

with... Stijn Smolders

This week, we find out what's really going on behind the selfie with Stijn Smolders, CEO at Sprout Performance Media.



I love my tech, but love a ride around the Peninsula even more! Here I am on top of Red Hill with a characteristic SA background: a township that plays gospel music every time I pass on Sunday morning and the blue, bone-chillingly cold ocean in the back! Hope to see you on the road – but when in a car: Stay wider of the (bicycle) rider!

1. Where do you live, work and play?

Smolders : Claremont (white picket fence *et al*), Woodstock (the Exchange = good coffee), grass (football with my son) and tar roads (road cycling).

2. What's your claim to fame?

Smolders : No fame yet, the best is still to come!

3. Describe your career so far.

Smolders : I started off in digital media sales in The Netherlands in 2005, after having studied and graduated in a BCom Marketing and Media Management Degree at the Eindhoven University in 2002. In between, I worked for an event marketing company as an account manager.

In October 2007, I went on holiday to South Africa and instantly fell in love with the country and its friendly people (and fantastic wines!) I was introduced to Adrian Hewlett, who was running Habari Media at the time, and secured a job as a national media sales manager for the company in January 2008. That was the start of my digital media career in SA.

I went back to The Netherlands engaged to my South African girlfriend in 2011, to brush up my digital and performance media knowledge. I lived in Amsterdam and headed up the Benelux media team at DQ&A Media Group for just under three years. In 2014, I moved back to South Africa and joined Sprout Performance. Its shareholders had the same ideas and long-term vision as what I had experienced to be very successful in Europe. It has been an amazing journey so far and some of the most progressive e-commerce advertisers in SA have managed to find us and are growing strong with us every day.

4. Tell us a few of your favourite things.

Smolders : My wife and I became first-time parents just under three years ago and coming home to a little boy calling: 'Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!' when I open the door is the highlight of my day, everyday!

To switch off from work, I really love riding my racing bicycle up and down Chapman's Peak - or any good tar road on the Peninsula, for that matter - a braai with friends in the garden of our new house or watching whales off the veranda of my wife's family house in Hermanus. A perfect balance between enjoying food, quality times with friends and family and an active lifestyle as I have so much energy!

5. What do you love about your industry?

Smolders : The measurability! For too long, the advertising and media industry had to justify its value and attribution via various vague, subjective matrices. Finally, there is hard evidence and mathematics applied. Finding the secret formula that equals R1 in = R6 out is exactly what we have been working towards.

6. What are a few pain points your industry can improve on?

Smolders : Knowledge, by far. Don't be hesitant to try out new technologies and platforms that have been proven to be successful in other markets. Don't wait and request 'case studies' from other advertisers to justify your decision. Go out, try new things and LEARN. If you are not supported to engage in clever new solutions; you are working for the wrong boss.

Technical skills and talented young professionals are scarce, too. It is clear the industry bottleneck is all around attracting the right talent. Automation and algorithms can make up for a lot, but you will always need bright people to explain what you do and control the machines. For that reason, Sprout Performance invests in an intern programme and hires students throughout the year to train them on the various platforms we work with.

7. Describe your average workday, if such a thing exists.

Smolders : Just taking today as an example, it started with our weekly team meeting, in which general topics were discussed. We looked back on Black Friday and Cyber Monday and how this affected our clients' campaign's performance. Later, I had a client meeting in which goals and budget commitments for 2016 were discussed.

I met with a new employee that started today, and I prepared for a client meeting scheduled the next day. Cash flow and debtors analysis was discussed at then of the day.

As I'm responsible for the acquisition of new accounts, I find it extremely important that a client's expectations are being managed correctly; as to what we will be providing. Due to the recent change in management of the company, I'm wearing multiple hats and am trying to delegate and restructure this as much as possible.

8. What are the tools of your trade?

Smolders : We use The DoubleClick technology, owned by Google, to elevate our data management to the next level. We connect our clients' search accounts to the same platform that tracks their sales and their 'branding' campaigns. This way, we know exactly what is attributed to which channel, and how we can build a sustainable and scalable model for them.

Oh, and good coffee!

9. Who is getting it right in your industry?

Smolders : There is a very select group of performance media players out there who are playing the same game. Similar-minded teams are DQ&A Media Group and Hitch Digital. Also SouthernAdx, from a sell-side perspective, by opening up quality inventory in the exchange. Together we grow the market and raise the awareness levels around transparency and return-focused media buying.

10. What are you working on right now?

Smolders : Our clients have finalised their 2016 budgets and are calling us in to decide how and across which digital media channels it will be spent. Estimations around expected revenue and set KPIs are a daily exercise that I am involved currently.

11. Tell us some of the buzzwords floating around in your industry at the moment, and some of the catchphrases you utter yourself.

Smolders : Some of the most prominent buzzwords are definitely the use of 'Attribution Modeling'. However, only a few players in the market really know how to apply them and interpreted data of the various digital media channels accordingly. I have been using a rugby example for a few months now: it basically explains that you should review the performance of the various channels (branding channels - like programmatic display - versus conversion channels - like paid search) as you review the performance of a rugby player in a test match. Nobody would dare to state that Du Preez played badly against New Zealand, because he did not score any tries. His job is to tackle and turn over the ball back into the possession of the Springboks. He plays a role at the beginning of the try-scoring process (an upper funnel channel or 'first touch' in the customer journey, as we call it in performance media). On the other hand, it is clearly the objective of the wing, like Bryan Habana, to score tries when he is given the ball at the end of the process (the sales channel in the customer journey). So the challenge is to find the right metrics and KPIs for each role and attribution of the channels that a digital media advertiser uses and not to only focus on how many direct conversions (or tries) each player (or channel) provides.

12. Where and when do you have your best ideas?

Smolders : When I am either riding my bike after a long day, or when I take a dive into an ice-cold pool to cool off.

13. What's your secret talent/party trick?

Smolders : I do a pretty good impersonation of Donald Duck after a few beers. It even got me to a talent final when I was a teenager.

14. What would we find if we scrolled through your phone?

Smolders : Pictures of a recent family photo shoot that I had with my wife and three-year-old son. So beautiful. I'm proud of them!

15. What advice would you give to newbies hoping to crack into the industry?

Smolders : It all basically comes down to experience on the various platforms that we work with, and the understanding of the bigger picture of the digital media mix of channels that we operate in. So, get your hands dirty on tech like GA, DS,

DBM, DCM and find out how a DSP works - you can start with looking those acronyms up - and start running campaigns. Get yourself an internship by coming prepared to an interview and explain your view on where digital media is going. Blogs and articles on these sites will help you: [AdExchanger](#) and [Double Click Advertisers](#).

You can read more about Sprout Performance Media by [clicking here](#), read up on Smolders' [BizTrends 2016 prediction](#) of programmatic video as a gamechanger and interact with him through the following social media accounts:

[LinkedIn](#)

[Twitter](#)

Skype: stijnsolders

*Interviewed by [Leigh Andrews](#)

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.

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