues we both had some years back, we are both on a very healthy diet (we lost 25kg three years ago getting healthy) and we have a

lot of fun planning our meals and making them together as often as possible.

## 8. What are the tools of your trade?

**Higgs:** Microsoft Excel and Word! I would be lost without those two. For a lot of our new measures, I also use correspondence analysis a lot, so that is a vital package for me. I am just getting back into SPSS, though my teams are much better at SPSS than I am. One does not need calculators any more as my phone/table has free ones.

On a more philosophical level, one needs passion, good communication (especially good writing) and presentation skills. I do love writing and love to see it done well. As I have gotten older, I no longer worry about saying "I have no idea what you are talking about" when people try to dazzle me. Very liberating!

## 9. Who is getting it right in your industry?

**Higgs:** We are. [Pondering Panda](#) is. Not too many others.

## 10. What are you working on right now?

**Higgs:** Prism (my new suite of measures of worldview), my update of the statistical handbook - this is a huge re-write due to all the new thinking out there, supporting [PA-SES](#), my upcoming PAMRO paper and presentation, my upcoming series of essays on understanding people, researching sampling issues - there is a long list!

## 11. Tell us some of the buzzwords floating around in your industry at the moment, and some of the catchphrases you utter yourself.

**Higgs:** Big data, neuroscience, mobile, GIS, PPS, Kahneman's System 1 and System 2, decision-making processes, short (seven-minute) questionnaires, in-the-moment research, situational equity, propensity scores, weighting, EAs, SAs, worldview, socio-economic status, Q-LSMs, PA-SES, givens, choices and outcomes. These are the words our team uses all the time.

## 12. Where and when do you have your best ideas?

**Higgs:** Walking or working from home on Tuesdays.

## 13. What's your secret talent/party trick?

**Higgs:** I tend to be a what-you-see-is-what-you-get type of person. Many people are quite surprised at my range of interests, but I don't really have a party trick. I followed the space programme from Sputnik 1 (Oct 1957) through to the Philae Lander and New Horizons, so I know quite a lot about that. My dad also taught me a love of English, so I do have a good vocab. My time as the TNS spokesperson surprised many people as I was seen as a very 'numbers' person - but I am quite good at explaining numbers to people, so that worked quite well.

## 14. Are you a technophobe or a technophile?

**Higgs:** I am a technophile and love gadgets. I have an iPad, a Galaxy, a Samsung Edge 6 phone and a Kindle. I also still have my slide rule I used at university. I had one of the first programmable calculators in the 1970s - a Texas Instruments TI-52, I think. I wrote moon-landing games for it! I have about four different types of calculator on my tablets.

## 15. What would we find if we scrolled through your phone?

**Higgs:** My phone has apps for measuring altitude, levels, distances, a compass, a sound meter, temperature and humidity, air pressure, a health app, a hiking app, my Sasol e-birding app, news apps, calculators and the usual camera. My pics

are mostly taken when I have not had my bigger camera on me, so not that many pics there. My contacts is an eclectic list of work, family and friends. I do have an e-reader but find the screen too small for books. I keep books on my tablets and my Kindle. On my tablets, I also have some apps on old African board games, I have some flying apps and some space apps, dictionaries and weather apps, various clock apps (I love clocks), Twitter and Facebook, more calculators, music... I tend to use my iPad for work and my Galaxy for personal stuff.

## 16. What advice would you give to newbies hoping to crack into the industry?

**Higgs:** There has never been a better time to get into research. There is so much new stuff happening. Be interested in people, numbers, good communication and in technology. Be passionate. Be prepared for a roller-coaster ride.

## 17. Plug your contact details, punt yourself - list all the places people can find you/your work online.

**Higgs:** I am permanently logged in to [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#), so I actually forget my addresses! I am also on [LinkedIn](#) but not the rest, as I have a hard enough time keeping up with those three.

You can read more about TNS by [clicking here](#), and [here for more on Higgs](#).

\*Interviewed by [Leigh Andrews](#).

## ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh\_Andrews.

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