

We aim to be inclusive, not exclusive - City Press's Ferial Haffajee

By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

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There's a real buzz about [City Press](#) ([@City_Press](#)), especially with the launch of its new [i magazine](#) supplement this month. Since [Ferial Haffajee](#) took over the paper's editorship more than two years ago, it has lifted its game on several fronts, going head to head with rival *Sunday Times*, breaking big stories and setting the news agenda. Haffajee ([@feriahaffajee](#)) tells Bizcommunity.com about the pains of repositioning and where the [paper](#) is going from here.



Bizcommunity: So the paper is looking good. Are you happy with where it's going?

Ferial Haffajee: I set a very high standard for myself and my colleagues and I'm also quite humble, so when you say that there's a buzz about the paper, I'd be very happy but I have very specific goals that we need to achieve before I can say, "Right, we're there."

But, of course, we're excited that we can set the news agenda and that many people like what we're doing with the paper.



Biz: What are these goals you're still wanting to achieve?

Haffajee: To vie to be Sunday's agenda setter, to own a much larger chunk of people who read on a Sunday, to increase their loyalty and make it a more non-racial read and to bump up circulation.



Biz: Is the [magazine](#) aimed mostly as bringing women readers in?

Haffajee: No, it hasn't got a gender rationale. You'll see it's quite cross-gender in its reach... We studied with Koos [Bekker, CEO of Naspers, the parent company of [Media24](#) which owns *City Press*] and Fergus [Sampson, CEO of Media24 English newspapers] the best Sunday papers around the world and the common factor in all of them is that they have a high-quality, high-gloss magazine and so that's what's we wanted to build very quickly.

And if you look at how it's structured, it's called *i* because it's unapologetically aimed at personal ambition and aspiration because our research has shown us that our readers are very ambitious and highly aspirational, so it talks straight into their interests.



Biz: OK, yes. If I think of the first edition of *i*, there was a guide to Louis Vuitton and to a certain kind of wine...

Haffajee: A lot of our readers love brands and they are brand loyal...

Biz: I found *i* quite interesting as it wasn't filled with the long, meaty features that you expect with Sunday supplement magazines but it was all bite-sized information and quick to digest.

Haffajee: Look, I'm talking to the [New Media](#) people [who are doing the magazine for *City Press*] and I think we have a very good early working relationship. I'd like to see more long reads in it but

really it is there to counter *City Press*, which can be quite a tough, investigative, highly political read.

Biz: It looks like it's quite a thing to put together as there's a lot of content there to package up on a weekly basis. What's the rationale for you guys outsourcing it?

Haffajee: It wasn't very easy for me to get the buy-in for [outsourcing the magazine] from the inside because, obviously, our people would like to do it... but, actually, newspaper and magazine people have very different DNAs. And I'm so happy we went that way because [content director] [Clare O'Donoghue](#) at New Media] and her people really know what they're

doing.

Biz: *Talking about setting the news agenda, you guys have certainly dominated the Julius Malema story - with what Piet Rampedi (@pietrampedi) and Adriaan Basson (@AdriaanBasson) have been doing - and that of the National Youth Development Agency from the Media24 investigation's unit. Are we going to see more of this to come?*

Haffajee: Definitely. Heading up to Mangaung [next year's ANC elective conference], we're drilling quite clearly and strategically, [looking at] which are going to be areas... we are crafting for ourselves and youth politics is an obvious area for us.

But what surprised me was the ease with which we found that information [about Malema]. People were waiting to tell about the aggrandisement and the corruption of the tender systems.

Biz: *OK, let's talk about your circulation. You guys were down in the last ABC figures (149 586 in the second quarter of this year compared with 167 467 in the same period last year). I know it's hard to really judge Media24 circulation figures because of the mess-up with the new [Cycad distribution system](#). Do you have an idea how you guys will look in the next set of ABCs, which are coming out soon?*

Haffajee: They're looking better. I mean I nearly got myself to a prescription for an anti-inflammatory because no editor wants to sit down [and see a fall in circulation figures] but this is a repositioning exercise [for *City Press*] so we all expected to lose and then slowly begin to rebuild.

