



Roularta
Media Group

**Annual
Report
2020**

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The vision of Rik De Nolf

The New Roularta

Roularta has ended 2020 with a profit, and obviously we are proud of that. How did we round off a pandemic year profitably, and can we look to the future with hope? The answer lies in the fact that our multimedia group has changed substantially in four areas in recent years, in terms of its income flow, digitisation, joint venture culture and financial structure.

From B2B to B2C

Approximately two thirds of our income currently come from the B2C readership market (subscriptions, loose sales and diversification) and printing for third parties. The other third comes from the B2B advertising market. There was a time when that ratio was reversed.

Roularta has grown out of local media such as De Krant van West-Vlaanderen, De Streekkrant, Steps and De Zondag. Only De Krant van West-Vlaanderen draws most of its income from the readership market: 70 per cent readership versus 30 per cent from the advertising market. The other titles are distributed free of charge and are almost entirely dependent on advertising. Roularta was also an important player in radio and television for 30 years, and those are also advertising-based businesses. These different factors meant that Roularta was mainly dependent on the advertising world.

That has gradually changed over the last ten years. Following the sale of our participation in Mediaaan, advertising only represents 36 per cent of our income today.

Kanaal Z/Canal Z, the business TV broadcaster, is still financed by content marketing, partnerships and co-productions, including webinars in partnership with advertisers.

However, the group's magazine portfolio, which had far more income from advertising than readers until a few years ago, has changed radically in the meantime. On the one hand, this is because of the expansion to include important women's magazines, and on the other it is due to the strong growth in income from readers, with more subscribers during the pandemic.

At the same time, advertising income has been declining for a few years due to the emergence of world players in social media. For the Belgian news magazines and women's magazines respectively, the ratio is now 75 and 80 percent in favour of the consumer market.

Digitisation

A second major change has everything to do with digitisation. Digital income is starting to gain importance for Roularta as well. It currently accounts for more than 30 per cent

of the magazines' advertising income. When it comes to the readership market, revenue is actually a combination of print and digital. More than 95 per cent of the news magazine readers opt for the hybrid formula: they read their favourite magazine on paper every week and also get access to the digital versions of our six news magazines. They keep up to date with the relevant news every hour of every day on the websites of those six editorial teams.

We will be launching a unique app and Roularta domain in 2021, which will make it possible, among other things, to read the digital versions of all our media brands including the six news magazines on a mobile phone, tablet or PC. These tools will make access to all the information on the overarching news website even simpler. The readers of women's magazines have had free access to all the group's practical websites until now. That has led to 3.6 million 'real users' per month, more and more of whom are registering. We want to increase that percentage of registrations to more than 60 per cent and gradually launch a paid model at very attractive rates.

'Advertising only represents 36 per cent of our income today.'

100%

A third major change has to do with leaving the joint venture culture behind. Traditionally, Roularta has had several major joint ventures, such as the historic partnership with the French groups L'Express and Bayard and the Belgian groups Rossel and DPG media (previously De Persgroep). The French activities and the 50% share in the radio and TV company Mediaaan have been sold. *Le Vif/L'Express* and recently also *Télépro* and *Plus Magazine* (in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany) have been 100% integrated. These factors have led to a simpler structure that makes it possible to optimise synergies.

The positive collaboration with the Rossel group is continuing in the 50/50 joint ventures Mediafin (*De Tijd/L'Echo*) and the websites for classifieds (*immovlan.be* and *gocar.be*).

Strong balance

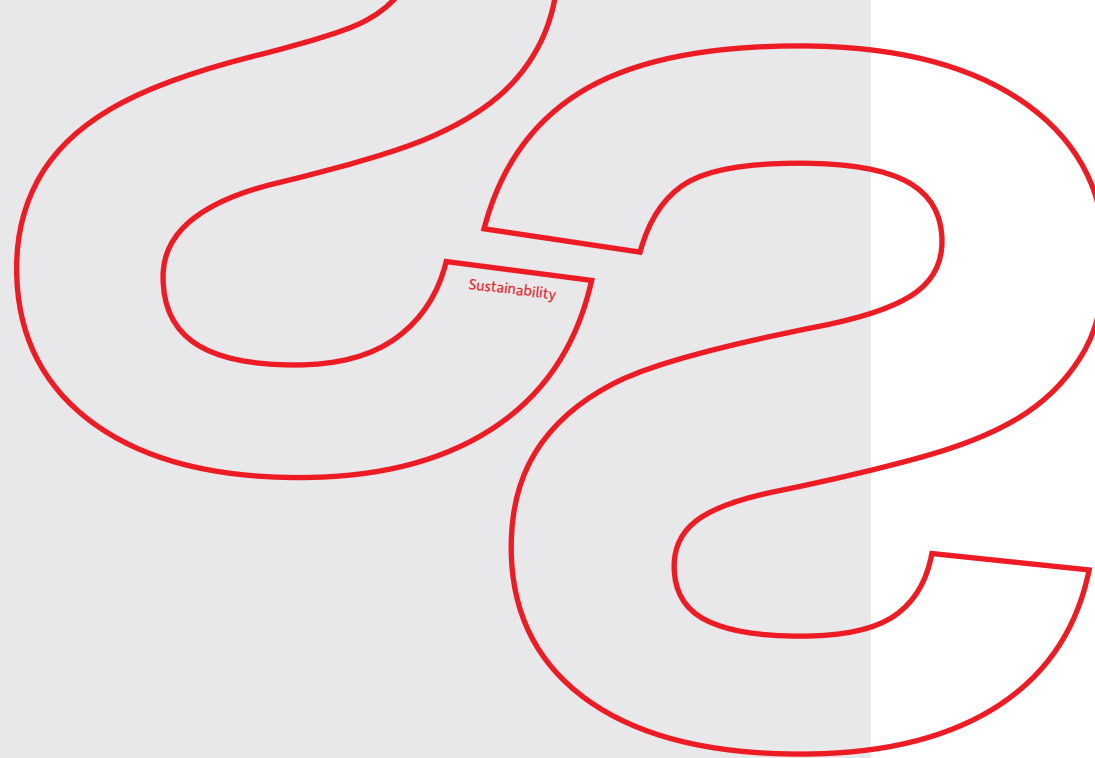
Roularta has one exceptional advantage: the group is not in debt and has 90 million euros in cash and on the other hand 1.5 million of its own shares.

This is after paying 8 million euros for the second instalment of the investment in a new rotary press and 12 million euros for the purchase of the Roularta shares that were owned by the historic shareholder Bestinver.

This is the result of a substantial positive cash flow and of scrapping a dividend in 2020 when it was not yet clear what effect the coronavirus would have. The strong balance will make it possible to pay out a dividend again in 2021 (of 1 euro, this time). After the pandemic, the advertising market will regain its strength, events and travel will be possible again and activity in the printing works will be able to evolve normally once more as well. These are all elements that contribute to a justifiably positive view of the future.

Rik De Nolf, Chairman of the Board of Directors Roularta





Working towards sustainability

‘We want to remain the most relevant media partner for the long term’

Roularta creates sustainable added value for its stakeholders and the whole of society. The organisation strategically focuses all its activities in the various domains on sustainability. ‘We see every challenge as an opportunity.’

‘It is up to the business community both to send a clear signal and to come up with solutions to the climate question.’

Sustainable company

In 2020, Roularta celebrated its 66th birthday, along with its 1,500 employees and all the stakeholders. Its age proves that the company is more of an established value than ever in the media landscape. Far-sightedness, courage and well-considered choices have made Roularta into a strong media group.

‘Sustainability and an eco-efficient policy are an intrinsic part of our way of doing business’, claims Xavier Bouckaert, the CEO. Furthermore, Roularta clearly cares about the environment and society. ‘Our country is not among the best in Europe when it comes to

achieving climate goals. It is up to the business community both to send a clear signal and to come up with solutions.’

Roularta walks its talk in various initiatives. For example, the organisation has obtained an ISO 50001 certificate. This is the company’s guarantee to external parties that it is constantly improving its energy management, thus using energy in an efficient, well-considered manner.

The business also lent its weighty support to the climate plan Sign for my Future. Almost 270,000 Belgians signed this citizens’ initiative. A broad coalition of young people, business leaders, civil society and the academic world are working for a sustainable future for the generations to come by means of a climate law, investment plan and climate council.

Roularta also fulfils a social role beyond the company by investing in talent, culture and new initiatives. For example, there is a partnership with the University of Antwerp through the Father Louis Bruyns Fund, which awards study grants to students from developing countries. There is also an annual bursary awarded by the Vocatio Foundation for young talent. In addition, Roularta is one of the founding partners of Een Hart voor West-Vlaanderen (‘A Heart for West Flanders’), which is committed to socially vulnerable youngsters.

Roularta supports the magazine MO, that focuses on issues in the Third World and is produced and distributed on a non-profit basis for the organisation Wereldmediahuis vzw. ‘Corporate social responsibility is in our DNA’, says Xavier Bouckaert. ‘A company that aims for nothing but maximising profits, with no concern for the world around it, has no future.’ ▶



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Xavier Bouckaert,
CEO Roularta

‘Our company cares about the climate, nature and human wellbeing.’

Francis De Nolf, member of the board Roularta



Roularta's sustainable building: ‘A company that aims for nothing but maximising profits, with no concern for the world around it, has no future.’

Sustainable investments and value creation

Roularta obviously aims to make a financial profit. However, maximising its profits is not its sole aim. ‘We also see our profits as a resource to invest in sustainability’, explains Xavier Bouckaert, the CEO. ‘In the long term, that benefits all our stakeholders, including readers and advertisers.’

Furthermore, Roularta has noticed that advertisers are paying increasing attention to sustainability and want to keep the ecological footprint of their advertisements as low as possible. Investors are also putting sustainability higher and higher on the agenda, often deliberately seeking out ethically responsible funds. Thanks to its many efforts to increase sustainability, they find an ideal partner in Roularta.

‘Our company cares about the climate, nature and human wellbeing’, says board member Francis De Nolf. ‘That is why we are also investing in several hectares of greenery on, in and around our company buildings, for example.’ Roularta had been doing that long before

there was any talk of a Green Deal. ‘Nature and humans are what make up our DNA, and that will continue in the years to come.’

