

DEAR SIR: YOUR NEWSPAPER

The story of the redesign of the Cape Argus as told

Mind pictures are useful when it comes to planning a newspaper relaunch, particularly if it involves a big publication with a large staff. A clear mental image must be established right at the outset so that everyone's myriad activities can be geared toward a comprehensible and coherent outcome. If the journalists don't understand what the editor is doing and why, it is highly likely that the readers won't either.

I used a few mind pictures in extensive consultative sessions with staff of the *Cape Argus* as we prepared this year for the most comprehensive relaunch in the grand old title's history. The images encompassed the entire strategy but had direct implications for the redesign component, which is the focus of what follows.

First, I said to my colleagues, imagine a newspaper which has been coming to work for more than a century in a suit. Now picture it arriving each morning at Newspaper House in a pair of Levis. Then think of a newspaper as having a volume on an amplifier, with points from zero to 10. Consider *The Sunday Independent* as, say, a three, the *Cape Times* as a five, and the new *Cape Argus* as a seven. Bright and loudish, but not distorting through the speakers.

These images were a means of getting us all on the same wavelength, understanding that the very personality of the paper was going to change – and certainly feel younger – from its content to its tone to its look.

It had taken about three months in the second quarter of this year for us to develop an overarching strategy for the September relaunch of the *Cape Argus*. The task was quite unlike that of my previous project, *The Sunday Independent*, not least in that we started with a blank canvas in the case of the Indie: we invented the paper, from content to design to staff structure, from scratch, and then tweaked as we went along, constantly assessing which of the innovations had worked and which hadn't.

The *Argus*, as it was known when I arrived in Cape Town, could hardly have been more different: 139 years old, for starters, set in its ways, published seven days a week (on-day Monday to Friday, overnight for Saturday and Sunday), mass market as opposed to niched, serving a staggeringly diverse audience, a great institution of the Cape but feeling fusty and stale, performing sluggishly and in need of the reinvigoration that is periodically required as time overtakes even the most successful formulae.

INSIDE today

WEATHERMAN PETE SAYS



It may have made it only if the last article, but it was the only one to make it to the top of the page. The headline was 'Weatherman Pete Says' and the sub-headline was 'The weather is going to be a bit of a mess today'.

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Clinton wants woman as US Secretary of State

Washington - United States President Bill Clinton has announced he will nominate a woman to be the first woman Secretary of State in US history to lead a new national security team that will include a Republican as Defense Secretary.

Sudden wind puts paddlers in too deep

ABILENE, Texas - The National Sea Rescue Institute has warned recreational paddlers to be alert to the risk of being swept away by a sudden wind.



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'Abducted' Jacqui seeking a divorce

Johannesburg - Jacqui de la Cruz, the 36-year-old Cape Town model, has been abducted by her husband for two weeks.

Daring to be different: the arrival of the International Olympic Committee in December was bound to set the creative juices flowing in the light of the strong editorial stance the Cape Argus has taken in favour of Cape Town's bid to host the Games in 2004.

In addition to the masthead's daily Olympic Bid Clock, counting down the days to the naming of the successful bidder, the paper's slogan changed for the day, the editor wrote a personal message welcoming the IOC team, Weatherman Pete was given extra space for his description of climatic conditions the evaluators could expect and artist Colin Daniel was let loose on four columns of space.

REEKS OF YOUTH

by its editor, Shaun Johnson



Wearing it well: Shaun Johnson (standing, right centre) and his team fly the flag on the eve of the September 5 relaunch

life would be dramatically reduced. Also, it is a fact that the 1990s notion of "time famine" has made it harder and harder to convince people to take the time to read a substantial newspaper in the evening.

But we did not have the option of going for the morning slot, so the challenge was to create a paper that was friendly, accessible and bright enough to compete with all the other activities that dominate homes in the evening – the Western Cape is, incidentally, very family-oriented.

People read morning and evening papers in entirely different frames of mind and moods. One of the means we employed to achieve this was carefully altered, formulaic pagination, which I'll discuss later.

