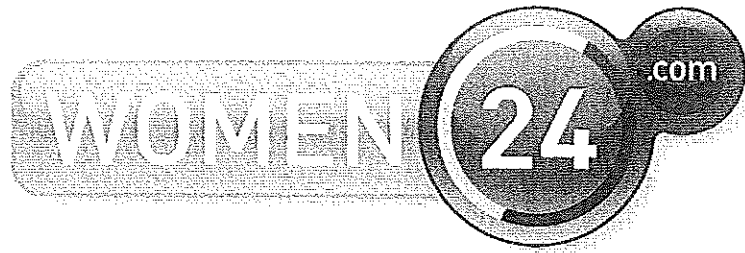


26



Women24.com – the challenge of getting SA women to interact online

"I don't often send letters like this, but..."¹

(Opening line of a reader's e-mail addressed to Sam Wilson, Editor-in-chief of Women24)

In 2005, Women24.com looked like it had it all: a sizeable and steadily growing audience, a lot of very good content drawn from some of the best magazines in the country, and a toe-curlingly good spot at the front of Media24's digital surfboard. But it just didn't really speak to anyone. Well, not for very long or with much resonance anyway.

The challenge? Give Women24 the personality it needed to draw South African women into conversation.

The old lady of the Net

Women24 turns six in 2006, making it the grandmother of South African websites. (You know dog years? Well, times one by 20 and you have web years.) And Women24.com has the battle scars to prove it.

Launched in October 2000, Women24 was originally managed from within the Women's Magazine Division of Media24, as an extension of its media footprint. The idea was to build a destination site for high LSM², exec-type women: a place where "women find answers".

Women24 was one of Naspers' first forays into Internet publishing and – along with News24, Moneymax (a financial site) and Icanonline (a bank) – it represented a strategy of niched, targeted sites with which to probe the new market.

The Internet has posed the media with the challenge of a millennium: how does one adapt one's traditional content models to make use of a brand-new media platform, attract an audience and – this is the tricky part – make some money in the process?

We got the platform, but where are the pennies?

Women24 managed the first and second bit just fine. Within six months of launching, it had 30 000 unique users³ and around 150 000 page impressions⁴ a month – an

impressive tally for a new Internet brand. Unfortunately, the third bit – the money – didn't follow. After the dot.com crash, advertisers – who had already been hesitant to deviate from the “safety channels” of print, TV and radio – became positively resistant to spending online, preferring to adopt a wait-and-see approach instead.

Another growth-limiting factor came from inside Naspers itself. For a long time, Women24 was a “closed site”, i.e. it was only available to MWeb subscribers and business users.⁵ Even if prospective Women24 users had been prepared to wait for ages on their dodgy home dial-ups or clogged office access lines, they weren't actually allowed in.

Steady as she grows ...

Despite these obstacles, Women24 continued – steadily and doggedly – to grow its audience on a month-by-month basis. By October 2005, the site was attracting around 150 000 unique users and garnering around a million page impressions a month. Women24.com was also set to break even in the 2005/06 financial year, for the first time in its history.