Moreover, as an owner, producer and publisher of quality media brands, free media and a printing works, Roularta also plays a powerful role in sustainability in the worlds of graphics and industry. For example, the company has invested 12,5 million euros in a new printing press that works faster and consumes less energy and raw materials (see Topic 3).

What is more, Roularta is also a social partner. The business stands up for its interests and those of its sector through various channels. For example, Roularta has provided the president of We Media, that defends the interests of magazine brands before regional and federal authorities, for many years, as well as the president of EMMA, the European federation that defends the interests of the sector before the European Commission and European Parliament.

‘We also see our profit as a resource to invest in sustainability.’

Xavier Bouckaert

‘Making adjustments with our new machines is lightning fast and very accurate.’

Piet Vanhoutte, Head of the Finishing Department Roularta

Sustainable activities and production process

Roularta aims for sustainable activities and production. The business does not have every single element under its direct control, but it can exercise a significant influence. ‘Because we are a large buyer of products like ink and paper on an annual basis, we can negotiate with the suppliers’, explains the CEO, Xavier Bouckaert.

‘For example, we demand from them that all the paper comes from sustainably managed forests. We also print all our newspapers on 100% recycled paper.’ The same applies to the printing machines. As a major customer in the printing world, Roularta asks its constructors to make extra efforts and deliver energy-efficient machines.

In that respect, the recent purchases of new machines such as the Müller Martini Tempo E220, the Polar cutting line and the new

Lithoman IV printing press are sustainable investments. ‘Making adjustments with our new machines is lightning fast and very accurate’, Piet Vanhoutte, the head of the finishing department, confirms.

‘The accuracy of the three-knife trimmer is and remains accurate to within a tenth of a millimetre. In the past we did have to contend with discrepancies sometimes.’ Another important advantage is that Roularta can save the settings for a certain configuration and call them up again later. The machines work more quickly, use less energy, last longer and pollute far less over the course of their life cycle.

Roularta is also concerned about its CO₂ footprint. There are more than 2000 solar panels on the roofs of the buildings in Brussels and Roeselare, allowing the business to meet most of its electricity needs. By using rainwater, the organisation can also limit the use of drinking water.

Moreover, the business applies a well-considered waste policy that is committed to maximum recycling. Finally, Roularta reduces its emissions every year by efforts to adapt its mobility. These efforts include the purchase of electric cars, the installation of charging points at the three main sites and stimulating the use of bicycles to commute. ▶



Printing works in Roeselare: As a major customer in the printing world, Roularta asks its constructors to deliver energy-efficient machines.

Sustainable staff

One team, one family: that is Roularta's view of its 1,500 employees. 'Our people are the great power and driving force behind everything this company achieves', believes the CEO, Xavier Bouckaert. 'We want to let their energy, potential, skills, talent and commitment shine.' Roularta provides the necessary coaching from the time they are recruited. For example, there are intro days, integration interviews after three months in the job, frequent performance interviews, skill screenings, career paths etc.

Along with internal and external training opportunities, Roularta also provides information sessions and even an 'on-the-job pathway'. In addition, there is constant attention to health and safety at work. Sometimes initiatives within the company contribute to supporting or promoting the employees' physical and mental health. Sports are part of that, along with attention to exercise and fun, social activities.

Even in the past year, despite the pandemic, there were many physical initiatives such as Roulactief that gives employees the chance to get to know each other better through activities such as staff parties, regional walks and museum visits. Unfortunately some activities could not go ahead. 'That's why we came up with digital alternatives, and we will continue to do so', says Bouckaert.

'Not a single week passes without inspiring webinars that our people can join. In the webinars, colleagues tell things like what exactly their role in the company is.' This is the organisation's way of strengthening the bonds between its employees. Other webinars focus on mental wellbeing or bring in external specialists to give a talk and answer employees' questions. That was what happened in a session with the epidemiologist Pierre Van Damme, for example. 'Above all, we give our people a clear signal that they do not have to face these extraordinary times on their own.'

Xavier Bouckaert welcoming new employees: 'We give our people a clear signal that they do not have to face these extraordinary times on their own.'



'Our people are the great power and driving force behind everything this company achieves.'

Xavier Bouckaert

'We also investigate solutions to tangibly increase personalisation for readers and integrate artificial intelligence into our processes.'

Xavier Bouckaert

Sustainable media partner

Roularta aims to ensure complementarity and balance between free papers and magazines, traditional and new media, printed and audiovisual media. Quality is always a top priority. Over the past pandemic year, Roularta's readers and advertisers have turned out to be particularly loyal. New readers and advertisers have also discovered – or rediscovered – the value of quality media.

'As a publisher, we have clearly played our role in society in 2020', confirms the CEO, Xavier Bouckaert. 'On the one hand, we proved ourselves to be a reliable and accurate source of offline and online information. On the other, we adapted our content to the coronavirus crisis and thus provided readers with the inspiration they needed to make good use of their time during the lockdown.' Both Roularta's online visitor figures and sales figures for print media have increased considerably over the past year.

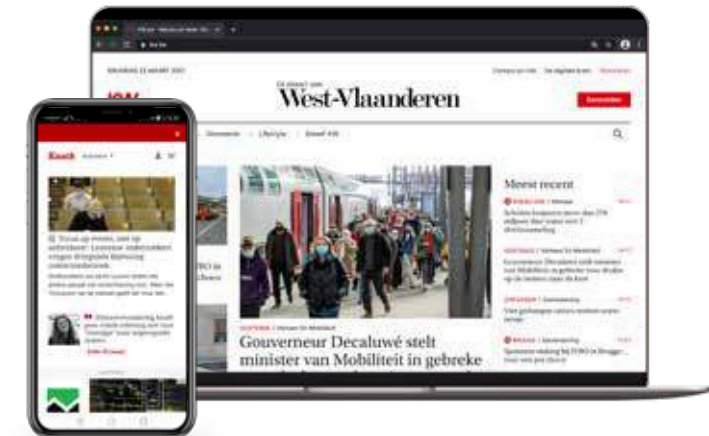
To become an even stronger media partner in the years to come, Roularta's Innovation Lab screens the outside world for trends and new technology. All the business units can come to it with questions and ideas as well. 'The Innovation Lab improves both the customer journey and operational efficiency', says Erwin Danis, the director of the Innovation Lab. 'What is heading our way? And what do we need to implement to keep on top of the future? That is the basis for developing new solutions.'

Examples of such solutions are the new Roularta app, to be launched in June 2021, and new designs and functions on the Roularta websites, which will be rolled out by September in successive phases. 'The Innovation Lab also

investigates solutions to tangibly increase personalisation for readers and integrate artificial intelligence into our processes', adds Xavier Bouckaert. 'We work together with researchers and universities. For example, we launched an academic chair at the VUB a while ago, where we investigate ways in which news media companies can continue to innovate sustainably.'

'The Innovation Lab improves both the customer journey and operational efficiency.'

Erwin Danis, Director of the Innovation Lab



The results in 2020

Roularta in figures

Profit and loss account

in millions of euros

Revenue	256.3
EBITDA	19.5
EBIT	6.1
Net result	5.8

Balance sheer 31/12/20

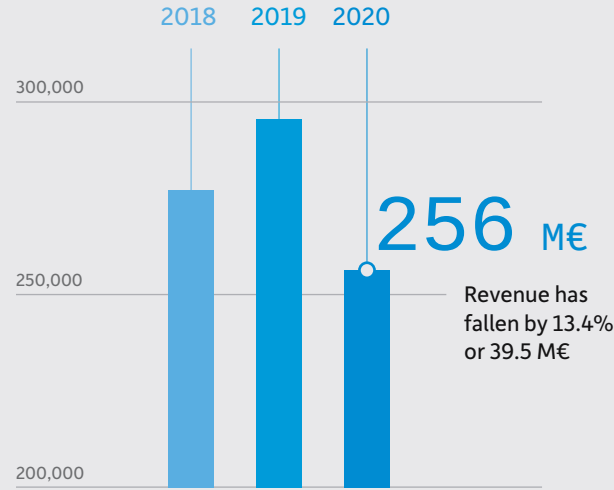
in millions of euros

Current assets	187.9
Non-current assets	149.6
Balance sheet total	337.6
Equity — Group's share	223.5
Liabilities	113.7
Liquidity ⁽¹⁾	1.5
Solvency ⁽²⁾	66.3%
Net Cash Position	85.9
Gearing ⁽³⁾	-38.4%

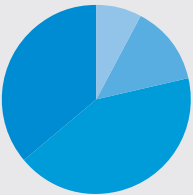
(1) liquidity = current assets / current liabilities.
(2) Solvability = equity (Group's share + minority interests) / balance sheet total.
(3) Gearing = – net financial debt / equity (Group's share + minority interests).

Revenue

in thousands of euros



Turnover distribution

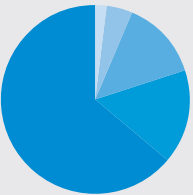


7.9%
Line extensions & rights

13.6%
Printing for third parties

42.4%
Subscriptions & newsstand sales

36.1%
Advertising



2.2%
Audiovisual brands

4.3%
Newspaper Brands

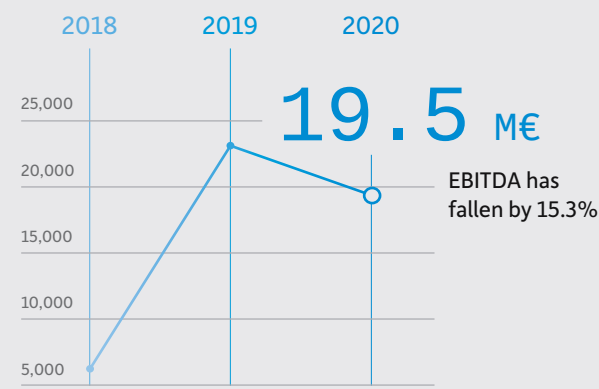
13.6%
Printing for third parties

16.1%
Local media brands

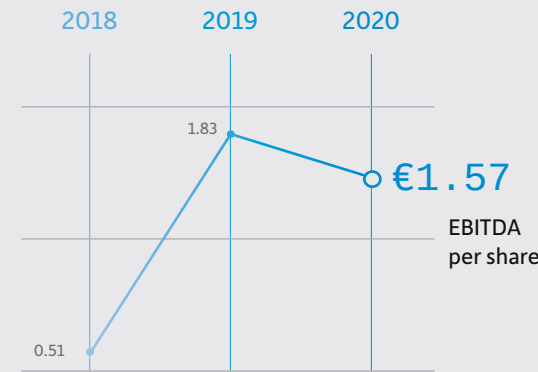
63.8%
Magazine brands

EBITDA

in thousands of euros



Key figures per share



Investments

15,1 M€

Evolution in subscriptions

+10,3% or
+7,4 M€

Mediafin in figures

Revenue

64.4 M€

Investments

3.2 M€

Evolution in subscriptions

+13.4% or
+3.5 M€

EBITDA

11.1 M€

The contribution of Mediafin to the EBITDA of Roularta Media Group amounts to 1.0 M€ for 2020. Compliant with the IFRS regulations, this contains 50% of Mediafin's net result (2.2 M€) minus the annual depreciation of brands including De Tijd and L'Echo (1.2 M€).