We also took the major step of reintegrating the geographically "zoned" sections into one newspaper for one Cape Town in the new South Africa.

The Group Areas Act and its long-lingering aftermath had seen to it that by following the geographical route one ends up publishing by "group area", offending many and satisfying few. It seemed to me obvious that if an important or interesting event occurred in Mitchell's Plain, it should go in the same paper which is read in Constantia, and vice-versa. The *Cape Argus* is an institution belonging to all the people of the region it serves, and had to reflect that.

So much for the positioning of the paper: let's talk about the

design, and another mind picture. I think of newspaper design like a piece of clothing. The primary question is whether it fits, and is well-made. After that it's a matter of fashion and personal taste. Does the design work? Is it a toolbox from which you can quickly, consistently and neatly assemble several newspapers each day? Those are the questions to be answered positively before you go ahead.

You can rest assured that if those criteria are satisfied, and the result is clean and readable, people will get used to the particular fonts and other elements you have selected. Every single aspect of the design must pass this test: does it make things easy for the reader? Thereafter it's a matter of whether you prefer flares or stovepipes.

In the case of the new *Cape Argus*, though, I wanted to do something more than just produce a paper which worked for the reader – we could have done that in 15 minutes with an old faithful like Times New Roman.

I had the growing feeling that South African (and, for that matter, British) newspapers were beginning to clone one another in their design fundamentals. Several titles published in our country at the moment are so alike in "feel" that one has to turn back to the masthead to see what one's reading. (Indeed the fashionable "small caps" masthead is itself part of the cloning process.)

So we wanted to create a paper that would leave no reader in any doubt that it was the *Cape Argus* in

their hands, and this informed our decisions on fonts, the grid, and our colour palette.

I was determined that the *Cape Argus* should look like no other newspaper ever seen in South Africa, or indeed the world. I believe passionately in the power of journalistic innovation, accepting that by definition not every aspect of innovation can be successful, and we were insistent that when the new *Cape Argus* came out, it would be an absolute original. We are all busy building a new country in South Africa, and we

I had the growing feeling that South African newspapers were beginning to clone one another

must work at building new newspapers as well.

Clearly such profound change was going to come as a shock to people who had become used to the look of the old *Argus*, but I bet anyone who would listen that the new look would be accepted within weeks, and it was.

Even the Gill Sans Bold Extra Condensed masthead, incorporating the Olympic Bid logo because of the importance of the issue for this metropolitan daily, was quickly embraced. We journalists often agonise over things that the reader

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PETE'S 5-DAY WEATHERWATCH

PETE SAYS: As predicted, there is a table cloth over Table Mountain which means plenty of south easterly wind over the weekend. It's likely to switch to south west by Monday bringing the occasional cloud with it. But I'm sticking to my guns on the fact that I believe summer is here, apart from periodic hicups in the form of the odd shower - on Tuesday perhaps?

OUTLOOK: Fine and windy



TOMORROW: A high pressure belt over the southern parts with a western interior trough means the fine weather will hold

SUNDAY: There will be a coastal low along the south coast with a blocking high to the east bringing partly cloudy conditions

MONDAY: A frontal trough to the south east with a coastal low along the south coast will bring some cloud

CAPE TOWN SOUTHERN SUBURBS FALSE BAY COAST Fine. Wind fresh to strong south easterly

