

Smart women read

 By [Roger Hislop](#)

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In the first of our [PR Meets the Media](#) series, in which Bizcommunity.com and Sentient Communications will be profiling South African magazines and their editors so that both journalists and PRs can get more of what they both want, we take a look at all the new developments happening at *Marie Claire* since editor Aspasia Karras took over [earlier this year](#).



Aspasia Karras, editor of *Marie Claire*.

Tornado

The last six months have seen a bit of a tornado tear through the offices of *Marie Claire*, with a new editor, a new fashion director, a new assistant editor in Johannesburg, a new beauty editor... some of whom are (gasp) black! And (double gasp!) based in Jozi!

Many bold changes for the South African glossy magazine industry, generally known more for its cosy coterie of the same faces from the Cape Town Old Girls Club, pursuing the same strategies and going after the same readers, decade after decade.

The magazine has also changed its payoff line to "Think Smart, Look Amazing", replacing the somewhat oxymoronic "The Thinking Woman's Fashion Magazine". It has beefed up its editorial team. It has thrown more effort at great photography.

The changes signal a return to the magazine's editorial roots, more in line with the left-of-centre, feminist, slightly radical journalism of 1950s Paris, rather than the increasingly lightweight and consumerist American model.

Renewed energy

Gone are the increasingly tabloidy features, replaced with harder and more topical issues-based journalism and photo

reportage. They are bracketed by the usual beauty stuff, but with renewed energy in the fashion pages. The assumption is now that the reader is an informed woman who wants to know about social trends and changes in the world we live in, packed with hard facts and genuine investigative reporting, rather than repackaged soft trend pieces and dip-stick, hand-waving "research".

Think more *Vanity Fair*, less *Hello*.

The target reader is looking for more insight into the world, less seeking for validation. "We are not telling our readers who they can become - they've already arrived," says Aspasia Karras, the new editor with only a few issues under her belt. "I like to describe her as the smartest girl at the dinner table."

Her focus so far has been to grow and develop new talent: "We're identifying and nurturing a pool of good young journalists - and photojournalists," she says.

Still a key pillar

Fashion is still a key pillar of *Marie Claire*, and fashion shoots have been elaborately styled and shot in local and international locations. The fashion pages have been given more oomph, thanks to a dedicated, senior fashion director. An unstated ambition is to do locally what *Marie Claire* did in Italy, where it unseated the almighty *Vogue* as the fashion bible.

A major initiative for the magazine is still the Prix de la Beauté, the Oscars of the beauty industry, now joined by the Prix de la Mode for the fashion industry, recognising creative talent as well as the industry around it, particularly in how it supports the businesses of local designers and clothes makers.

This emphasis on a more thought-provoking editorial style does, however, mean that *Marie Claire* is a niche publication - its circulation is around a third of its more mass-market cousins such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour*. Not everyone wants to be challenged, not everyone has an eye for the creative. But those who do, love it.

For PRs, this means the challenge is harder. To be with the smart kids, you gotta be a bit smart.

Online strategy

The print magazine is now supported by a Facebook page at [MarieClaireSA](#) (152 fans) and Twitter [@marieclaire_sa](#) (634 followers), numbers that lag most other local magazines badly - but they've only been live a few months, and lots of work is going into it. There is also a blog, [Marie Clairevoyant](#), which also acts as the publication's website.

Says Karras: "Our main objective online right now is to build a community. Hits are consistently growing, and from a loyal group."

Marie Claire readers are a vocal lot, and the magazine gets many more letters to the editor than it can publish - many of these will now be appearing on the blog. A standalone online site for the magazine would be a next step.

Who's who

- **Editor: Aspasia Karras (@AspasiaKarras)**. Contact her if you have something big, particularly interesting and it'll blow her socks off. If you have the slightest doubt, think about whether one of the following people will be a better starting point.
- **Assistant editor (JHB): Zodwa Kumalo-Valentine**. She also handles special projects and online activity. Special reports, including the two Prix (Beauté and Mode), or usually themed and planned well in advance. Get hold of her if you have something big in mind (major promotion or cross-promotion).

- **Assistant editor (CT): Melissa Attridge (@melissaatt)**. If whatever you're punting is major, and Cape Town-based, she's a good place to start.
- **Fashion director: Sharon Becker**. If you have a client that is fashion industry, Becker's the contact. Clothes, fashion, accessories... not cosmetic or health products.
- **Beauty editor: Zanele Kumalo (@misszan)**. If you have beauty or health products, this is your best option.
- **Features editor: Vanessa McCulloch (@4LoveOfFeatures)**. Since Marie Claire is an issues-centric magazine, if you have a story that is either very topical, or can support a larger trend feature, talk to McCulloch. Don't go there if you don't have a strong feature story angle. If you're not sure what this means, then don't go there at all.

How to pitch

The *Marie Claire* editorial team prefers to be pitched by email - with two main rules. Pitch cleverly, and get to the point.

Explains Karras: "'Cleverly' means explain what makes your brand amazing. Tell us a good story, and we'll be inspired - ie think of relevance of your story idea, and why readers would care. Don't spam us - there's so much info out there."

If you have a specific story, then choose your target publication and pitch it. If it's a general product or news announcement, then send it to the relevant person with a quick summary of what the story is, why it's relevant, and attach necessary info.

Fact file

- ***Potted bio: Aspasia Karras - editor of Marie Claire***

She was an experienced journalist in the monthly magazine segment, working as features editor at *Elle*. She'd come from a newspaper background, having cut her teeth as a freelancer at the *Mail & Guardian*, then working on the short-lived *ThisDay*. Then newsman Ray Hartley (now *Sunday Times* ed) convinced her to give up the glossies and re-enter the tough but exciting world of the daily national newspaper when he launched *The Times*. She returned to the monthly gloss magazine world in January 2010 when she took over as editor at *Marie Claire*, bringing a greater emphasis on more topical, issues-based reporting. She also brought with her digital savvy from the Times Live experience (although she had long had her own fashion blog on Times LIVE called The Frock Report, now handed over to Jacquie Myburgh), quickly ramping up *Marie Claire's* online presence.

Read Herman Manson's [interview with Aspasia](#) when she was appointed earlier this year.

- ***Readership stats (ABC June 2010)***

- ABC circulation: 36 061; paid 32 599
- Demographic:
 - High LSM - 77% are 7-10; 34% are 9-10
 - 54% of readers are black, 28% white, 15% coloured, 3% Indian

- Fairly even spread across age groups (27% 15-24, 21% 25-34, 31% 35-49, 21% 50+)

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