How Roularta Media Group creates value



Input

<div>Financial capital</div> <div>80 million euro</div> <div>registered capital</div> <div>13,141,123 shares</div> <div>listed on Euronext Brussels</div> <div>224 million euro</div> <div>equity</div> <div>86 million euro</div> <div>net cash position</div> <div></div>	<div>Manufactured capital</div> <div>Offices in Belgium</div> <div>Brussels, Roeselare (head office), Antwerp, Ghent, Hasselt</div> <div>Office in the Netherlands</div> <div>Baarn</div> <div>6 advanced full-colour offset printing presses</div> <div>650 data servers</div> <div>1 petabyte storage capacity</div> <div>2,000 computers</div> <div></div>
<div>Natural capital</div> <div>52,292 ton</div> <div>100% TCF paper of which 2.98% is FSC paper and 87.33% is PEFC paper</div> <div>1,088 tons</div> <div>of ink</div> <div>21,916 m³</div> <div>water</div> <div>135,543 m²</div> <div>aluminium plates</div> <div>41,194 litres</div> <div>of cleaning agents</div> <div>111,600 litres</div> <div>of dampening additives</div> <div>31,564 MWh</div> <div>= CO₂ emissions of</div> <div>9,229 tons</div> <div>66,000 m²</div> <div>area of greenery</div> <div></div>	<div>Human capital</div> <div>1,236 staff</div> <div>687 men</div> <div>549 women</div> <div>186 accredited professional journalists</div> <div>Network of more than</div> <div>1,300 freelancers</div> <div></div> <div>Social capital</div> <div><ul style="list-style-type: none">Membership of various organisations, e.g. Council for Journalism, FebelgraChairmanship of WE MEDIA (Belgian magazine association) and EMMA (European magazine association)Relationships with suppliers and professional organisations</div> <div>794,751 subscribers</div> <div></div> <div>Intellectual capital</div> <div><ul style="list-style-type: none">Innovation Lab and Roularta Digital HubStrong media brands</div> <div></div>

These figures do not include the important acquisitions in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany in March 2021.



Output

<div>Financial capital</div> <div>256 million euro</div> <div>turnover</div> <div>87 million euro</div> <div>personnel</div> <div></div>	<div>Social capital</div> <div>Websites: more than</div> <div>3.7 million</div> <div>unique visitors per month and more than</div> <div>45 million</div> <div>page views per month</div> <div>3,348,539</div> <div>readers of local media (CIM)</div> <div>9,073,402</div> <div>magazine readers (CIM) in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany</div> <div>Weekly</div> <div>1.3 million</div> <div>viewers for Kanaal Z/Canal Z</div> <div>Co-creator</div> <div>‘Een Hart voor West-Vlaanderen’</div> <div></div>
<div>Natural capital</div> <div>54%</div> <div>lover consumption of isopropyl alcohol as an additive in the printing process thanks to state-of-the-art printing presses</div> <div></div>	
<div>Manufactured capital</div> <div>437,670,426</div> <div>rotations of rotary presses</div> <div>More than</div> <div>100 events</div> <div>(Trends Manager of the Year, Trends Summer University, She goes ICT,...)</div> <div>Printed copies</div> <div>267,763,225 magazines and</div> <div>102,138,181 newspapers</div> <div></div>	<div>Intellectual capital</div> <div>140</div> <div>innovative projects tested by the Innovation Lab</div> <div>70</div> <div>magazine titles</div> <div>5</div> <div>newspaper titles</div> <div></div>
<div>Human capital</div> <div>13.078</div> <div>hours of training for personnel</div> <div>59</div> <div>new recruitments</div> <div></div>	

These figures do not include the important acquisitions in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany in March 2021.

Opting for depth,
relevance and quality

How Roularta's news magazines scale great heights

When the world finds itself in turbulent waters, people seek safe havens. In news programmes, news apps and newspapers, robust journalism has been appreciated and rewarded throughout the pandemic: 'As long as magazines stay relevant, they will continue to exist.'

Jos Grobбен, director of magazines, is pleased with the appreciation of journalism during the coronavirus pandemic. The magazines for which he is responsible play an important role, he says. 'You have the news sites, where speed is of the essence. At the other end of the spectrum are the magazines, whose added value lies in the selection they make. In between are the radio, newspapers and television.'

Jos Grobбен is also the publisher of "News & Business Magazines", but he actually thinks that 'news magazines' is not a very good name. 'In fact our strong brands don't focus on the moment but on profundity, mapping tendencies and distilling the relevance out of them. Magazines used to contain summaries of what had happened in the past week. Fortunately we no longer do that, because there is not a soul who cares about ten-day-old news. Now you have to interpret events. We need to inspire people and learn new things. We do that with a hybrid formula: we are present on the digital channels, app and website every day, 24/24. In midweek we provide an extensive pack of reading material on paper and in a digital version. Our subscribers can access a fantastic range: they have digital access to all our "news" magazines in Dutch and French (*Knack* and *Le Vif*, *Trends* and *Trends Tendances*, *Sport/Voetbal* magazine and *Sport/Foot* magazine).'

Now the newspapers are also evolving in the direction of a hybrid model, with a pack of reading material at the weekend and digital

reporting every day. 'Newspapers are producing good supplements now', Grobбен says, 'but they are still far more rooted in the news. *Knack* has a different selection and offers greater depth.'

How relevant are you?

'It's all a question of how you spend your time. When we phone people who have cancelled their subscription, that is one of the most important reasons for stopping. Time is relative: how many minutes of each day do you want to spend finding out what's in the news? You can listen to podcasts, read a paper, wear digital glasses that practically project the articles onto your retina... but you're still not going to follow the news five hours a day. News consumption is not going to increase dramatically just because there are more types of media.'

What people don't find relevant will be left behind. That is why it is important to commit to quality more than ever', Grobбен says. That focus starts with recruiting the best people. 'We need people who can separate the chaff from the corn so that we can pinpoint the most important topics. The journalism in *Knack* has played a role in many political debates, from the Egmont Pact to the Panama Papers. The climate debate, which we opened up, belongs among those topics as well.'

Roularta employs fact checkers to fight the false information being spread by social media. Those online platforms have many benefits,

'Magazines used to contain summaries of what had happened in the past week. Fortunately we no longer do that, because there is not a soul who cares about ten-day-old news.'

but they are simultaneously disrupting the business model of printed magazines. Although there are a few provisos to add: 'The debate about print and digital is irrelevant, although it isn't always easy to stand up to the big guys who absorb lots of advertising money. They're not sacrosanct, though. Look at Facebook, which has lied to advertisers several times in recent years. Print is still a very powerful medium. Even Bol makes magazines. So it can't be such a completely silly idea', Grobбен laughs.

Risks and opportunities of the crisis

The coronavirus crisis is also an opportunity for the media. After all, the number of visitors to news sites shoots up with every crisis, and loose sales have also exceeded all expectations in the past months. 'The readership market is fairly stable and can take a few knocks. It is an important task to convert that flow of new visitors into subscribers. The rock-solid brand *Libelle* now has the highest number of subscribers in its entire 75-year history.'

However, the crisis has also brought its share of challenges. The magazines themselves have stayed partly out of the line of fire, but diversification has meant that there has long since been more at play than that. For example, *Knack* organises cruises and *Trends* runs networking events; both of these activities have now come to a standstill. Moreover, investments in digitisation projects need to be timed right. 'It is far easier to push newspaper readers towards a digital product than magazine readers. Magazines are still associated with "slow reading". So we take our cue from the readers' tempo: a weekly magazine supplemented with apps and websites for daily news. In other countries as well, you notice that the transition is taking longer than expected, except with international titles like *The Economist*, which has a readership market all the way to Timbuctoo', Grobбен says. 'In that sense Flanders is a city state; we don't control the world. That is why it is so difficult to predict the future. Nevertheless, I am confident that for as long as magazines succeed in staying relevant, they will continue to exist.' ■



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Jos Grobбен,
director of magazines Roularta

'The rock-solid brand *Libelle* now has the highest number of subscribers in its entire 75-year history.'

The editors-in-chief have their say

It's not easy to produce decent journalism in the middle of a pandemic. Five editors-in-chief at Roularta look back on the challenges and opportunities of an extraordinary year.

Editors-in-chief

1.

What was your biggest editorial challenge in 2020?

2.

Did 2020 also offer journalistic opportunities?

3.

Has the journalist's profession changed after a year of the coronavirus?

4.

Which article from 2020 has stuck with you the most?



Bert Bultinck, editor-in-chief of Knack

'The epidemic was a boost for Knack's quality journalism'



Anne-Sophie Bailly, editor-in-chief of Le Vif

'We had to be there for our readers'

1.

'It might sound surprising, but the biggest challenge was not that different to the one we faced in previous years: making an attractive news magazine that is sharp, intelligent and on the ball. Obviously it was a new challenge to work from home as standard. That was particularly true for our editorial team, because the water cooler is normally an important breeding ground for their ideas. Sometimes the coronavirus measures caused logistical puzzles – live interviews were often difficult – but the more difficult circumstances hardly ever got in the way of our main tasks, if at all.'

2.

'Beyond any doubt. The epidemic was a disaster for our society, but it was a boost for Knack's quality journalism. Flemish readers felt a need for journalists who explored the issues in greater depth, who could explain complex

developments clearly and take the debate to a higher level. And what do you know? Those are the journalists who work for Knack.'