NORTHERN PENINSULA Fine. Wind fresh south easterly

PAARL-STELLENBOSCH Fine

HERMANUS-OVERBERG Fine. Wind fresh south easterly

LANGEBAAN-WEST COAST Fine. Wind fresh south easterly

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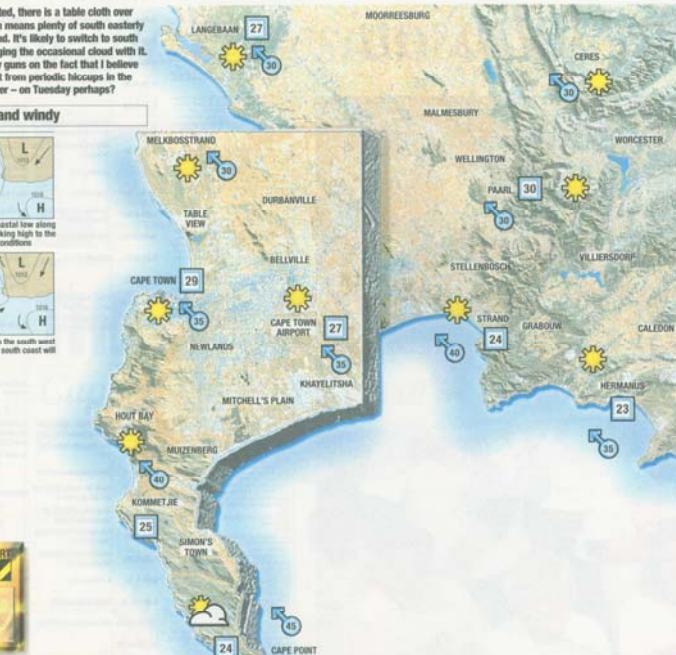
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TOMORROW'S WEATHER PICTURE



NATIONAL TRAVELLERS' FORECAST table listing weather for Johannesburg, Bloemfontein, Kimberley, etc.

FISHING

Not to put too fine a point on it, boat fishing is probably a wipe-out for the weekend. There appears to be just too much south easter out there which, it is predicted, will hit 40km/h. But it's music to the ears for rock and surf anglers. The onshore wind is likely to bring kob, steenbras and even eel on the bite in the surf spots between Muizenberg and Macassar and even further afield beyond Gordon's Bay. The ledges at Rookvanz, Cape Point, has been yielding some yellowtail to experienced anglers

SURFING

The strong south easter has all but flattened the surf on the Atlantic coastline. It's down to two to three feet and the best spots for today and the weekend are the Dunes, the Hoek and Minnerloot. The False Bay coastline is like a washing machine, but Kogel Bay could be worth a visit

HIKING

A good outlook from a weather point of view as long as you remember that the south easter can be very cold at higher altitudes. There is also going to be some cloud about

DIVING

The south easter has set up a nasty cross current in False Bay which means rough white water and poor visibility. Diving is not recommended. On the Atlantic side the south easter, under normal conditions, clears up the water in areas like Kommetjie, but the water is very cold - guard against hypothermia.

TONIGHT SUNDAY MONDAY TUESDAY

Weather forecast table for tonight, Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday with wind, temperature, and sun/moon icons.

RAIN 24 HOURS TO 8AM TODAY table listing rainfall forecasts for various locations.

TIDES

Tide forecast table for high water, low water, and spring tides.

AIR TEMPERATURES

Air temperature forecast table for today, tomorrow, and yesterday.

WATER TEMPERATURES

Water temperature forecast table for various locations.

INTERNET ADDRESSES

Table of internet addresses for weather services.

A star is born: Weatherman Pete, alias assistant news editor Peter Goosen, is occasionally mobbed by small children in the street after becoming an overnight sensation with his detailed and chatty five-day forecast

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Specifically, I made these requests among others. A sans serif headline font which could be used in caps for a splash lead, in upper and lower for the rest. Because the backbone of advertising support in the Cape Argus is what I would call garish retail, I asked if we could develop a formula whereby all headlines were in bold, with only the point size shifting in order to indicate to the reader our judgments about the importance of stories. (Instinct tells me that the endless variety of font weights has been overused at the expense of simplicity and clarity and that it's time to go back to basics, but the need was acute in the Cape Argus because the editorial space has to fight for visibility against very dominant and bright advertising.) I asked for Nimrod as the body type because most people seem to find it easy to read - you're reading it now - and suggested an innovation/experiment whereby the intros are in the same type and size (Nimrod 9 on 10) as the body copy, but are in bold and ragged right with hyphenation off. I think they have turned out to be very readable and neat. I asked for a colour palette which related to our continent and our city, and moved away from the boring standards.

