

# Aiming for relevance to changing readership - *FHM's* Brendan Cooper



By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

24 May 2012

What do you do when your circulation is falling consistently, even though you have a strong brand? If you're a newspaper, you're likely to throw your hands in the air and blame it on online. But in the very competitive magazine world, you must take action or die - which is why *FHM's* successful former editor, [Brendan Cooper](#), has been [brought back](#) from management to the editor's seat.



Brendan Cooper

Cooper tells Bizcommunity.com how he's going to put the magazine back on track, how the readership has changed and why the lad-mag era is over.

**So it must be quite strange being back in the editor's seat [from being associate publisher at *Media24 Magazines* responsible for *Sports Illustrated*, *Golf Digest*, *TopCar* and launching the South African version of *Top Gear* magazine]?**

**Brendan Cooper:** Well, bearing in mind that the May [2012] edition is not really me [although Cooper wrote the editorial]: the June edition, I had more influence over but the July edition - which is our '100 sexiest' issue and is our iconic issue - will show the vision I have for the magazine.

It was kind of strange. It happened very quickly. I was asked if I'd take over *FHM* [which is owned by Media24] again and I said: "Absolutely, I'll do it right now. I'm very happy. I know the magazine very well. I have a lot of thoughts about what the magazine should be doing and to stay relevant to its target market."



May 2012 cover of *FHM*

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I'd obviously kept in touch with the magazine over the years that I haven't been there and I have my ideas of where we should take it and what should be done.

**So I'm puzzled about what happened with *FHM*. Obviously, we've all seen the drop in ABC figures [at 47 168 total sales in the latest figures - for the first quarter of 2012 - compared with 59 961 the same period a year earlier. In the last quarter of 2011, the magazine was at 38 873, compared with 49 618 a year earlier]. But it's a very strong brand, so what went wrong?**

**Cooper:** As you say, *FHM* has a massively strong brand. I think there's a huge amount of good will towards the brand... People want to come to *FHM* parties and they think that the brand is cool. So the brand equity is there.

We are currently doing our 150th issue so it's been around for a long time and I think we've always been very good at being a South African version of it. The other thing is that the market is there. There is a huge number of guys with the *FHM* mind-set - at one time the magazine was even bigger than *Cosmopolitan*.

I think what *FHM* has struggled slightly with is relevance. Magazines have to evolve with their readerships. They have to remain relevant for the zeitgeist of the time. And I think all we have to do is stay relevant for the people who are now our readership - and that readership has changed. I think the lad-mag era is well and truly over and has been for some time. Guys are a bit more serious in the way that they think and they need more serious content.

Having said that, *FHM's* not going to change. Our pillars are sexy, funny, useful and relevant - and the mag will stay true to that editorial philosophy. I think it didn't really stay in touch with its market well enough and I think that possibly it didn't stay on the right side of the continuum in terms of its tone - and by that I mean both visual and text wise. *FHM* has to get its tone spot-on. It has to be risqué and irreverent. It has to be cheeky but, if it steps over that line even slightly, things go bad.

So my mission with the magazine is to find that absolute sweet spot, which I think *FHM* has enjoyed largely throughout its history by being really fun, really quirky, really cool but not stepping over the line. I think all we have to do is do that - do it properly - and our circulation will shoot back up again.

❏ ***So why has the readership become more serious? Are they more media-savvy and discerning because there are more male-orientated magazines on offer?***

**Cooper:** Not necessarily. I think the needs of guys change all the time. In the '90s, we went through the whole Brit-pop phenomenon. Prior to that there'd been the sensitive new-age guy thing. Then there was a huge backlash when it became the lad-mag era, where you could drink beer and be a guy again.

But our world has changed rapidly. We're in a massive economic crisis. There are a lot of serious issues that men are facing in terms of identity and in terms of jobs and cash. And what *FHM* has always done is to be useful - this has always been a big part of the brand - and I think we need to be more useful now than we have been in the past because I think that's what the readership are demanding...

I think *FHM* can be useful to its audience in ways that other magazines in the landscape can't. Our AMPS [readership figures] show that 71% of *FHM* readers will not read *Men's Health* or other titles. So it's a huge group of people who will only read *FHM*. So we have to identify what the useful and relevant content is that those guys want and deliver it.