3.

'Our profession has hardly changed. We all know how to schedule a Zoom meeting now – sometimes that was a bit trickier in the past – and it has been difficult or impossible to travel abroad for the past year. But I am confident that journalists in the post-coronavirus period will be able to do their jobs again the way they did before. Physical contact is important, especially if you are looking for news.'

4.

'It was the penetrating, sometimes moving interview that Dirk Draulans did with the Belgian virologist Peter Piot, who had been infected with a severe case of the coronavirus himself. Knack was the first to tell his story. The

interview was also an international success. We sold it to the leading scientific journal Science, and it was a hit there as well. The piece resulted in millions of page views on the Science website.'



© Frank Toussaint

1.

'We suddenly had to respond to the huge need for information among the public. Confronted with an unknown event, they turned to the quality press for answers. More than ever, we really had to be there for our readers. We were also forced to start working from home from one day to the next. That meant overhauling our work processes whilst maintaining the quality of our content the whole time.'

2.

'It certainly did. Over the past year, our editorial team has constantly been thinking about how to approach crisis journalism of this kind. What was the appropriate way to interpret the figures and graphs? How should we inform our readers without sowing fear? This way of thinking led to many discussions and debates, which is always a good thing in our field.'

3.

'2020 proved how fundamental human contact is for everyone, in both our private and professional lives. That applied to our sources of information, but also to the relationships between our editorial staff. The year of the pandemic brought out the essence of collective intelligence and also the importance of unfettered debate on ideas that are inherent to an editorial team.'

4.

'It is difficult to choose one article. We presented several very good special reports on the coronavirus, both online and in print. We often dealt with issues that no one else had tackled, but ones that demanded attention. In parallel, we were still deciphering the negotiations in the run-up to the formation of the government, and we gave the readers of Le Vif a unique glimpse behind the political scenes. Investigative journalism was always crucial.'



© Frank Toussaint



Ruth Goossens, editor-in-chief
of Knack Weekend

‘More savoir-faire, less automatic pilot’

Jacques Sys, editor-in-chief
of Sport/Voetbalmagazine

‘We want to grab the readers by the scruff of their necks’



1.

‘The biggest challenges were technical and organisational. Computers and internet connections regularly crashed, and it was considerably more difficult than before to organise interviews and photos. Thanks to our enthusiastic team and all the overtime they worked, we succeeded in delivering a very relevant lifestyle magazine every week.’

2.

‘2020 was unusually exciting for journalists. We constantly had to adjust our content to a new reality, and at the same time we had to deal with all sorts of limitations. Suddenly there were also fewer opportunities in the traditional lifestyle sectors such as fashion and travel. However, there was a far greater need for stories and reports offering hope and support in this difficult period. It was a case of needing more savoir-faire and less automatic pilot. But looking for original angles and creative solutions is what gives you an adrenaline boost as a lifestyle editor.’

3.

‘I don’t have the sense that the profession has really changed. A good interview or a hard-hitting report still need the same ingredients: thorough preparation, accuracy and fluent style. It is true, though, that we will be more inclined to do an interview on Zoom in the future than take a plane. In that sense, our ecological awareness has increased. We’re still waiting to see how fashion journalism will evolve. Presenting new collections is currently happening entirely online, and that isn’t an ideal solution.’

4.

‘The things that spring to mind are mainly entire magazines. In May we did a lovely, interesting travel special focusing on domestic tourism and the neighbouring countries. Our heart-warming ‘Person of the Year’ report has stuck with me as well: a selection of twenty people who did something special to help someone else. And then there was the wonderful but sad story of Bob, an 84-year-old architect who had

been confined to his bed by illness for five years. He gave an interior photographer permission to take photos so that he would be able to admire his own home again.’



© Frank Toussaint

1.

‘Continuing to surprise our readers although there were no more sports events. To begin with, we filled the gap with special reports, but ultimately we decided to put our publication on hold for fourteen weeks. That was a difficult decision, but it was the right one. The second challenge was to start back up again and grab the readers by the scruff of their necks right from the word go. We redesigned the concept of the magazine, but it still focuses on news and in-depth analyses.’

2.

‘Absolutely. We took the opportunity to strengthen our website and position it better on the market. As soon as we temporarily halted the paper publication, we got to work on that. Our site is more up to date than ever: it is a daily newspaper that includes analyses, reports and columns. The number of readers increased considerably after our restyling, and now that our paper magazine is being printed again, that number is stable.’

3.

‘Live interviews were often impossible in the past year. For a sports magazine like ours, that is a significant handicap. Direct contact with the sports world is partly lost. You can compensate with Zoom interviews, but they require an adjustment from everyone. Our editorial meetings are also completely different now to the way they used to be before the coronavirus. And of course we are reporting on sports events now without the real-life experience.’

4.

‘I was really pleased with the edition that marked our fortieth anniversary. It appeared on 18 March 2020. It looked back on forty years of sport, forty years of journalism. The conversation between Jan Mulder and Imke Courtois was the backbone of the publication, but there were also all kinds of other interviews with sportspeople from the past and present. The whole thing was fleshed out with analyses and opinions. In short: it was everything that *Sport/Voetbalmagazine* stands for. It ended up being a fantastic souvenir edition.’



© Frank Toussaint



Wim Verhoeven, editor-in-chief
of Trends/Trends-Tendances

'Our strength? Transcending the madness of the day'

1.

'I took the job of editor-in-chief at *Trends* and *Kanaal Z* in the midst of the coronavirus crisis. The coronavirus got, and is still getting, a lot of attention. Rightly so, but in the meantime the world has not been standing still in other areas. The climate, diversity in the workplace or the social role of business leaders: keeping track of all these developments is a challenge for our editors. Our readers expect us to look to the future with an entrepreneurial mindset. There's a reason why we're called "*Trends*".'

2.

'The coronavirus crisis has generated an endless stream of 'McDonald's journalism', you might say: fast news that sometimes goes out of date almost before it is published. Virologists, epidemiologists, vaccinologists, politicians and action groups: everyone is talking at the same time. The strength of a weekly magazine like *Trends* is that we have time to transcend the madness of the day. The unpredictable course of the pandemic has taught us that all that fast

news doesn't necessarily leave us better informed. So my motto is: *Trends* doesn't have to be the fastest, as long as we are the smartest.'

3.

'An editorial team is not that different from teams at other companies, with everyone working almost entirely from home in recent months. Everyone does their best, but working remotely is far from ideal. Good ideas often arise spontaneously when people are together and sharing information. However we'll soon be able to combine the best of the old and the new way of editing a newspaper. Hopefully we'll be able to look each other in the eye for real more often, but we will also be able to concentrate on writing a piece at home.'

4.

'*Trends* successfully dealt with "the new way of doing business". More than ever, our magazine focused on gamechangers: people who have an idea, make a difference or seize an opportunity to do business and contribute

to the world at the same time. It is striking that these are often young people, and often women as well. *Trends* will always be a benchmark for the important sectors, economic policy, money matters and investment advice. Now you can add this new, young economy. Gamechangers like these can inspire others.'



© RV

The Roularta app as the spearhead
of digital strategy

'We've set the bar high, aiming for hundreds of thousands of users in the first year'



© Jaelynn Castillo

Readers spend 22 minutes on each
digital magazine they open.

Roularta's *New Deal*, introduced in 2019, was the first step towards the Roularta app. It was intended as the spearhead of the publisher's updated digital strategy.

The experiment with the *New Deal* was a resounding success: anyone who subscribed to a printed edition of *Trends*, *Knack* or *Sport/Voetbalmagazine* also received online access to the other news magazines and their counterparts in French. 'The *New Deal* proved that people are prepared to pay more for a subscription that includes the digital package', says Stefan Seghers, Chief Data Officer. 'We have gained new subscribers rather than losing them. More than that, in fact: people read the other titles online very intensively. They spend 22 minutes on each digital magazine they open. When we saw those figures, we realised: if readers are spending that much time on them, we're on the right track.' ▶

‘If you only read Libelle, it will feel like the Libelle app.’

Sanoma

The arrival of the Sanoma titles and *Plus Magazine* opened up possibilities for even more combinations. It even seems to be the ideal way to strengthen the niche publications that Roularta owns. ‘In recent months, we have developed an application that brings all Roularta’s magazines together: from *Libelle* and *Data News* to *Trends* and *Flair*. Anyone who subscribes to one title can read one or more other titles for a reduced price’, Seghers explains. ‘We have been noticing for years that our brands are really well known, but that we can do much more to convert that fame into growth. In other words, we have an opportunity to sell a second or third Roularta title within a household, and thus to attract more readers.’

The range of Roularta magazines makes it possible to commit strongly to families. Just as

every member of the family has their own Netflix account, Roularta’s app will take everyone’s preferences into consideration. ‘We didn’t rush into this’, Seghers continues. ‘Market research showed that people were interested in packages of titles and that they were willing to pay for them. More than 80 per cent also thought it was worth being able to share the application in their household.’

Nevertheless, the app does not detract from the brands’ specific identities. Quite the opposite, because these strong brands are the very source of Roularta’s strength. All the articles are presented in the house style of the magazine they appear in. ‘If you only read *Libelle*, it will feel like the *Libelle* app. Although the intention is obviously for us to suggest other titles over time’, Seghers says. ‘Because we have a lot of data about reading behaviour, we can create personalised subscription formulas. A

family that receives the paper version of *Knack* has digital access to the six news magazines and receives a discount on a digital subscription to *Libelle* and *Plus Magazine* in the Roularta app: that is just one of the many options.’

There are various ways to find articles in the app: from a feed of articles or by browsing the magazines. ‘The latter option again emphasises the importance of perceiving value. Editors make certain choices, and for many people that package is very important.’ Every time an article is opened, the person will be able to read it in a mobile-friendly format. We took smartphones as the basis for our designs, not the other way around. That means the articles look great on any screen, from the smallest smartphone to the largest tablet.