Rebuilding has been difficult for me because of our distribution system but I hope that will be stabilised over the next year.

Biz: *It must be quite soul-destroying to see the drop-off in circulation.*

Haffajee: Luckily, I had been told that that was what it was going to do [when we repositioned]... that you lose a section of readership and gain another one.

Biz: *And I suppose there's an element of shooting in the dark because of the distribution problems - you don't know to what degree you're being affected?*

Haffajee: It's coming right now. A new system's been developed but it is a double whammy because the repositioning exercise over the past two years has been a holistic publishing exercise. So you're having to move your entire distribution footprint, changing your content and then finding those [new] readers and marketing to them.

So it's been an intricate and complex operation but I've learned so much about how to do it.

Biz: *And are you doing reader research?*

Haffajee: There's near-constant reader research... I work with the [market research] guru, [Jos Kuper](#), and she's been really helpful in defining our readers' interests for us.

Biz: *You know, I was so interested to learn when I first interviewed you as City Press editor that you fought to keep the slogan "Distinctly African" when the paper was repositioned. City Press was always very firmly THE black read on a Sunday. Are the demographics of the readers widening now?*

Haffajee: I've spoken to [Mathatha \(Tsedu\)](#), the previous editor of *City Press* and "Distinctly African" was always meant to be continental; not the South African race definition. That's why I defended it, because I think Africa is the new cool. It's the new growth spot and the JSE shows you why.

But obviously, [the slogan] had a double meaning and I think the way to change that wasn't to quibble about the logo or slogan but to make the paper feel more inclusive rather than exclusive. So we've done that with columnists, with the people who write for us, with different takes on our news pages.

I think it's worked because the latest set of AMPS (readership figures) is showing that we've grown the race base of our readers quite substantially... It's often a subliminal experience - who your analysts are, who your columnists are, who your writers are - that make people feel either uncomfortable or comfortable.

Biz: And ad revenue. How's that been this year?

Haffajee: It's been good. When last I checked - the second quarterly review of our division - we were just ahead of target.

Biz: Across the world, Sunday papers have felt the decline of readers more than daily papers over the past couple of decades. People's Sunday are so different - they're much busier than they used to be. What is your view on this decline?

Haffajee: I think the local Sundays are beginning to reveal the same pattern. But still, when we study what our readers do, reading on a Sunday afternoon at a car wash or a braai spot or a picnic is still a very big part of their Sundays.

So I think we're good for a while yet but we are growing across platforms so you'll see on page two [of the paper] that we have an [iPad app](#). I'm very aware of that and having the brand across platforms... The key for me is to keep relevant, to keep breaking news on a Sunday.

Biz: Can I just check: your LSM reader profile is 6-10?

Haffajee: Yes, we are higher in 8-10 and I need to build 6 and 7 and the magazine is our vehicle to do that.

Biz: Looking at the second-quarter ABC figures, you have very few subscribers [only 1539 individual and business]. That's very small for a Sunday paper.

Haffajee: This is where we're working the hardest... There's a [big subscription drive](#) [on the go]. It had picked up a lot when I last checked.

Biz: What are the main areas you really want to improve on editorially?

Haffajee: We're going to relaunch the business section very soon. We're watching the magazine and I think social pages are very popular so we are really investing in the editing of that.

And then I edit Voices [the opinion section of the paper] myself and I think over the next six months, I'm going to get some help there to ensure that the quality of the copy can match anything in the world. It's a popular section so I'm going to get some help now.

The thing, I think, we don't do well yet is my vision to be truly national. We've opened offices in Limpopo, Mpumalanga and the Free State but we haven't yet worked out how to make our people think more widely than news. I'm spending quite a bit of time in those offices, finding out about people and finding out what makes them tick. We also have a KZN office and then we've hired an Eastern Cape person. I really want it to feel like the nation is talking to itself [in *City Press*] and I'm not there yet.

Biz: Do you have a Cape Town office?

Haffajee: No, but I want to open one, although it's my last outpost.

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- Journalism.co.za: [The hazards of writing truth to power in Polokwane](#), August 2011
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