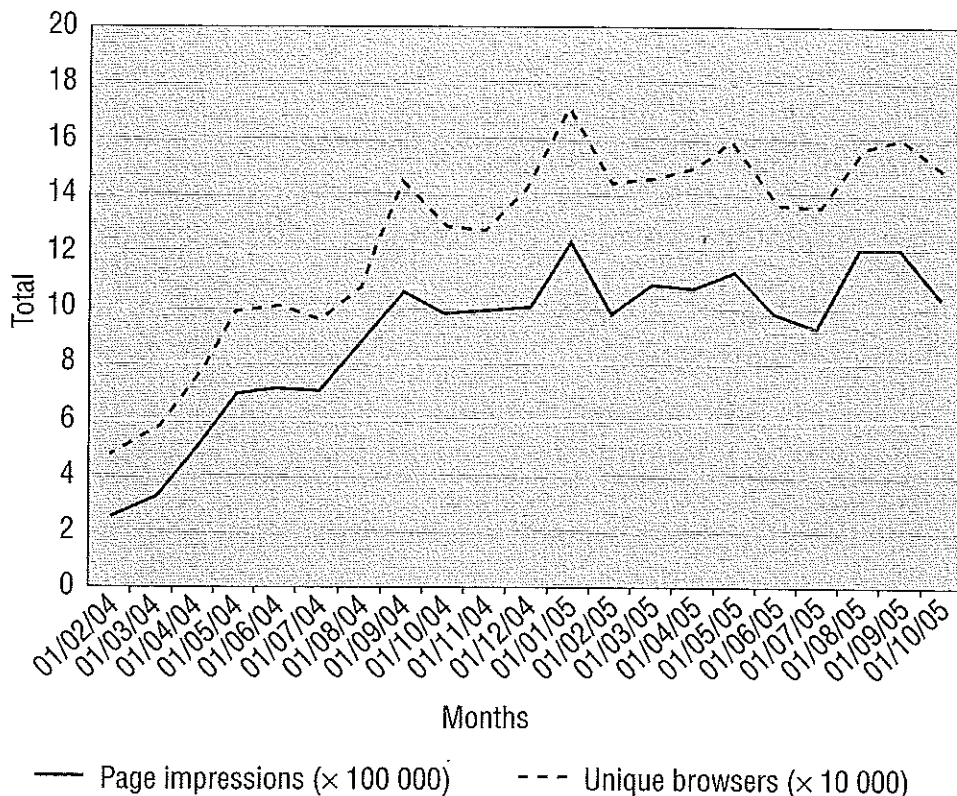


Figure 26.1 The growth of Women24.com – February 2004 to October 2005

Source: Nielsen's NetRatings.

In a nutshell? Women24 survived the dot.com crash, Naspers' “walled garden” strategy and even Telkom's early stranglehold over broadband⁶ to emerge as one of South Africa's top ten websites⁷. Women24.com was strong, solid and stable ... and a little boring.

Beyond the broadband

So where to from here? With the walls down, dangers past, and affordable, speedy broadband access almost within reach, it was time to move out of defensive mode and shake things up a little. As the Media 24 digital brands prepared to consolidate themselves into an integrated 24.com offering, it was time for Women24 to carve a new niche and shake off its dogged, old lady image. It was time to get frivolous. It was time to get South African women talking online.

Table 26.1 The unique selling points of Women24.com

Women24's unique selling points ⁸	Meaning
<i>Strong domestic audience</i>	Majority of visitors come from within South Africa and are not "trawled" from the international audience by search engines.
<i>Lots of great content</i>	Drawn from the Media24 magazines, including <i>Fairlady</i> , <i>True Love</i> , <i>Men's Health</i> , <i>Shape</i> , <i>Shop!</i> , <i>Bride</i> , <i>Your Pregnancy</i> , <i>Your Baby</i> , <i>Your Child</i> , <i>Women's Value</i> and <i>Home</i> , among others.
<i>The biggest South African website⁹ as its portal</i>	News24 is the general interest website which, to date, has acted as a portal for the niche 24.com brands. Users enter via News24 and "click down" into the niche brands.
<i>Part of the Media24 stable</i>	Financial backing, leverage and cross-sell opportunities in abundance
<i>No direct domestic competition</i>	Women24.com is 65 times bigger than its nearest OPA ¹⁰ -registered competitor. ¹¹

Women who run with the web

If the Women24 team had learnt one thing over the past six years, it was that its users were nowhere near as high-powered as they had thought they were going to be. Statistics over the years had shown that far from being the expected LSM 10+ high-powered executive superwomen, Women24's readers were much more likely to be married mothers with a nice, but not fabulous job – your everyday working superwomen, grabbing an online break at their desks during their working day.

Overwhelmingly tending towards the female (go figure), the Women24 user is probably a middle-earner over 30 years old, as likely to have children as not, a little more likely to be in a long-term relationship than single, and most likely to have some sort of post-matric qualification.¹²

One thing the statistics didn't reveal about the Women24 users is that they love to chat. That only became apparent later.

Building both sides of a conversation

In November 2005, a new Editor-in-Chief, columnist Sam Wilson, was employed to reposition the Women24 brand. The first thing she did was change the Women24

tagline from “where women find answers” to “your voice, every day”, in an attempt to set Women24 up as an engaging, interactive website, not merely one you hop in and out of.

If you’ve ever been in a branding brainstorm, you’ll know it is incredibly easy to change a brand’s positioning. In PowerPoint it’s quite significantly harder to change it in the minds of your audience.

Talking to her ...