Roularta as a platform for others

The most radical consequence of the Roularta app is probably the disappearance of all the separate apps. Roularta currently has more than 30, because many brands have a separate app for their website and their magazine. The new project brings them together: anything you can read for free on the website will be free in the app as well. ‘The *Knack* app is currently used by more than 20,000 people, for example. So we’ve set the bar high for the Roularta app, aiming for hundreds of thousands of users in the first year. When we launch it, we will allow everyone to read absolutely everything free for 30 days. That’s an incredible offer. By thoroughly analysing what people read, we will be able to offer customised subscriptions after that trial period. That turns the digital tool into both a recruitment channel and a way of rewarding

loyal subscribers. So we might end up giving people who already have print subscriptions to three titles full digital access to all the other magazines after all.’

The renewed websites will also be launched later this year. There, too, the emphasis is on a similar experience that makes cross-selling possible. The fact that both the applications and the renewed websites can be made is all thanks to the open architecture that has been a priority over the past few years. The underlying structure of the content store had its own API, making it possible to deliver articles automatically to external parties.

Thus it is not unrealistic to imagine that a bank or transport application might one day offer a package of Roularta articles on a specific theme. Of course that is subject to certain conditions, Stefan Seghers explains: ‘When our articles appear on other platforms, the brand must always be mentioned, the invoicing for the user goes through Roularta and we also need access to the data.’

Getting rid of its old-fashioned image

The logo used as the app icon is not Roularta’s traditional logo either. ‘We’ve modernised it. Will it become Roularta’s new logo? Who knows. At any rate, it is an experiment that shows the direction we are heading in with the group.’

‘We are in the final phase of development and will be releasing the Roularta app to 2,000 subscribers in June. This project will be initially successful if the subscribers say it offers them added value. After that we can start experimenting and upselling.’ ■

‘We have been noticing for years that our brands are really well known, but that we can do much more to convert that fame into extra subscribers.’



Stefan Seghers, Chief Data Officer Roularta

© Marco Mertens

App

Trade magazines: deepen, don't broaden

If you look at Roularta's portfolio, you will see a number of lesser-known titles alongside the big names like *Knack* and *Libelle*. *Data News* and *Grafisch Nieuws*, for example. These are trade magazines whose circulation is a fraction of that of the general magazines, although they are every bit as valuable.

The trade magazines have been going for decades, but the market in which those brands operate has changed radically in recent years. 'I remember being at a German trade fair for publishers twenty years ago', says Jos Grobben, the director of magazines. 'Because Audi was a big sponsor of the event, a representative of the car manufacturer was allowed to give a short speech. The man told us that Audi was financing the event in the hope of joining the publishers in the room in a few years' time. Half the audience laughed, but they turned out to be wrong.'

Whereas trade magazines used to be an intermediary link between producers and users, the former have now started communicating ever more directly with the latter. Initially they did so by making their own websites, then using social media and finally by becoming a kind of media companies in their own right. This has led to a drop in advertising income that can be felt right across the media sector.

'If trade magazines want to survive, they need to realise that they can no longer function as a conduit. Rather than broadening their content, they need to deepen and deliver

'We want to be the Rolls-Royce of our sector: we aim for nothing less.'



Jos Grobben,
director of magazines Roularta

© Frank Toussaint

great added value. Producers who make podcasts or are active on YouTube will only talk about their own products, but a trade magazine is a place where you can compare products on an objective basis', Grobben explains.

It is no longer sufficient simply to publish a magazine, either. 'We really commit to diversification in our trade magazines. *Data News* derives a large proportion of its income from events. For example, 1200 people attend the *Data News Awards*.'

Grafisch Nieuws, the trade magazine for the graphics industry, also organises events. 'The Drupa exhibition is a biennial highlight in the sector. In the years with no exhibition, we have started up a smaller, Belgian version, "Get Smart". Because we organise it as an independent party, we can put several competitors on stands in the same hall without difficulty, which appeals to people in the business.'

The professionals who rely on magazines like *Grafisch Nieuws* and *Data News* are a clearly defined target group, which makes them very attractive from a commercial perspective, even today. 'If you occupy a significant position, a trade magazine can be highly relevant. If you are number two or three in the market, it's a lost cause. We want to be the Rolls-Royce of our sector: we aim for nothing less.' ■

Three employees
tell us about their jobs

For love of the media

Virginie has only just come aboard the Roularta ship, Veerle has been sailing with us for five years already and Kris is an experienced captain with thirty years on the clock. We follow in the wake of three employees whose burning ambition it is to help Roularta navigate the right course.



© Frank Toussaint

5 months at Roularta: Virginie Leupe, product manager for De Zondag & De Streekkrant

'I can see myself in a management role in the future.'

Three degrees in marketing and professional experience to boot: Virginie Leupe (25) presented serious credentials when she applied to Roularta at the end of last year. 'I obtained a bachelor's degree in marketing from VIVES in Kortrijk, followed by a higher bachelor's in advanced business management at UCLL in Leuven. Their partnership with universities in the UK meant I could also do a master's in international marketing at Coventry University.'

In November 2020, during the second lockdown, she started at Roularta. 'It wasn't

planned', she laughs. 'I noticed a vacancy for a brand manager on LinkedIn. When I applied, the HR department told me that a lot of experience was required for that role, but that there was a new vacancy for a product manager. Why not, I thought. I was working as a web marketer for Tui in Ostend at the time.'

Obviously the application process was not what you would expect it to be. 'I only met my new boss once in person during the process. Of course I was already used to video calls, but it is still strange to see hardly anyone during

recruitment. Luckily, I was able to go to the office regularly during the first month, although I got to know most people online. It was important for me though to realise mentally that I was in a new working environment. I'm fortunate to have a good team who immediately made me feel welcome.'

Virginie works as a product manager for *De Zondag* and *De Streekkrant*. She draws up marketing plans with the marketing director, sets up competitions for customers through partnerships and briefs the graphic team on many matters such as adverts, stickers and image material. 'I also support the sales team: I have a really broad role. The most challenging thing about this job is that *De Zondag* and *De Streekkrant* are free products. Without advertisers they couldn't exist. The trick is to be as creative as possible on a limited budget.'

Virginie sees herself in a management role in the near future. 'If I get that chance, I'll seize it with both hands. I know I'm capable of it. And one day, don't ask me when, I want to start my own business. I dream of a coffee bar with a kind of library where you can borrow or buy books on the spot. I see myself as a bit of an old soul in a young body. I really wanted to get into the print world, and I read a lot. During my intro day at Roularta, I was looking forward to visiting the printing works most of all, to see how a magazine or newspaper rolls off the press and is finished. That was also a little dream that came true.' ▶

30 years with Roularta: Kris Van Peteghem, digital product developer

‘Strong managers, a bit of luck and showing courage, that’s what it’s all about.’



© Frank Toussaint

Kris Van Peteghem (53) is an old hand at Roularta, but it doesn’t feel that way to him. After his studies in commercial engineering and one year of military service, he started his career with the media company as an assistant to the purchasing director. ‘It was a new role at the time. My first boss was William Metsu, who went on to become the general director of the printing works. You can learn a lot if you are lucky enough to work for strong managers,

certainly as a beginner. You do need to be lucky, because you can’t choose your own managers.’

A year and a half later, Leo Claeys – Rik De Nolf’s brother-in-law – was looking for someone to deal with distribution coordination in the free press division (now Local Media). ‘Distribution is the last essential link to the reader, and back then it didn’t run smoothly. This job was also a new role. That made it interesting, because you create a lot of your job yourself, along with your manager.’

Strong managers, a bit of luck and showing courage yourself: Kris believes these are the three ingredients you need to create an exciting career for yourself. ‘Leo said to me: “Now you’re on the purchasing train, and you know how it works. I’m just letting you know that there’s another train on the tracks, the distribution train. I know which way it’s going, but when it reaches the points, things can get a bit bumpy.” What he meant to say was: if you want to move on in a company, you really need to go for it.’

Kris was given the extra task of setting up an external training pathway for sales. ‘The intention was to capture that knowledge within the company, so we wouldn’t have to stay with that agency forever. That experience really opened up my world to sales, infusing me with customer centricity. I started training people after that, and then I got the chance to become

the product manager for *Steps* magazine and *De Zondag*.’

Then Chris was logistics manager for a while. ‘I was really fascinated by the technical installations in the printing works. Luckily I was still a bit of an engineer’, he laughs. In that period there were exploratory talks with Google for a partnership as the reseller (premium partner) for Google Ads, in the world of search engine advertising. ‘I started learning all about that and made a business plan. We ended up being the first Google partner in Belgium, and we won a Google Award twice.’

That job was the forerunner of his current job as digital product developer. ‘Just like in print, you need to dare to innovate in digital. I’m currently working on a project on digital signage, digital screens for Mijn Stad TV, that are used at busy locations in local shops for digital communication. The baker or butcher can use some of the slots themselves to advertise their products, and we sell the other slots to advertisers.’

You might well say that Kris is a loyal and multi-talented lieutenant. ‘Of course I have sometimes considered going to work elsewhere, but the company was smart enough to offer me new internal challenges in good time. The grass is often greener on the other side, but during my career I have seen many colleagues come running back to Roularta.’

5 years with Roularta: Veerle Hofman, sales training & coaching manager

‘I partly had to reinvent my job in 2020.’

Veerle Hofman (47) learned the tricks of the trade at Gouden Gids (Truvo), where she worked for 17 years. She started out as a sales rep and discovered all kinds of customers in a range of sectors while she was on the road. ‘All those conversations really contributed to my general knowledge.’ She developed naturally

into a coach for several teams. ‘When you follow all those reps out onto the road, you see and learn a lot all over again.’ Next she worked as a sales manager with a team of 15 reps for a while, and then as a coach for the key accounts.

Her last job at Truvo was as a training and coaching manager with a team of ten trainers. ‘Then I got a phone call from Roularta, which was looking for someone with my profile. After 17 years I was ready for a new challenge.’

She started in Local Media, where she was responsible for developing a sales approach. I was brought in to teach the reps to do 360° sales, both in print and digital. We started by rolling that out to the leaders and then to their teams.’ Then she moved on to Roularta’s customer journey pathway, where she developed a code of conduct. ‘The million-dollar question is: how can we focus even more on our customers in a highly competitive and changing world? What is more: how can you communicate better within in your team? After all, you can only approach external customers well if you work together well internally.’

Today she’s still monitoring the customer journey pathway. She also coaches leaders in how to lead, how to convey their vision to their team, how to speak to a group, etc. ‘Every company needs inspiring leaders who can get the best out of a team’, Veerle says.

