

Social network: It won't pay if you don't play



By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

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There are no experts on Twitter and Facebook and I'd do a careful check on the credentials of any "consultant" you might be thinking of paying to advise your company or train your staff on how best to use them.

The truth is that these social networks are so new and vast and fast that very few of us know how it is changing the way we consume media and interact with brands. If you look into it, most social-media consultants are just media people who tweet a lot - like me, and I wouldn't presume to charge anyone for what little I've picked up by doing so.

Those approaching an idea of what social networks are doing and where they are going are people like Minette Ferreira, the GM of *City Press* and *Daily Sun*. She's been directing and watching the papers' experiments with mobisites, Facebook and Twitter - and analysing what they are doing for the titles from a publishing and branding perspective.

While the *Daily Sun's* mobisite - launched in 2010 during the Soccer World Cup - never took off in a sustainable way, for instance, its Facebook page has. For *City Press*, it's Twitter that is the star and not Facebook. ([Click here](#) to read Ferreira's insights in a Q&A with her last month).

The *City Press* experience is particularly interesting because you can compare it with its arch rival, the *Sunday Times*.

Keeping the brand alive through the week

For Ferreira, *City Press'* popular Twitter following of more than 49,000 people (and those of its editor, Ferial Haffajee, and the paper's journalists such as Carien du Plessis and Adriaan Basson) keeps the brand alive through the week.

"In the old-media world Ferial would have had an opportunity once a week to talk to readers and South African newspaper consumers," Ferreira told me last month. "Now she competes with talk-show radio hosts who are on air every day. That's phenomenal. That is significant, which is why the strategy for *City Press* on Twitter as well as on its website is that the digital environment allows *City Press* to be a seven-day-a-week brand - and not just a Sunday brand.

"If you had to spend marketing money to keep a Sunday brand alive through radio or TV or print advertising every day of the week, you couldn't. Never ever have I seen a newspaper budget that could afford that and, here, you have a marketing tool that is actually for free and if you use it correctly, can be really powerful."

Compare this with the *Sunday Times*, where editor Ray Hartley [stopped tweeting](#) more than a year ago, the paper does not have a Twitter account or Facebook page and its online content is protected by a paywall. (Avusa's news portal [Times Live](#) -

of which the *Sunday Times* is a part - has a Twitter account and Facebook page.)

But what does this mean for the two titles' circulations?

The *Sunday Times* is still the biggest paper by far on a Sunday (at 452,785 in the last available ABC sales figures, for the second quarter of 2012) while *City Press* is not putting on the sales it would like in its [reinvented form](#) of the past three years. (The paper was at 146,054 sales in Q2 2012 compared with 149,586.)

Maybe it doesn't need social media?

Meanwhile, *Sunday Times* has launched its e-edition and the paper is still *dik* with advertising so maybe it doesn't need social media?

We shall see in the next couple of years. Building a brand takes a long time and *City Press*' aggressive use of social media may pay off at the expense of the *Sunday Times*.

Where social networks such as Twitter get really interesting is in leading to totally new kinds of businesses. Earlier this year I [interviewed](#) the director of news services at a Dublin-based company called [Storyful](#), which describes itself as a "social media field producer".

Storyful - started by an Irish foreign correspondent more than two years ago - watches social networks to give early warning on breaking stories to clients around the globe. It also does verification checks on information, pictures and videos that pop up on social networks and it can put its clients in contact with the sources.

If this sounds like two hacks on laptops in a garage, then think again: the company had more than 30 staff members, when I spoke to them, and the client list included *The New York Times* and The Economist Group Media Lab.

Finding the key users driving conversations

This week I came across [NewsWhip](#) (also based in Dublin), which has a tool called [Spike](#) that tracks which stories and publishers are getting the most action on Facebook and Twitter. (You've got till 7 November to noodle around the Spike website for free, by the way, so go have a look.)

Then there's the London-based [Chatterbox](#), a commercial spin-off from Queen Mary University of London that uses "conversation analytics" to analyse social networks in order to find the key users driving conversations and opinions about brands. It sounds complicated but, essentially, it works on a subscription model that helps companies to manage their brand reputations.

"Why does any of this matter?" asks [this very interesting Editors Weblog piece](#) about Spike.

"Social networks are growing in importance as tools for spreading the news, particularly among the young," the article said. "A recent study by the Pew Foundation found that for Americans under 30, [social networks have far surpassed print and digital newspapers as a primary source of daily news](#): it found that 33 percent of young adults accessed news on a social network the previous day, while only 13 percent had read from a print or online newspaper."

South Africa may be a developing nation but we're no slouch in this area.

Impact on media consumption

At the end of August this year, there were 5.3-million people in South Africa on Facebook, 2.4-million on Twitter and 9.3-million on Mxit, according to a [study](#) by researchers World Wide Worx and information analysts Fuseware. ([Click here for an infographic](#) on the key findings of the study.)

But if we know why it matters, do we know how it changes the way we are consuming media?

That is less clear although I do think that for those who use social networks a lot, the change is really notable.

For myself, I know that my main consumption of news is no longer in the morning with a daily paper or on a Sunday.

My new consumption habit is to scan Twitter and Facebook when I've got a bit of downtime during the day or the evening - or when hopping into bed - and the eclectic nature of the networks can take me to articles as far afield as *The New York Times*, *The Economist* or *The Atlantic*. I also read articles on local news sites but, once again, my reading is far more eclectic than it has ever been and I can bounce between EWN, Times Live, News24 and *Business Day* in as short a time as 15 minutes.

I have definitely got out of the habit of reading news online on my PC and my main point of access is undoubtedly Twitter and Facebook on my smartphone.

Together with radio news in my car (mostly Cape Talk/702), I feel this keeps me well informed and it suits my busy lifestyle.

I'd say that my key piece of advice for brands, titles and media professionals is - like the Lotto - it don't pay if you don't play. And that you can have for free... no charge at all!

For more:

- Bizcommunity: [Malema-mayhem coverage belongs to Twitter](#), August 2011
- Editors Weblog: [Spike can show editors what drives the share](#), October 2011
- Journalism.co.za: [Former journos find new role in social media management](#), May 2012
- Journalism.co.za: [Making sense of Twitter, editors and endorsements](#), July 2011
- The Atlantic: [Learning to Love the \(Shallow, Divisive, Unreliable\) New Media](#), April 2011

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