The first thing that needed to be done was to build a Women24 personality that readers would relate to. This was done by using Sam Wilson as the face of the brand. The weekly Women24 newsletter¹³, traditionally a weekly content round-up with links through to the site’s top stories, morphed into an Ed’s letter/column covering lighter and more engaging topics from a personal perspective, designed to draw readers into conversation as opposed to simply directing them through to the site (although linking to the website obviously remained the newsletter’s primary goal.)

A columnist section was also added to the website where Sam Wilson’s ‘every-woman’ columns were supplemented by other slice-of-life columnists – from the stay-at-home housewife (Nina from Newlands, fretting about how to get her pool to stop leaking, her vincas to grow and her brain to stop seizing up in boredom) to the ex-pat (Laura from Arabia, puzzled at finding herself in Saudi Arabia with a husband, a kid and a burka) – and various single-guest columnists inviting comment on issues from commitment-phobia to pole-dancing.

In short, the traditional content strategy of repurposing Media24 magazine content for the web was augmented with a veneer of engaging, original and fresh content, specifically tailored for the Women24 reader and the immediacy of the online medium.

... and letting her talk back

But it wasn’t enough to talk directly *to* the user. The Women24 team also had to make space to hear readers’ feedback. In the early days of the brand repositioning, this meant the Editor responded to every piece of reader’s mail that arrived: a tactic greeted with surprise, gratitude ... and then more e-mails.

As the Women24 mailboxes started to burgeon and direct responses became impossible, a letters page was set up on the website. It showcased the best contributions and also rewarded the best letters of each week, with a grand prize for the letter of the month.

“The most surprising bit about this strategy (other than the fact that it worked), was how incredibly erudite, interesting, articulate and funny the Women24 reader turned out to be,” says Editor-in-chief Sam Wilson. “Many of the letters I get are so well written, I am able to compile them into articles, which are then in turn very well read. And that kind of content loop is exactly what Internet publishing is all about.”¹⁴

It’s also this conversation that draws advertisers and provides online media with its biggest competitive edge over its more static print, radio and TV counterparts. While magazine publishers boast about being able to offer “engaging content”, an online lifestyle website can go one further – it can offer interactive content.

In the five-month period from November 2005 to March 2006, Women24's unique users increased by 25% with a 50% jump in page impressions. The growth in page impressions was double the growth in unique users so, not only were new readers being attracted to the site, they were also staying around longer. This increase was remarkable, given that the changes were achieved purely through the new editorial strategy, without any supporting marketing initiatives.

Yes, yes ... and the money?

Commercialising something as boundary-less as the Internet is an interesting proposition. The traditional money model is to sell straight advertising in the form of skyscrapers, buttons, banners and mastheads.¹⁵ Then there is media-rich online advertising, such as expanding creatives (ad blocks that expand when you scroll over them) and interstitials (those annoying pop-ups or floaters that obstruct your view of the page).

Those are the basics. Not-so-basic streams of ad revenue include selling advertorials and advertising in newsletters and promotional mailers.¹⁶ You can also make money by creating (and handing over) a client-owned, opt-in database by, say, running a competition that asks entrants if they are happy to hear more from that advertiser and then collecting the email addresses of those who agree. Pricing is

The screenshot shows the Women24.com website. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'WOMEN 24' logo and a 'Win a Naked Bangles' promotion. Below the navigation, there's a main content area with an article titled 'Bursting bubbles' by Sam. The article discusses parenting and mood swings. To the right of the article is a sidebar with 'SPONSORS' and a list of categories: LIFE, GLEAMOUR, MOTHER, ESCAPE, COMMUNITY, and REGULARS. At the bottom, there are several advertisements, including one for '1st For Women' motor insurance and another for a dating service. A large banner on the right side of the page reads 'Ladies, get up to 40% OFF!'.

A sample page from Women24.com.

usually linked to the number of times the page is viewed,¹⁷ but occasionally ads are sold on a cost per acquisition or cost per lead basis – obviously a riskier option!

A bit complicated, isn't it? It is a brave fashion or beauty advertiser who ventures past the tried-and-tested welcoming gloss of the basic magazine DPS¹⁸ and into the harsher world of the web. So far, the financial and automotive industries are the frontrunners in the web-tising game, but they are traditionally keen to place their spend with male-orientated brands.

So where does all this leave Women24, burgeoning traffic and all? So far, while ad revenue is on the up, it has yet to reflect the circulation upswing of the previous six months. Since the brand improvement/ad sales lag is commonly around a year for print and six months for online, this is to be expected. And if advertisers are keen to speak to women (that trusty group doing 80% of the consuming) in that lean eye-grabbing time – office hours, surely a stable, well-visited and audited women's site is a better bet than say, Aunt Shirley's blog? Only time will tell.