‘I have a fantastic job, but sometimes I’m exhausted after a training session’, she laughs. ‘I make my training courses really interactive with lots of exercises, including movement exercises to keep my listeners alert. But it’s quite a bit more difficult to make sure everyone has their say on Zoom. Now I do a lot with breakout rooms and changing teams to keep things interesting. I would say that I partly had to reinvent my job in 2020.’ She sometimes sees herself as a psychologist. I can get a lot out of people, even if they’ve got things on their mind.’

Veerle hasn’t ruled out the idea of becoming a manager herself in the future, based on this role. ‘But that isn’t my main ambition. My mission at Roularta will have succeeded if I have contributed to positive changes in the company culture with open and transparent communication.’ ■



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News & Business

Readers and Audience (print + digital)

Trends + Trends/Tendances

Readers
307,061

Audience
49,532



Knack

Readers
451,199

Audience
87,821



Bodytalk fr+n1

Readers
296,460

Audience
144,161



Trends Style fr+n1

Readers
123,000

Audience
44,767



Sport/Foot Magazine Sport/Voetbal Magazine

Readers
439,307

Audience
30,601



Le Vif/L'Express

Readers
350,122

Audience
51,655



Data News fr+n1

Readers
87,823

Audience
22,310



Krant van West-Vlaanderen

Readers
389,624

Audience
52,980



De Tijd/L'Echo

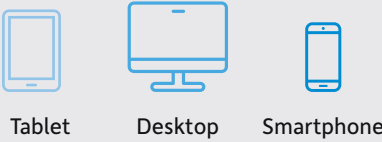
Readers
509,200
(incl. website)

Total circulation
76,135



News & Business

Real users, visits, views per month



knack.be/levif.be

1,278,172

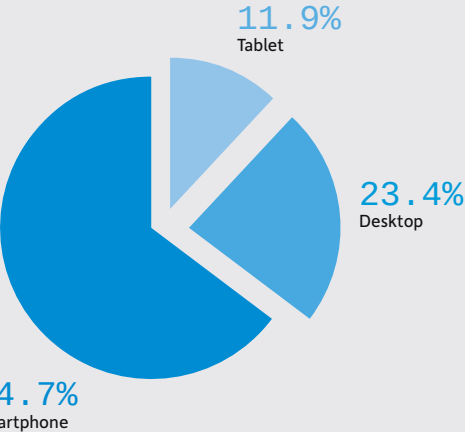
real users

4,332,697

visits

6,813,527

views



sportmagazine.be

152,152

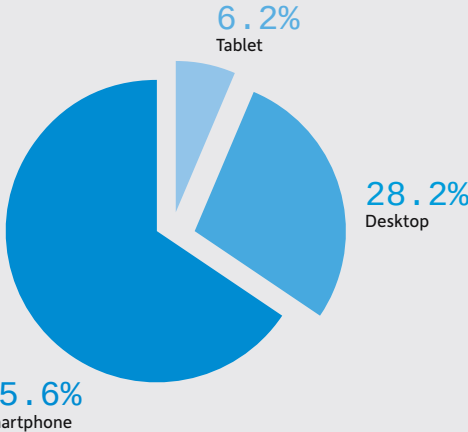
real users

256,225

visits

365,963

views



Krant van West-Vlaanderen

524,300

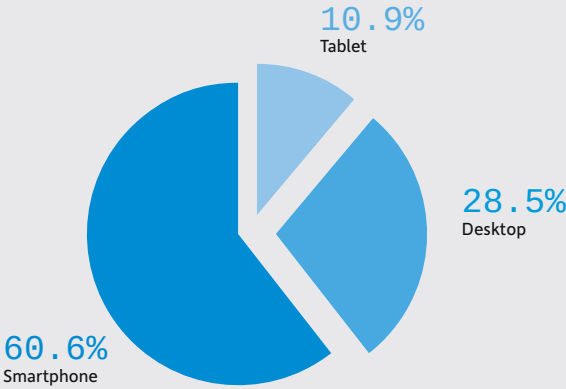
real users

1,417,618

visits

2,230,211

views



Data News

95,956

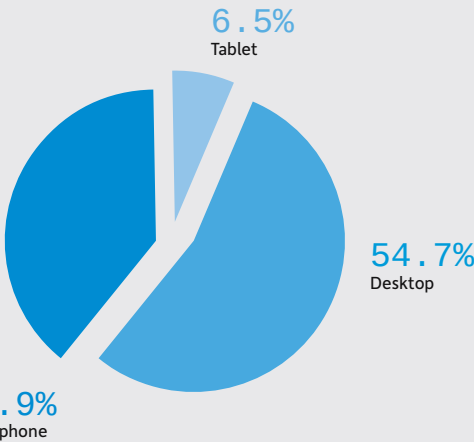
real users

169,595

visits

265,970

views



All Roularta Brands

3,702,468

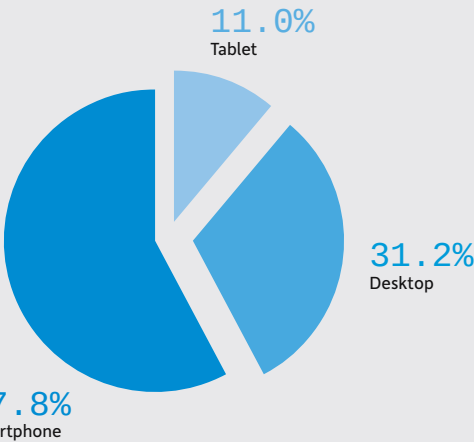
real users

19,961,429

visits

32,959,361

views



trends.be/tendances.be

673,932

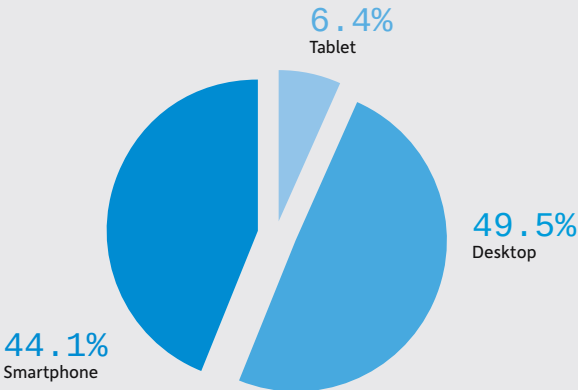
real users

1,481,351

visits

3,471,992

views



Vision

'The digital acceleration cannot be reversed'

They had to change their approach to tourism and the popularity of cooking videos went through the roof. Suddenly everyone went digital. How the coronavirus shaped the year for lifestyle magazines as well.

Last year had a great impact on the content of lifestyle magazines as well. Although they don't report on hard news, their angle on content cannot be disconnected from what is going on in the world. 'It is our mission to inspire our readers, offering them dreams and relaxation. And that was exactly what people needed. So we didn't need to change anything about the topics we presented, but we had to change our approach to ensure the topics were coronavirus-proof. But we are used to constantly coming up with new angles within the same topics. That means we had to be highly flexible, but we never had the sense of leaving our comfort zone in terms of content.'

Bond with the readers

The magazines deliberately avoided all the news about the coronavirus. 'That wasn't what readers were looking for from us. Many of them completely lost their footing as the coronavirus crisis intensified. So they came to us for inspiration, to find out how to help each other and how to make life pleasant in their own bubble, in spite of everything. And we were absolutely essential to that.'

People genuinely appreciated this

approach: readers flooded the editorial offices with mails thanking the editors for the inspiration they had found in the magazines and on the websites to conjure up a fun Easter or Christmas celebration after all, even if the coronavirus meant that it was completely different to what they were used to. 'At times like that we became even more keenly aware of our social role. We sensed that what we were doing was important to so many people, which stimulated us to put together especially good editions in difficult circumstances. That also ties in perfectly with our mission to be as close as possible to our readers.'

Timing

Even though women's magazines did not directly respond to the coronavirus news, it was still a big challenge to keep the content of the magazines in line with what was and was not possible at any given time. 'We often had to throw our editorial planning overboard completely. That isn't easy for the editors of a lifestyle magazine, who generally plan things a long time in advance. Nevertheless, it is important for lifestyle articles as well to get the timing exactly right. That became really clear last

'Readers flooded the editorial offices with mails thanking us for our Christmas or Easter tips.'

year: what we were still allowed to do one week was suddenly banned the next week. So even a lifestyle magazine has to be flexible.' Tourism was one of the topics where the angle sometimes changed at short notice. With treasure hunts on foot in cities or holiday tips in Belgium, the magazines offered inspiration for days out for readers in their bubble, but even that was untimely when cities locked down completely or people were advised not to go to the coast.

Digital

2020 was also the year of the digital acceleration, among other things with record numbers of visitors to all our websites. 'The figures for *Libelle Lekker*, for example, absolutely went through the roof. It was as if everyone was looking for recipes on our website. Certainly when it came to cooking, it felt as though we could never offer enough content', Hellemans says. 'We won't be able to reverse the digital acceleration. In the midst of the crisis, a whole range of new habits emerged that are here to

stay. Some of our readers didn't really know how to use all the possibilities of digital tools before the coronavirus crisis, but in the middle of it all they learned how to use a smartphone much better, they bought much more online, and they got to grips with video calls. After all, it was the only way to keep in touch with their friends and family. In that sense, our audience has become more digitised at breakneck speed. That has laid the foundations for long-term digital growth.'

Traces of that can already be found in the magazine itself. For example, links to cooking videos were added to the recipes in the Christmas editions of *Libelle* for the first time, so that readers could also see how to make a recipe. 'Those videos turned out to be a resounding success. Our readers have a lot more digital skills and habits now. Those won't disappear. And that in turn creates a whole scale of new possibilities.'

Karen Hellemans
Editor-in-chief of *Libelle*
/ Publisher of women's magazines



© Studio Dann

The year in journalism for the lifestyle magazines

The editors of the lifestyle magazines have not had an easy year. The coronavirus crisis turned the whole of society on its head and large parts of the country locked down, often precisely in the areas that lifestyle magazines focus on most. There is not much point sharing trendy restaurant tips when bars and restaurants are closed, talking about great shops when

shopping has become a matter of bare necessity, or giving your readers exotic travel reports to dream of when the aeroplanes are stuck on the ground. Despite all these limitations, the lifestyle magazines still managed to keep their readers interested. More than ever before, in fact. Four editors-in-chief tell us all about it.



