

Sarie's trailblazing move into e-commerce



By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

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Why this hasn't been done before in South Africa, I don't know. An online store selling clothes featured in women's magazines seems so bleeding obvious but only now do we have SA's trailblazer: Sarie.com. The big marketing drive is yet to come but *Sarie* magazine's online shop has been doubling unique users since its launch in March. After having tried it out by acquiring a (rather fetching) dress and sandals (they were delivered in one day!), Bizcommunity finds out from Sarie.com CEO, Louna Lohann, about the mix of media, tech and retail expertise behind the [online store](#), why some of the magazine readers were uncomfortable with the offering at first, and how this is the start of a big new e-commerce play for *Sarie* owners, Media24.



Louna Lohann

■ So how did this all come about?

Louna Lohann: Well, obviously there is a Media24 initiative to embark on this important drive...

■ You mean digital?

Lohann: Ja, they decided to use *Sarie* magazine because it's the biggest glossy women's magazine in South Africa (120 402 circulation in the latest ABCs, for the first quarter of 2012) - and has been for some time. So it's quite a strong brand. It's well known throughout South Africa. It's got over one-million readers so it's definitely the right way to go if you want to embark on something like this.

The idea is that we focus on fashion for now but you would have seen (online) that we've got a few other elements as well that we will expand on later like décor and food-related items. The idea is that if a reader reads *Sarie* magazine and they see editorial of how the fashion is put together, then we make it easier for the reader to go online and buy those items online... It's like giving the reader another offering. At the back of the magazine you'll see there is always an (stockists') index of where you find the items of clothing but if you want to make an outfit, you've got to go to all of those shops. Some are in Jo'burg and some are in Cape Town.

❑ ***And the stockists' lists are usually just a phone number so you're not sure where in Cape Town or Jo'burg the boutique is. I've never got round to phoning one of those numbers. I don't think most people can be bothered.***

Lohann: Also, for people who don't live in the big cities, it's not accessible. On the other hand, people feel that it's a bit daunting to step into a boutique. You feel: "Oh, my gosh. I'm one of three people in this shop. I feel like I've got to buy something". So this takes away that kind of fear - not to say that online shopping at the moment is not without fear. I think a lot of people are still worried about giving credit card details over the internet. But that is why we've chosen the *Sarie* brand. People know that it's not a fly-by-night company so if you can trust the brand and they bring a trusted offering, then it might be easier for a South African woman to take that step and purchase online.

❑ ***But sourcing and stocking the clothing must be really complicated. Are you guys partnering with [36Boutiques](#) (which is owned by Media24 parent company [Naspers](#) and housed in the MIH division)? I've noticed the styling of the photographs is quite similar.***

Lohann: We started off working with them. 36Boutiques started off as a flash-sales site but in the meantime they've [changed](#) their strategy - very similar to that of *Sarie.com*. I think they've seen what we're doing with *Sarie.com* and that it can really fly in this way.

❑ ***So when did *Sarie.com* launch?***

Lohann: We announced the shop in the April edition of *Sarie* (which would have been on the shelves in March) and it's going so well. What's fantastic is that with the magazine and the whole editorial team, it is also very personalised. So we use Chris Viljoen, our fashion director, and he's a well known guy in the fashion industry in South Africa. He dressed quite a few famous people in SA. He really has a fashion voice and people trust him with styling.

We focus on local designers and we go and visit them and literally go through their ranges. Chris will look at the clothes and say: "This is trendy. This is applicable to the *Sarie* reader, etc. etc." So we literally handpick the clothing. It's not a case of mass production or that the designers put their full lines online... (With every item on sale online), there's a "Chris says" which is about why he chose that item and then there are the details of the material and the sizes of the material - how it measures.

❑ ***Ja, I was impressed with the detail in the information about the sizes.***

Lohann: The better you communicate online, the more reliable the (buying) decision...

❑ ***What's so interesting about this is that you guys are moving from the media world into the realm of retail. How do you predict how many of an item to stock? I don't think many journalists have the first clue how to do this.***

Lohann: That is where we also have a retail team. It's complicated stuff and it is a bit scientific as well. So before we even go to the local designers, we go to Europe and the USA and see what the trends are and then we come back and interpret those trends.

Also, from a retail perspective - with our buyer, our planner and myself - we compile our plan: that we want so many dresses and so many pants and that we see these kinds of pants; we need to incorporate this in our buying plan. So we literally have a plan beforehand of what we're going to buy and only then do we go out and buy. There might be stuff that Chris feels is highly fashionable - an absolute must-have - but that we feel South Africa might not be ready for, so we will buy very little of that item... It's definitely a synergy between what's fashionable and trending and what's commercially viable for our market.