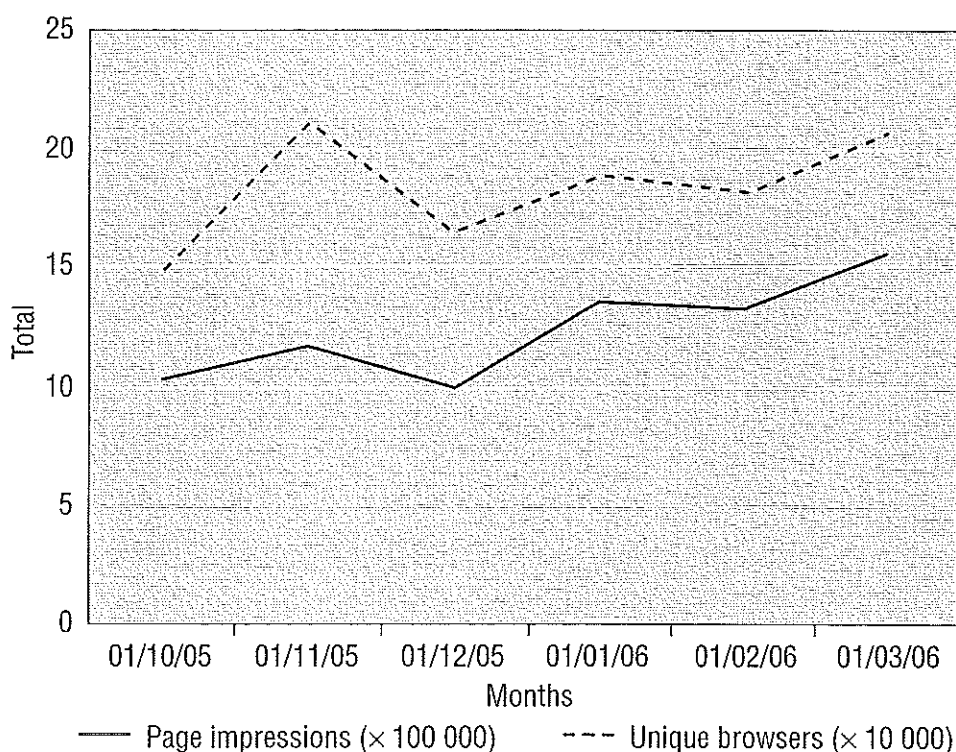


Figure 26.2 The growth of Women24.com – October 2005 to March 2006

Source: Nielsen's NetRatings.

Sexual attractions don't last very long

When you are repurposing content from magazines, it's hard sometimes not to go for the obvious slam-dunk. In November 2005, the Women24 team decided to break up a *Men's Health* article from its October 2005 issue – entitled *Be Her Best Ever* – into five parts and use them as a series: "Get properly shagged this Christmas". The original article by Dr Ian Kerner was billed as a better oral sex guide for men. Women24 adapted it into five separate tips that could be e-mailed to the Women24 reader's partner, in an anonymous e-mail entitled: "What she really wants for Christmas ..."

So far, so fine. The content was cute, frivolous, more risqué than readers were used to from Women24, and the unusual “refer-a-friend” gimmick gave it an angle which was picked up by other media – *The Mark Gillman Show* on Radio 5 in particular. Readership statistics improved. And then one day, quite suddenly ... they went through the roof.