© Frank Toussaint

Journalism



Eva Van Driessche, Flair

'It's all about self love'

As she looks back on 2020, the editor-in-chief of *Flair*, Eva Van Driessche, feels positive about her magazine. 'We've had a good year. The repositioning and restyling of the magazine that we had started on before the coronavirus crisis really energised us', Van Driessche says. Particularly in the first lockdown, the number of digital readers rose sharply, with 30 per cent more visitors to the website. 'Because we had just started registering our website visitors at that point, we achieved our goals far more quickly than we expected. People were clearly coming to us for inspiration.'

Nonetheless, it was also a big challenge for *Flair* to inject readers with the me-time they desperately needed. 'We target the young audience who were fed up with the lockdown after a week. Young people want to explore new places the whole time and use our discount campaigns to have fun experiences. So we had to go looking for creative alternatives', Van Driessche says. 'Fortunately we could rely on what must be the fastest-adapting marketing team in history, which transformed all of our

discount campaigns into campaigns that were possible at that moment.'

At times when it wasn't possible to seduce readers with rock-bottom prices for restaurants or hotels, the marketers set up the 'Shop In Uw Kot' (shop from home) campaign (with discounts at local online stores) and a campaign centred on takeaway restaurants. 'We had to keep changing our plans all year long. That required great flexibility and was the biggest struggle of the year.'

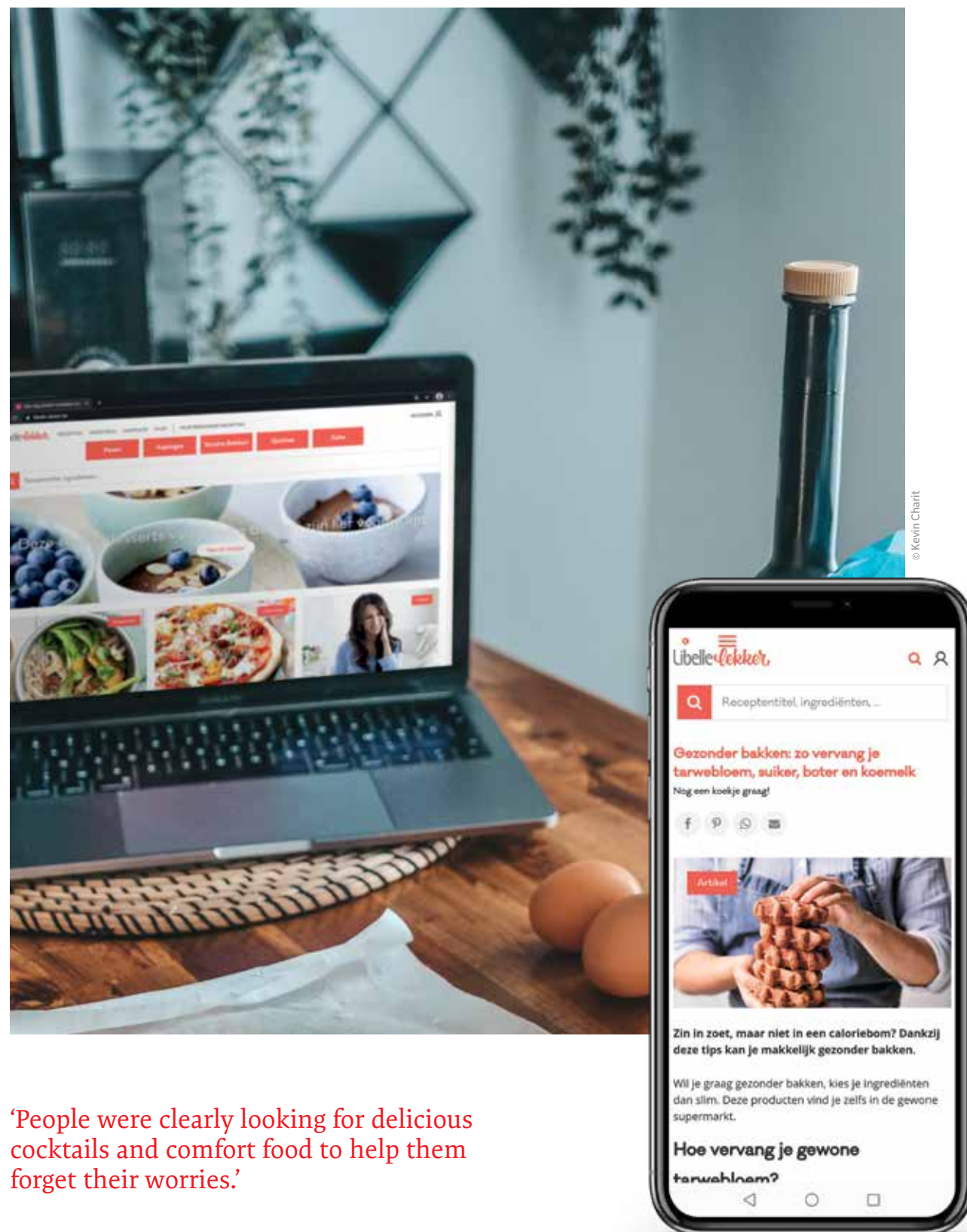
Finding new angles on content was never a problem. 'We made a big point of positivity by focusing on the things that were still possible.' So the magazines were strewn lavishly with city walks, lists of the most Instagrammable places in Belgium, recipes for cocktails or tips for furnishing a home office. Young people's mental health was also a major area of attention.

'Self love is an important mainstay of our repositioning. Even before the coronavirus crisis, young people were struggling with a lot of uncertainty, which led us to pay more attention to mental wellbeing even then. In the

midst of the crisis, we simply carried on with that. At a time when you are entirely left to your own devices, it is even more important to love yourself. And the readers clearly appreciated that message.'



© Studio Dann



'People were clearly looking for delicious cocktails and comfort food to help them forget their worries.'

© Kevin Charit



Karolien Van Dinter, Libelle Lekker

'2020 was the year of mojitos and banana bread'

When the crisis got tough, the Belgians got cooking. In the first few weeks of the lockdown, the *Libelle Lekker* website attracted one million extra visitors. 'We spent the whole year wondering when the visitor numbers would drop back down again, but the upward trend continued throughout the year', says Karolien Van Dinter.

Ultimately, half as many visitors again found their way to the recipe website over the whole of 2020. 'If our website could speak, it would say that 2020 was the year of mojitos and banana bread, because those were the most popular search terms. People were clearly looking for delicious cocktails and comfort food to help them forget their worries.'

The big challenge is to transfer the great online success to the magazine. 'Our sales figures were already growing over the past few years, which is atypical in today's magazine market. What we need to do is convert even more people from the website to a magazine subscription. That isn't an obvious transition to make, so we need to do it by various routes.' In 2020, *Libelle Lekker* committed strongly to registering online visitors. The zone for registered users was also improved: visitors could save recipes and make shopping lists there. 'The

registered visitors are an attractive audience to whom we can sell items from the online store or magazine subscriptions.'

2020 was not an easy year to put magazines together. 'As magazine makers, we are trained in making the best of what we have to create an inspiring lifestyle world no matter what.' Recipes are always developed in small groups – an editor, a food stylist and a photographer – and if you turn those groups into fixed teams, they can continue working together

throughout the crisis quite easily. The reports needed quite a bit more improvisation.

'But the thing that has stuck with me most were the reactions from our readers in our mailbox or on Instagram. Many people told us they had been inspired by our recipes and that this had helped to distract them from the coronavirus crisis. Feedback like that from people who are struggling is really special', Van Dinter says.



© Frank Toussaint



Karen Hellemans, Libelle

'We were needed more than ever before'

The editors of *Libelle* have traditionally always been in close contact with their readers, but it became even more clear in 2020 how close that bond really is. 'We got even more responses than usual from readers who wanted to thank us, for example because we had inspired them to create an alternative Easter celebration, go on a surprising walk in their own neighbourhood, or because they had had a lovely Christmas after all thanks to our ideas. Open-hearted stories also came in every week from readers in difficulty who felt supported by *Libelle*. That was heart-warming. More than ever before, the editorial team had the sense that we were needed', says the editor-in-chief, Karen Hellemans.

2020 was also the year in which *Libelle* celebrated its 75th anniversary, for which a special – socially distanced – double edition was made. The photographer and television programme maker Lieve Blancquaert also made a video featuring letters from readers. 'It still gives me goose bumps to think about the story of a *Libelle* subscriber who had lost three children, but still kept a toy horse made of fabric that she had made herself many years ago from a pattern in *Libelle* in memory of them. That sums

up everything we stand for.'

As well as the 75th anniversary, the Christmas editions were a highlight for Hellemans. 'Because of the coronavirus situation, we even doubted whether we should really make a big thing of Christmas like we do in other years, because Christmas parties the way they used to be were impossible. At the

same time, though, we realised that everyone needed a warm, Christmassy feeling more than ever, and that they were looking for inspiration to have a fun Christmas celebration within the limits of what was possible. It was an incredible feeling to bring the inspiration and illumination that so many readers needed during such a difficult period.'



© Studio Dann

An Brouckmans, Feeling/GAEL

'Challenging to go back to basics'

In organisational terms, the editorial team of *Feeling/GAEL* never got into difficulties over the past year. 'Of course it's more fun to brainstorm together. But we can put an edition together from anywhere, completely digitally. Moreover, our staff were used to working from home, so the production process was never in jeopardy', says the editor-in-chief, An Brouckmans.

The real challenge lay in the content. Travel is an important mainstay of *Feeling* and each edition contains at least one dream holiday, often on a different continent. There wasn't much point to that last year because we were only allowed to travel within our own country. 'Based on what was still possible, we still managed to come up with a thousand and one perspectives that were relevant to our readers. We covered pretty much every possible form of holiday in Belgium. That was a big challenge, but a really fun one. The challenge for us as magazine makers was to go back to basics and come up with new angles. That kept us on our toes and resulted in exciting editions despite the difficult circumstances. It wasn't just the sales figures that skyrocketed: digital visitor numbers peaked as well. Our special report on

staycations during the summer generated a record number of registered visitors.'

