

Why SuperSport punches above its weight - Happy Ntshingila



By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

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Happy Ntshingila's unique career has seen him move from advertising (HerdBuoys) to one of SA's biggest advertisers (Absa) and now, as CEO of [SuperSport](#), he is in the position where he seeks advertising. Just over four months into the new job, Ntshingila tells Bizcommunity about the complex world of broadcasting rights, how SuperSport never skimps on live coverage and why he's got another book in him.



Happy Ntshingila

■ ***I'm interested in SuperSport because the cost of sports broadcasting rights is ever increasing and you guys have to have the big events because you're in the business of sport. I often wonder how you keep your revenue on the up to match these costs. You [took over](#) at SuperSport (from Absa) in March so what's been the biggest challenge so far? This is a very big business.***

Ntshingila: It's a huge business and the most important thing is to understand how the world of rights works because it's quite a tricky thing. Look, I found this business functioning perfectly. So it wasn't as if I've had to do any repair work. All I've had to do is to try and hang on to the stuff that works - and the stuff that works is the big stuff. It's the English Premier League and the PSL and the rugby - the Super Rugby and the Test rugby. Those are big events. Motorsport is also huge...

■ ***So how does the world of rights work then? Do you head off to London or Sydney, for instance, and just bid for them? Or is it more complicated than that? Is it based on relationships you've got to maintain?***

Ntshingila: It is based on long relationships - and also based on not making the wrong move too early otherwise you might influence the price incorrectly. It's a world of negotiations... But you do bid for them - like a tender... Remember the rights holders are also looking for someone who's going to make their product look good. So it's not just that your money looks better than somebody else's.

■ ***So what is the main source of revenue for SuperSport? Is it a combination of subscriptions and ad revenue? (SuperSport is owned by SA media giant [Naspers](#). [Click here for a recent interview](#) with Naspers' financial director Steve Pacak on the 2011/12 annual results.)***

Ntshingila: Yes, it's a combination but subscriptions is the bigger part.

■ ***Is it possible to gauge the size of your audience among the [DStv](#) bouquet?***

Ntshingila: It is a very difficult thing but I can tell you that when you have a Pirates-Chiefs (soccer) game, we pull about 1.6 million viewers. That's a lot of people watching television.

■ ***And is it mostly men?***

Ntshingila: It's biased towards men, yes - the same with rugby.

■ ***And they're mostly well monied, I would imagine?***

Ntshingila: Ja, some of them are watching on the Premium bouquet. HD ([High definition TV](#)) is becoming a big thing and is making a big difference to viewing sports. I don't know if you've tried it but if you've watched HD, you don't want to go back ever again... HD and sport are definitely made for each other... It's like you're there. We're still working on measuring the audiences on HD and we'll get that right very soon.

■ ***Is developing and acquiring technology quite a big cost of the business?***

Ntshingila: It is. However, I'm big on this type of stuff... At the British Open, they could track a golf ball as the player hit it with robotic cameras until it landed. The first thing I said to my team (afterwards) is: 'We need to get that'. We need to stay with the changes in technology and be seen to be part of the development. When we were working on the Olympics and talking about the commentary and the analysis, the guys said: 'We'll get Ryk Neethling'. And I said: 'That's great. He's good at what he does and he'll do analysis that people will listen too. What about Carl Lewis?' And we've also got Carl Lewis.

■ ***Ja, that's a real coup. He's going to be excellent.***

Ntshingila: But if you want to be the best, you've got to get the best analysts. Then people sitting at home will say: 'SuperSport is taking me seriously'... Carl Lewis is not doing it exclusively for us but he's doing it for us for eight days. The viewers are very, very demanding. I like that - that the viewers are making demands on us and we're having to respond because we can only improve.

■ ***I know you get feeds from London for the Olympics but when you're covering big outdoor events yourselves such as soccer or rugby, it's very complicated and expensive, isn't it? e.tv [told me recently](#) that they can burn through R100 000 a day covering a big live event like a protest march or an election?***

Ntshingila: Look, when we do a live events, we go in guns blazing. We send the OB ([outside broadcasting](#)) trucks and they are something else. They're big and expensive. When we cover a game, we send 18 cameras. We don't mess around. If you look at the quality of the coverage, you see we cover it from all angles. And that's because we've got 18 cameras. Live events can embarrass you if you try to skimp. You can't edit while it's live.

■ ***What's interesting about your career is that you were in advertising (a co-founder of SA's first black-owned advertising agency, HerdBuoys) and then you were with one of the advertisers (with Absa as head of marketing and communications). Now you're in the position where you seek advertising. Do you miss advertising itself?***

Ntshingila: I've always missed advertising but, fortunately, I work in a very creative world. (At SuperSport) we do a lot of promos and we do our own marketing stuff. I do miss it but I'm not too far removed from it. I've been loving the Olympic promos we've been doing. They're just awesome. And we are forever trying to improve the on-air stuff so I've been involved in that quite a lot. We've also just done a tweak with the SuperSport logo and I was involved in that. I've only been in the job four months but I'm enjoying it.

■ ***What are you most pleased with and enjoying the most since you've taken over?***

Ntshingila: I think sitting down and just talking about the content, making a contribution to what we need to improve, engaging with the commentators - I've met with all of them - so sharing with them what I think they do best and what I

believe we should be doing better. So I guess (what I'm enjoying most) is the total engagement with the people in the television world who know more than I do.

■ **Do you think you've got another book in you? (The first, ['Black Jerusalem'](#), about starting and running HerdBuoys, was published in 2009.)**

Ntshingila: There is, but there isn't time right now. There is a book on sponsorships, for sure, and that goes back to my time in banking. But I think I would want to do it after I know more about rights in television because it makes a whole lot of sense to combine the two.

■ **Let's talk a bit about online. Is the SuperSport website profitable in its own right?**

Ntshingila: Yes, it is. We do get a lot of revenue coming from that side.

■ **And how many staff members do you have at SuperSport?**

Ntshingila: About 1 000. About 800-plus permanent and the rest are on contract.

■ **Gee, that's big. Is that the biggest part of the DStv business then?**

Ntshingila: Yes, it's huge. Remember, we've got all the technical staff and the production guys. And we also service the rest of the continent, where we have different bouquets.

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- Journalism.co.za: [Broadcasters prepare for lukewarm response for Olympic coverage](#), June 2012
- Mail & Guardian: [PSL strikes new deal with SuperSport](#), August 2011

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