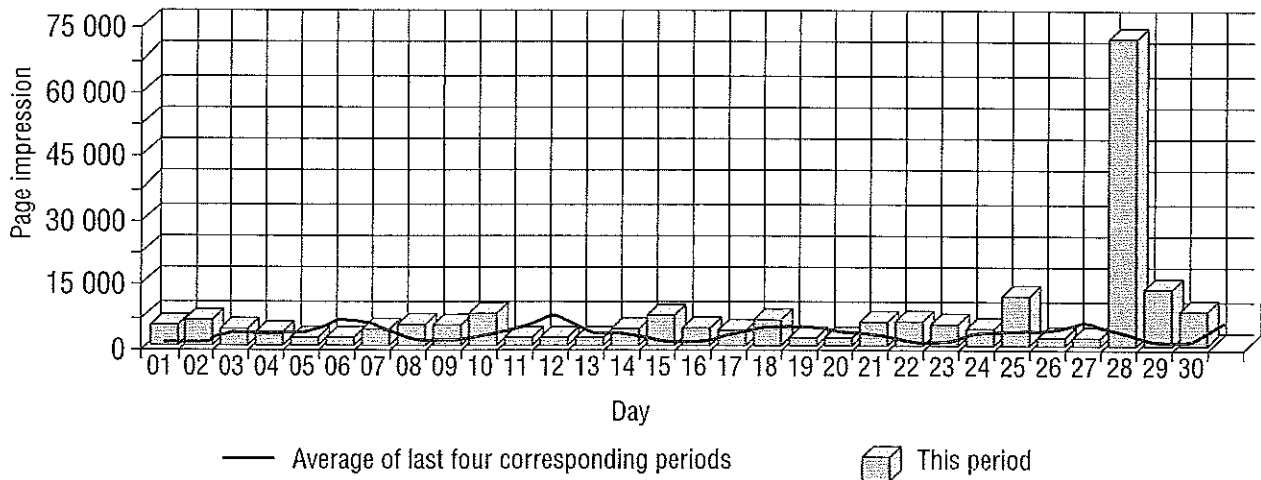


Figure 26.3 On 28 November 2005 Women24 experienced an unusual increase in page impressions

Source: Nielsen's NetRatings.

It took a little while to figure out why. After a bit of poking about in the statistics, it became clear that the majority of readers were being referred through a one-off link on a hugely popular, off-beat American website – fark.com. In one day – 28 November 2005 – Women24 received 60 000 extra page impressions. From users who came ... and went. It took another three months to garner a comparative audience again – this time, a stable, South African-based one.

Local is lucrative

There is one main thing to learn about the online media game: international visitors do not translate into money. They may look cool in your monthly statistics, but any advertising planner worth his or her salt will ask for a website's domestic audience before committing any marketing spend. Why? Well, it is obvious if you think about it. What good does it do a South African brand if a woman in the US clicks through to its website? Not a great deal.

Sex may attract readers by the tens of thousands, but it attracts readers you can't (and don't want) to keep. It's not really a winning formula for a regular, lifestyle brand that is trying to attract mainstream advertisers. So yes, sex does sell online ... but the attraction is fleeting.

Media merging for the new millennium

As discussed earlier, Women24's editorial model has long been entirely reliant on content from the Media 24 magazines. However, now that Women24 had interactive,

original content, the content feed could start moving – at least a little – in the opposite direction.

Here is a prime example. The editorial team of *Bride*, a magazine distributed by Media24's Women's Magazine Division Special Projects team, was planning to run an article on "the secrets of a happy marriage". Eager to get as many true life anecdotes as possible, it approached the Women24 team and asked them to approach their audience in turn.

Sam Wilson used her Ed's column to discuss why she thought her marriage was successful, and invited readers to send in their sentiments on the topic. Within days, over 40 e-mails had arrived which could then be forwarded to the *Bride* team and adapted for print. Clearly, it was an exciting new trend.

Women24: in line with online internationally

There is a lot of buzz in the online world about evolution from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0.¹⁹ While no one is entirely clear on the exact definition of Web 2.0 (or indeed, if Web 2.0 is anything more than a geeky marketing trick), what is clear is that while the average person used to access information on the Internet, that same person is now comfortable posting on blogs, chatting on forums and contributing content too. For example, Britannica Online was big in the early web days (Web 1.0), and Wikipedia – which thrives on user contributions – is the Web 2.0 equivalent.

Still confused? Don't worry, most people are. Robert Kaye²⁰ gives an easy one-liner explanation: "While Web 1.0 was read-only web, Web 2.0 is the writeable web."

So Women24's new emphasis on user-generated content fits neatly within that framework – servicing a new generation of web users who don't just want to listen, but want to talk back too.

According to the PEW Report, released in December 2005, it seems that this shift is particularly noticeable in female web behaviour.²¹ The PEW study revealed that women are fast catching up to men online, and overtaking them when it comes to using the Internet for communicating with others and building relationships.

Standing still online? You've been left behind

Of course, attracting readers to websites is not a static pursuit. The speed and competition of the online publishing environment means that as soon as you start feeling complacent, you have probably missed the boat. And if "interactivity" and "user-generated content" and "multi-media synergies" are the buzzwords of today, well, who knows how far we can push them by tomorrow?

