

Content is the key to radio's future, says Kagiso's Nick Grubb



By Gill Moodie: [@grubstreetSA](#)

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[Nick Grubb \(@Nickgrubb\)](#), a former 5fm programme manager, is back in the corporate radio world after running his own consultancy - this time for Kagiso Media as the COO for Kagiso Broadcasting.



Grubb tells Bizcommunity.com why they are pushing to view themselves as creators of content rather than broadcasters, how music programming is getting more attention and about dealing with the challenge of overseeing two new morning shows since he [started in July 2011](#) - for both Jacaranda FM and East Coast Radio.

■ ***In January 2012 you guys put out an open [call for ideas for creative content](#) for Jacaranda and East Coast Radio. That was very unusual. What kind of response did you get?***

Nick Grubb: Awesome. I had no idea what to expect. We've got between 40 and 50 proposals... But the exciting thing is that - and I kind of anticipated it but I underestimated the value of it - the real consequence of this thing is that we've got something like over 200 people signed up in a database now. Some of them might just be curious fly-by-nights but if 20% of them are proper content companies, we've started to establish a relationship that we've never had before.

And when I look at the mix of companies and individuals that have responded, it's everything from comedians and screen writers to advertising agencies and television-production companies to producers and directors - a real cross-section of content people and I think that that alone is worth the whole exercise. And it hasn't been an expensive exercise.

■ ***And it's a new-media crowdsourcing way of thinking - like Quirk's [Idea Bounty](#).***

Grubb: It's also an old-school thing. It's a television idea - particularly from the SABC, which will issue [requests for proposal](#) (RFPs) once or twice a year to the content industry. And the guys will dissect these huge RFP books and then pitch on a number of things. That's a much more detailed process with much bigger budgets (than ours)...

We are comparatively small-fry and have just taken that TV idea and are trying to get into a situation where we can eventually start trying to create a little radio-production community or, at the very least, start getting people who are producing for other media aware of radio and considering opportunities in radio so that we can enliven our content proposition.

■ ***And that the key thing for Kagiso, isn't it? When I [interviewed Omar Essack](#) (Kagiso's CEO of broadcasting) last year, I understood that he really wants you guys to think of yourselves as content people rather than radio people or online people or TV people.***

Grubb: Absolutely. Already we've done a little exercise and our budget -proportionally to some of the other radio stations that we are able to compare ourselves to - is significantly higher on content personal and commissioning budgets.

It's not been an area that commercial radio - particularly in music - has invested much - or had to invest much. Because

the old formatting rules were: get one personality in the morning with a bunch of people around them, put your money in advertising behind that and, for rest of the day, play a very safe and scientific play list - and say as little as possible. You know, be on the kind of service-announcement side: news and traffic and weather.

I think that's been very successful for radio in terms of developing large audiences and for establishing brands... but, in my opinion, it's also made the landscape less exciting and we're not going to be able to compete in perpetuity [like that]... We're not necessarily threatened by new media and I'm not saying we're scrambling to find new business models. It's nothing as dramatic as that.

What we're saying is: "Let's make the stuff between the songs as interesting as possible." And we do that by investing in good talent but also by looking outside the industry and saying: "Are there other people who can contribute to this and make radio talked about that, I think, outside of breakfast shows is not often talked about anymore?" Radio is not the most exciting media in someone's day of consumption.

■ ***So would you say that your creative content is stuff like 'Date My Dad' that you did on Jacaranda last year (where kids nominated their fathers, who'd been single for a long time whom they felt were ready for dating). Would you call that reality radio?***

Grubb: Ja, absolutely. I think though that the approach, for me, is trying to find real human stories - whether that's just the way a breakfast show interacts with audience in the course of a normal morning's programming or a large promotion...

The more that we can take advantage of the fact that radio is such a deeply personal medium and connect with real human stories, I think it makes us a lot more compelling. It's something that television doesn't get to do in the same way in terms of being able to have dialogue with people in real time.

■ ***So how's the drive panning out to make [Jacaranda](#) more of a Gauteng station rather than a station for Pretoria?***

Grubb: We're doing a lot of work on that but we're also very, very mindful of the fact that Pretoria is our No. 1 market positioning. So we need to be absolutely sure that, as much as we venture into Johannesburg, that we are keeping our presence as top of mind to Pretoria people, as we always have done.

■ ***Ja, Pretorians have a highly defined identity and see themselves as very different to Joburgers.***

Grubb: There is that but it's about finding those things that unite people. We've got a campaign that we're launching quite soon that should do that quite well. We are looking at our brand quite closely - seeing if there's opportunities to freshen that up... and then obviously all this is underpinned by a very, very rigorous programme of evaluating our content and our products right now.