❑ ***So are you from a retail background then?***

Lohann: Yes, I'm from a manufacturing and retail background. I have worked at Ackermans and also been a supplier on textiles and children's products for all the major retailers in South Africa. For the past 10 years I've been involved with a few businesses and I did my MBA about 10 years ago. I love doing a little bit of everything so this business is absolutely amazing for me as there's retail - which I love. We work closely with the designers so the manufacturing part kicks in every now and again. And then obviously there's the marketing part of it - we're starting with a real drive now. We wanted to settle the site and the business first. We've partnered with one of our distribution partners (Media24's On the Dot) to do the warehousing and distribution for us. And then obviously the customer service part is absolutely crucial for us... so

we've got a call centre standing by answering questions, talking you through (payments) - you can even get fashion advice if you want.

■ ***Jeepers. That's a big operation. I presume you're using the in-house Media24 tech people to develop and run the website.***

Lohann: Yes, they (from Media24's Touchlab tech and innovation unit) are seeing what we can do better on the site all the time. We've just developed (an app) for iPad and the next step is to develop on mobile. So it's quite an operation but we're trying to do it as lean and mean as possible... I sometimes feel I'm in the business of training people to buy online rather than in the fashion or online-retail business. It's really about taking your customer over that bridge - to just try it once. For fashion, it is difficult. People (in SA) have known Kalahari (also owned by MIH) for years. Selling books and CDs and electronics is much easier online than fashion, where people want to feel the fabric and try on the garment.

■ ***The one thing I would not buy online is a pair of pants because you really need to try them on to see if they fit nicely.***

Lohann: Pants is a difficult one. We obviously give all the measurements but when we sell pants online, it'll either be a brand that people know like Sissy Boy or with a draw-string... We try to do a comfortable fit - not a very tight fit.

■ ***OK, that makes sense. So if I'm a Levi's fan, then I will buy the jeans online because I know how the sizes and patterns work. Surely the market for Sarie.com is much wider than Afrikaans women?***

Lohann: Oh yes, definitely. That's why we've translated the [site into English](#) and we're going to market it wider than the Sarie readers... Also, if we think of expansion in the future, there are such a lot of fantastic brands in the Media24 group that we can expand to... ([Click here](#) for the list of Media24 magazines.)

■ ***Were the readers uncomfortable at all with the store being punted in the magazine - because it feels like an advertorial?***

Lohann: Ja, that's a good question. When we announced (our launch), we wanted to go big because we were so excited and we did get some reader feedback saying: "Are you becoming an advertisement" - and then trust issues started coming up such as: "Are you only punting your own product or is this really fashionable". So that's why it's important to keep the balance in the magazine. If you look at the fashion editorial (in the magazine), you will still find products from all over South Africa, including the (Sarie.com) shop. So (the online store) is part of the offering but not the *only* offering.

■ ***Web traffic must have gone up on Saire.com?***

Lohann: Yes, tremendously and conversions to sales are good. It's still in the baby stages but the initial uptake looks good... Everything is telling us we're on the right path.

■ ***Can you tell me how many sales you've been making monthly, perhaps?***

Lohann: It's difficult for us to put that out there because of our competitors but we can say it is growing very nicely every month. Since March, our unique users have doubled every month.

■ ***You can obviously deliver in the major centres within one or two days but what about smaller towns and country areas?***

Lohann: We try to say that we can deliver within 48 hours but (not with) the outlying areas. When you order, we give you date (of delivery) and say that you can call the call centre and they will track it for you... The other thing we've got that is a differentiating factor is a digital magazine. Every two weeks we issue a new digital magazine for free that we do with the full force of the magazine - professional photography, models, styling etc., etc. It has an article in it and (Sarie editor) Michéle (van Breda) has an editor's letter in there. It's like a little mini-magazine that is online every two weeks.

■ ***It's amazing that a women's magazine in SA hasn't done this before but then I guess Media24's rivals in magazine don't have all the synergies that you guys have. Associated Magazines doesn't have its own distribution department as far as I know and Caxton is not much of a tech innovator.***

Lohann: You do have to have the infrastructure. That's why we felt we wanted to have the infrastructure and the business process and the tech support in place for Sarie.com - and now the world is our oyster. Now we can use this for any

(magazine) title.

■ Was this quite a long in the development then?

Lohann: Yes, it has been more than a year. But I also think we've moved amazingly quickly. This is a speed-to-market business. You can't sit and wait. So what we've done over the past year - and the processes we've put in place - is absolutely astounding.

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