The mind boggles. <click>

NOTES

1. The opening line of a reader's email addressed to Sam Wilson, Editor-in-chief of Women24.
2. An increasingly outdated lifestyle measurement tool, used to determine a consumer's worth/position in the market place.

3. "Unique users" is an Internet term used to describe the number of individual visitors – i.e. each is only counted once, regardless of how many times her or she returns to the site – a website attracts over a given period.
4. A number of "page impressions" represents the number of times pages on the relevant website have been opened or clicked on.
5. This policy was chipped away over 2001 and 2002, as more and more of the "closed site" links were removed over time.
6. At the time of writing, this is still a major factor limiting growth. However, Telkom's monopoly over broadband access (and its resultingly exorbitant charges) has begun to show major cracks, with the SNO looming and cheaper ADSL packages emerging.
7. Nielsen's NetRatings, September 2005.
8. Many marketers abbreviate the phrase "unique selling points" to "USPs" in conversation. Try not to do this – it is annoying!
9. News24, South Africa's largest website, had over 1.5 million unique users and almost 20 million page impressions in March 2006 alone (source: Nielsen's NetRatings).
10. Online Publishers' Association. For South African websites to receive independent and therefore trustworthy statistics, they need to belong to the OPA.
11. While Women24 had over 130 000 unique South African users in March 2006, Ananzi Women had just over 2 000 (source: Nielsen's NetRatings).
12. For a more detailed breakdown, visit http://www.media24digital.com/women24_profile.asp
13. Sent weekly to almost 24 000 subscribers.
14. For example, a single call for embarrassing kiddy one-liners resulted in over 80 e-mails, the best of which were compiled into an article, available at http://www.women24.com/Women24/Mother/Parenthood/Article/0,7173,1-9-11-34_9232,00.html, and subsequently read by over 4000 users.
15. All terms for different-sized ad blocks served on Internet pages, usually linking through to a web page of the advertiser's choice, invariably its own.
16. A promotional mailing can be compared with list rental, only online the mails are sent to the "rented" subscriber names by the web publishers themselves, so are never disclosed.
17. CPM – cost per thousand page impressions
18. Double-page spread
19. Tim O'Reilly, What is Web 2.0? Design patterns and business models for the next generation. Available at <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html>.
20. <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/wlg/9291>
21. http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/171/report_display.asp

BACKGROUND READING

Kotler & Armstrong, Ch. 1, 3, 18

Kotler & Keller, Ch. 1, 17, 19

Lamb, Hair, McDaniel, Boshoff & Terblanche, Ch. 1, 8

Perrault & McCarthy, Ch. 4

Pride & Ferrell, Ch. 2, 24

FURTHER READING

The Economist. 2003. Prime clicking time. May 31: 65.

Rayport, Jeffrey F. & Jaworski, Bernard J. 2001. *e-Commerce*. New York: McGraw Hill, Chapter 10.

QUESTIONS



1. Describe the profile of user of Women24.com. Show how this has changed since Women24.com's inception.
2. How does Women24.com compare with a hard copy magazine such as *Bride*?
3. As an advertiser of wedding-associated products and services, show how you would use both Women24.com and *Bride*. Refer to the section on weddings in the *Celebrations and ceremonies* concept (Chapter 5) in answering this question.
4. As a consumer of media that are available online and in a magazine, show the differences in the two from a consumer's point of view. As a publisher of both, list the strengths and weaknesses of each.
5. Some hard copy magazines such as *Getaway* are intentionally integrated with online publications. Review *Getaway's* publishing strategy compared to that of Women24.com.
6. As the publisher of Women24.com, review your strategy in anticipation of cheaper and more accessible bandwidth and improved wireless technology.
7. Some marketers believe that the web is an ideal medium to initiate and sustain word-of-mouth marketing. Discuss this with particular reference to Women24.com, using examples.
8. Advertising online is a relatively new discipline. Show advantages, disadvantages and difficulties associated with it.
9. As the publisher of Women24.com, what advice would you give an advertiser of domestic electrical appliances or women's fashionwear to get optimal use out of this medium?
10. Consider the various ways in which the publisher of Women24.com could generate revenue from this publication.

Simpson, J. and Dore, B. 2007 *Marketing in South Africa: Cases and Concepts* 3rd ed. Pretoria: Van Schaik. pp 341-350 Women24.com