We've just done a little bit of restructuring at Jacaranda - I don't want to go into too much detail about it until the structure is up and running but it's all about making sure that our content is delivering on this quest for quality. So we're creating capacity within the structures of the station to be a lot more content-focused and to be able to take individual pieces of content and make sure that the impact of those are maximised.

❑ ***Mmm, Gauteng is a very competitive radio market.***

Grubb: Exactly. And we've had challenges too. We've had a change in our [Jacaranda] morning show [after host Darren Scott resigned in September 2011 [amid a racial row](#) - now, with [Ballz Visual Radio](#), he's exploring online radio] - that's a really big thing to do.

To launch a new morning show (with new host [Frankie du Toit Rian van Heerden](#)) is significant and it always comes with a high degree of listener unhappiness to start off with. I've launched a few now. It's such a personal medium and suddenly the guy or the girl that you're used to in the morning - who has become a companion - is no longer there. So it's a question of getting the new team up and running as quickly as possible and getting them settled in terms of their own relationships with each other.

❑ ***And how's [East Coast](#) doing?***

Grubb: They also got a new morning show ([with host Darren Maule](#)), in July last year, and they're doing really well. Darren and his team have had about six months to get settled so inevitably they're sounding slicker, they're having quite a lot of fun in the mornings and we're getting a lot of really positive feedback.

But we're also spending a lot of time at both stations focusing on our music, to make sure our music is as strong as possible. And, generally, across the two stations, one of my big crusades at the moment is that I keep reminding the content and programming staff that our audiences are used to massive increases in the quality of media production on every other platform that they are consuming through the day.

If you consider that Avatar was on TV last night [Monday], look at how the production quality and special effects have just become so much more amazing, compared with six or seven years ago. If you look at a website today vs a website two years ago, the advances in production values have increased so much. And radio needs to understand that listeners are expecting more and more out of their media consumption. I think that radio has been in danger of forgetting about that in recent years.

❑ ***How do you actually improve your music offering in today's world of formats and play lists because it's all quite structured, isn't it?***

Grubb: Ja, it is but it's also research, research, research. The radio industry has been around for many, many years and there are clearly definable ways to grow audience by doing certain things with music products and taking the time and effort to understand what your audience is looking for.

And so play lists will always be a part of what we do at music radio. It's tried and tested but the more effort and time you put into making sure the right input is coming in - in other words that we are really listening to what our audience is saying to us and not being prescriptive in that play list - then you do see significant results in the response that you get...

Obviously, we play Afrikaans music on Jacaranda, which is part of deepening that relationship with that audience but it's also something we're always re-evaluating. Is it the right kind of music? What kind of rotation and regularity do we need? Is it accessible to as-broad-a-range-of people as possible? You're always trying to balance these opposing forces and there needs to a degree of science - built on market research and understanding what our audience wants...

At East Coast, we've just re-employed someone [in programming] who was working in the sales and promotion area - Debbie Sharrat, who's had significant experience in all aspects of programming and used to do music way back when. We've put her back into music. Because you can run music rather scientifically, there is always a temptation to get a youngster who can run the system - and there's value in that person being there but you still need that experience in terms of the music formatting.

This is all part of our reinventing of the content and, effectively, we've made music more important in the make-up of the station.

❑ ***East Coast and Jacaranda's websites are very popular. Are they profitable in their own right or are they***

essentially marketing arms for the radio stations?

Grubb: The hope and the intention is for them to stand alone and they do OK. At any one time, the four best radio-station websites [in terms of traffic] are Jacaranda, East Coast, [Primedia's] Highveld and [the SABC's] 5fm. But the reality is that there are not many radio websites at this stage that are able to get more than between 5% and 10% of their aggregate weekly on-air audience.

So they do OK and we're talking about a 100 000-odd people who engage with your website. That's great and it has a certain appeal to advertisers and there is a really good opportunity for converged sales between on-air and online. But you're also competing with the MSNs of this world, with over 2 million unique users, so we're not big players in the internet space.

The constant question is to what degree do we use it as a way to deepen relationships with audiences? And I think that, as a result, we are all mindful of the digital opportunity and certainly Kagiso, in particular, is in a slightly more experimental space with this stuff - we're trying different business models to see which of them will stick.

But we are also making sure that we deliver on the No. 1 objective, which is supporting the broadcaster in the best possible way.

For more:

- Bizcommunity: [Kagiso Media quietly poised to take off in Gauteng radio](#), October 2012
- Bizcommunity: [Digital migration: rush is on, but where's the spectrum?](#), October 2011
- Bizcommunity: [Small players threaten commoditised radio](#), May 2010

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