I stressed the need for an absolute minimum of complicated gimmicks, so that our pressurised subs could commit their energies to accuracy and creativity rather than deciphering - and confusing - elaborate stylesheets. After our lengthy session Garcia went off to his hotel room with his Powerbook and in the morning we began, together with our systems wizard Dave Chambers, to erect the scaffolding. Main headlines in Helvetica Neue Bold Condensed, inside heads Helvetica Bold Neue. Strapheads in Walbaum, an elegant and strong italic. (Neither of the fonts had been used before in South Africa, as it happened.) Body copy in Nimrod; a restricted range of pull quotes on a colour wash, easy to place and difficult to muck up. Basic structure modular with no doglegs, erring towards horizontality rather than verticality, but breaking each page for balance. A six-column grid with options for bastard measures dependent on specific pictures. No fussy drop caps or purely decorative elements: everything simple, everything subjected to the "is this for the reader or for us?" test. The examples on these pages will give you a much better idea of the whole than a string of jargon from me, but I think it is worth pointing to some of the particular innovations which, when seen

together, begin to build the "difference" we sought. I stole my own idea from The Sunday Independent (in design one should not be ashamed about pilfering if other publications have done something effectively and it suits your needs) and got rid of the irritating barcode by swinging it up into the left hand corner of the masthead space. I couldn't, as with the Indie, get Everything simple, everything subjected to the 'is this for the reader or for us?' test what I call a landscape ad across the bottom of page one, so we had to work around the traditional rectangular solus. We tried running the day and date vertically next to the barcode ("in cyberspace", said one of our subs), but had to move the date and seal back to more traditional spots. We left the price in cyberspace, so to speak, and no one seems to mind. We put our new slogan "Cape Town's Biggest, Oldest, Favourite Newspaper" discreetly beneath the colourful masthead.

We built in a promo slot with the masthead - a version of the sky-box - for plugging Tonight and other features, and gave a lot of attention to a daily "Inside Today" plug on page one, featuring our new personality forecaster, "Weatherman Pete". (Know your market: the weather is a very serious issue for everyone in Cape Town, cutting across all cleavages of class, race, gender and the rest.) I had the feeling that upfront puffs were often not taken for what they are - prime page one space, deserving of the best thinking, writing and design the title has to offer. The paper then began to shape up like this. Main body section one with breaking news for the upfront pages, changing gear subtly into more feature-oriented news pages with longer copy and bolder illustration, leading into the traditional slots of leader page and oped. Ours are called Cape Argus Issues (for oped) and Cape Argus Attitudes (for leader). Issues carries a daily, localised humour column called Tavern of the Seas, and a rotating column written by our in-house specialists, from crime to the environment. It also carries "The Big Story", one lengthy issue-based feature of the day which I believe is more effective than a random array of lifters and own-generated pieces. My theory is that you will know at a glance each day if the subject inter-

ests you: if it does not, you'll move on without inconvenience. The Big Story is adorned by a daily painted portrait by our excellent artist Colin Daniel. The page also carries obituaries of local personalities on a regular basis. "Attitudes", our version of the traditional leader page, carries a large Zapiro cartoon, a small leader (we're trying to cut the waffle), James Clarke's humour column and a very lively letters section which we've called Cape Points. That ends section one. Section two - Argus 2 - starts with Life, the easy-reading quirky department of the paper. There's a personality profile and portrait each day ("In Town Today") chronicling the fascinating characters of the region and those who are (increasingly) passing through. We ask each one what they think of Cape Town, and run their answers bite-sized. Life includes a Things To Do In Cape Town section, a shipping column (this is still a port city), and a rotating range of feature material. The jewel in its crown is Weatherman Pete Goosen's page, complete with a suburb-by-suburb forecast of Cape Town's notoriously diverse climate, which we humbly believe is the best newspaper weather guide in the world. It was clear to me in the relaunch process that so-called "service journalism", for so long the unglamorous