❏ ***What kind of useful content are you talking about?***

**Cooper:** For example, in the May issue we have a really engaging two-page article on how to use social media to develop your start-up company.

❏ ***Oh ja, I read that. That was good.***

**Cooper:** Ja, it is a really useful piece of content. The other one in the May issue is: "15 things that are making you fat". *Men's Health's* take would be: 'How to get a six pack'. *FHM's* take is: 'Dude, don't do this and don't do that - don't eat rice cakes in particular - because that's what is making you fat.' So it's a different take.

Our next issue contains an article on the 150 greatest things on the internet ever. A lot of it is fun and frivolous but a lot of it is: "Go check out this site. This site can help you."

Beside the useful button that we're pushing a bit more, another thing we're going to do is fashion. In 2003 and 2004, *FHM* won a lot of the Mondri [magazine] awards for fashion, beating all the fashion titles, including the women's fashion titles. It's always been a very serious fashion magazine and that's something we will continue to focus on and it's a personal interest of mine. This is also something that is useful to our readership. We can show them: "This is cool. This is how much it costs. This is where you can go to get it."

And then I think the big thing that sets *FHM* apart from all other men's titles is that it's funny. It's a laugh-out loud, funny magazine.

We just have to do all these things right - and that, very simply put, is the mission that I'm on. Get the magazine relevant; get the magazine resonating and singing - and circulation will follow.

❏ ***What do you make of the view that the male magazine market is becoming more niche, with titles such as [Avusa's] Stuff and [Ramsay Media's] Popular Mechanics doing well and now we have Top Gear [within Media24] in SA?***

**Cooper:** Well, if you analyse the [ABCs](#), you see that some of the other magazines like *Men's Health*, for example, [at 74 903 circulation in the first quarter of 2012] are doing really well circulation-wise. So I don't think it's just niche magazines that are doing well. There is a downward trend generally and *Stuff* and *Popular Mechanics* are bucking that trend but we're talking about a couple of thousand - not tens of thousands [of sales].

So these magazines are growing incrementally but they're never going to be mass brands like *FHM* or *Men's Health*. I don't

think the market's going to fragment into niche titles. I think that the big titles just need to do their jobs properly and they'll remain relevant, prosperous and healthy.

#### ■ **When was FHM bigger than [Associated Magazines] Cosmo?**

**Cooper:** It was around 2005. I can't quite remember when exactly but I do remember big celebrations in the office. We came in at number nine in terms of top circulating magazines and *Cosmo* was at number 10, which is an amazing feat for a men's magazine that was, at that point, only about four or five years old.

#### ■ **Golly, that just shows you that it's not enough to be a great brand - that you can go from those heights into a circulation decline.**

**Cooper:** Magazines go through life cycles and they go through changes. Like all products, there are periods when the product can slightly lag but, if you have a strong brand and if you have a strong editorial focus, you're not going to become irrelevant in your market...

We will at *FHM* also be spending marketing money going forward. Sometimes when you're such a big brand, you forget you've got to keep marketing yourself. So we will be investing in the brand and our marketing, our PR and our events. You'll hear and see a lot more of the brand in the immediate future.

#### ■ **Talking of PR, you guys were in the news earlier this month with the [Jessica Leandra racist tweet](#). I thought you played that just right with a fast-reacting [FHM](#) tweet saying: "We're horrified that any1 would say such things! Those attitudes have no place in society or FHM!"**

**Cooper:** Thank you. You know, the girl's photograph was on our magazine once, a year-and-a-half ago. So for us to take responsibility for her was a real media stretch, I thought. But it was a really interesting day to watch that trending [on Twitter] in South Africa.

What I found really disappointing was some of the journalism that came out of that. Of the journalists who phoned me, much of the level of questions was really mundane and some literally said to me: "Do you stand behind her?" I had to say: "Of course not. We've already issued a press release saying that we don't." What sensible person would stand behind her? It was ridiculous.

But I do think we acted quickly and in a straight-forward manner to say: 'Listen guys, it isn't our policy to cheer morons. She tweeted from her own Twitter account and we distance ourselves from it.' We weren't defensive. We didn't have to be defensive.

#### **For more:**

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- Bizcommunity: [How not to self-destruct on Twitter: the People vs Jessica, Tshidi & Itumeleng](#), May 2012
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