More than ever, articles appeared in response to the many challenges facing mental health. So there were features on all the people who were missing human touch, on the lack of social contact and on relationships under pressure. 'Magazine makers have to present the subjects that matter to people, the ones consumers really need at that moment.'

All the same, the editions that stood out for Brouckmans over the past year were precisely the ones that were not about the coronavirus. For example, there was an edition linked to international women's day in which the editors put together an imaginary government consisting entirely of women. And there was the one about the Black Lives Matter movement, with the editor of every column turning a critical eye on her own relationship with racism. 'But clearly we're not a medium that publishes hard news. We're quite happy to leave the facts and figures to our colleagues. Our main aim is to offer our readers inspiration to relax, enjoy life and experience personal growth. That is our most important mission, whatever the circumstances.'



© RF

Editors in lockdown

‘We are a family who cares for each other. Readers feel that too’

The pandemic also thoroughly shook up the editorial teams’ working methods. How do you continue to inspire each other? What do you do when problems emerge? And how do you take care of each other? Trust turns out to be crucial.

Last year, making a magazine was nothing like the way it usually is, with editorial teams that suddenly found themselves working from individual home offices. ‘It really has become clear how strong the editorial team is, and how well attuned we all are to each other, irrespective of the location we are working from. That didn’t come as a surprise, but it was greatly reassuring’, says the editor-in-chief of *Libelle*, Karen Hellemans.

Creative dynamic

Certain things suddenly went more smoothly when the editors were working from home, such as the weekly discussion about the cover. ‘All of us used to gather around the same computer screen, which was always a nice, social occasion. Now we all look at the same cover on our own screens, and actually that is a lot more efficient. The same applies to other meetings. Page discussions are generally also more efficient when we have them digitally.’

At the same time, however, the coronavirus period has exposed the limitations of virtual tools. ‘I’ve missed the creative dynamic

more than anything. I don’t believe in brainstorming on Zoom. The best ideas often emerge from the little conversations you have before a meeting starts. Those don’t happen at a virtual meeting, so the discussions are shorter and more streamlined. That means you miss a lot of stimuli; it’s harder to pick up each other’s ideas and ultimately inspire each other.’ That is precisely why the editors chose to hold a lot of brainstorming sessions in physical form after all, obviously to the extent that the rules allowed them to do so and with a smaller number of team members if necessary.

Leadership

The past year was a big challenge for leaders as well. How do you keep everyone involved when everyone is working on their own at home? And how do you keep your finger on the pulse? ‘I was already used to putting a lot of trust in my teams, so I didn’t need to change much about my leadership style. But it certainly isn’t easy when almost all your communication is on screen, simply because you get less input.’



© Frank Toussaint

‘It became clear how well attuned the editors were to each other. That didn’t come as a surprise, but it was greatly reassuring.’

‘When I used to walk into the editorial offices, I would feel the vibe on the shop floor from the very first step I took. You immediately notice whether people are tense, and you can respond to that quickly as a leader. I find that more difficult to detect from behind a screen. It really helps a lot if the core team know each other well and there is an atmosphere of great trust. That is crucial.’

Team walks

To avoid losing the connection between staff members, *Libelle* organised team walks last year as well as the many team meetings. ‘That was an opportunity to really catch up on things. It was a great way to find out whether there were issues and where I needed to step in. There was also an e-mail for all the editors each week that contained both an update on the coronavirus measures and fun facts (like the people

whose birthday it was that week). That mail acted as an “editors’ newsletter” and helped to maintain a positive atmosphere in spite of the physical distance. In addition, we organised an online Christmas bingo as an alternative to our Christmas drinks, and of course there were all the efforts that HR put in with the online fun@work activities and our “Insight” magazine that was sent to staff at home.’

‘Let’s be honest: the things that were already going well kept going well throughout the coronavirus crisis. But things that were a mess didn’t get any better in the heat of the crisis. That applies at both organisational and personal level. So our teams deserve a real feather in their caps, because everyone kept a constant eye out for anyone who was struggling. In that sense, we are a family who care for each other the whole time. And I am convinced that those bonds are inevitably reflected in the magazines we make.’ ■

Digital communities

When readers become friends

The readers of *Libelle* have been connecting on social media over the past few years. ‘The ‘*Libelle Vriendinnen*’ (*Libelle* Friends) tool brings them back under our auspices’, says the digital marketing manager of the magazines, Carl Van den Hove. ‘Even though they were mainly reaching out to each other digitally last year, they can’t wait to meet up physically again.’

‘There is a real community behind *Libelle*. Readers write letters to the editors, connect on social media and arrange to meet up, you name it. For them, *Libelle* is the one friend with whom they can talk about their daily life, a friend who gives them energy and inspiration’, Carl Van den Hove tells us. His team supports the magazines’ brand managers with their digital campaigns.

That community feeling, combined with the inspiring content the magazine offers, ensure that *Libelle* represents quality and reliability to its readers. ‘What is more, the pandemic has meant that everyone has been looking for inspiration for their home and garden, even more than at other times.’

‘*Libelle Vriendinnen* is a tool we have developed to help them connect to *Libelle* and other friends of *Libelle*.’ There are already many groups where *Libelle* readers meet each other and interact, such as walks in a given city, amateur cooks to make jam, etc. ‘It is often about exchanging tips and tricks, sometimes offering a solution to a problem.’

Gifts and offers

‘*Libelle Vriendinnen* was a resounding success right from the start. We started in January with 3,000 members; by the end of the year that number had grown to 18,000. They come together in about 200 small clubs of like-minded people. Some of the clubs only have five members, others a few hundred, but they all have *Libelle* in common. We bring them back home, as it were. That has benefits both for them and for us. To quote another figure, we have noticed that sales of subscriptions were

twice as high as average among the registered *Libelle Vriendinnen*.’

‘We noticed that commercial gain put some readers off a bit, although that is not our primary aim. We want to bring them together and stimulate interaction between them and with us. Obviously it’s beneficial to us if readers register and we can have access to that data. It enables us to link advertisers to the right target

group more accurately. But it also enables us to reward them, with gifts or special offers, for example. Take the 50 free photos on the summer cards platform that *Libelle Vriendinnen* were given as an extra gift if they sent someone a digital postcard’.

Libelle Vriendinnen is a digital initiative with which Roularta brings its readers together and facilitates interaction between them. It led organically to an editorial extension. ‘The topics that *Libelle Vriendinnen* go for are a source of inspiration for the journalists. They show very tangibly what interests the readers. The editors can challenge them too. You can inspire readers

to use less sugar and exercise more, for example by walking 50,000 km together. Or why not hold a competition to see who can make the nicest advent calendar? Or how many plants they can sell for Kom op tegen Kanker, a cancer charity?’

Forward-looking

‘Incidentally, we have found that the best way to reward our readers is to include their name in the printed magazine with a photo. Especially during the pandemic, we have noticed that readers cherish their paper magazines even more than before as a moment of me-time when

they can disconnect from digital meetings for a while. In any case, the intention is to integrate the *Libelle Vriendinnen* more throughout all our communication with the readers. That includes the new website that is on its way and our social media channels. I should add that the *Libelle Vriendinnen* are often a little younger than our average readers, generally between 30 and 45 years old. Of course, though, that is a nice advantage when it comes to making our brand more youthful. The *Libelle Vriendinnen* are here to say, even when the pandemic is over. They absolutely can’t wait to meet up physically as well as virtually.’

‘There are almost infinite topics for setting up a new club. All we ask of participants is that they stick to a code of conduct and that the club topic fits in with the values of the brand, which goes without saying’, says Van den Hove. Roularta will soon be launching *Generation F* as well, the platform for the *Flair* Friends, you might say. And in time there might be platforms for our other titles as well. ‘I certainly think that it’s a possibility for the readers of *Knack*, *Trends* and *Sportmagazine*. It would enable entrepreneurs to network or exchange business ideas. Or it could be a digital response to all the events that cannot be held for the time being.’ ■

‘The topics that *Libelle Vriendinnen* go for are a source of inspiration for the journalists. They show very tangibly what interests the readers. The editors can challenge them too.’

Carl Van den Hove, digital marketing manager for magazines Roularta



© Sincerely Media

Friends

Subscriptions after the Roularta app

The digital app for the Roularta brands

The Roularta app gives readers a rich selection of magazines at their fingertips at any time. The new platform highlights the different brands separately. The whole family can create a profile at the same time, with each family member being offered the reading material they are interested in, whatever magazine it comes from. 'This will enable us to connect better with our readers and increase the number of subscriptions sold even more', explains Nele Baeyens.



Digital

© Frank Toussaint

Nele Baeyens, Director Marketing Magazinebrands & Digital Brand Innovation Roularta

In 2020, the year of the coronavirus pandemic, magazines and strong media brands proved their attractiveness once again. With everyone at home in lockdown, we went looking en masse for reliable sources of news and connected with our family and friends digitally. 'People made intensive use of the *Knack* and *Trends* websites and podcasts. Encouraged by *Libelle*, 63,000 readers sent their mum a card on Mother's Day. Those are huge figures, proving that Roularta has a strong portfolio of brands', says Nele Baeyens, who has been Director Marketing Magazinebrands & Digital Brand Innovation since 2019.

During the lull caused by the pandemic, IT experts and marketers worked together to create the Roularta app, the continuation of the 'New Deal' that Roularta launched in 2019. 'In the long run, you will be able to read all Roularta's titles in one app, ranging from the combination of *Knack*, *Trends* and *Sportmagazine* to *De Krant van West-Vlaanderen* or *Libelle* and *Plus*, *Feeling* and *Flair*. We have deliberately chosen to play out each brand strongly and to keep each one separate from the others. The

bond these readers have with their brand is still enormous, and we will keep that specificity at any cost. What is more, readers can consult all the content of the magazines and the website in the app. To read the articles from the magazines and the +articles, you obviously need to be a subscriber, because otherwise you come up against the paywall.'

Metamorphosis for the websites

For readers, the app represents a thorough update of the reading experience. But it is more than that. 'You can also make profiles for the other members of your family, the way you do on Netflix. Everyone can read the content that interests them, from the economic news in *Trends* to the articles about cooking in *Libelle*. So as a reader, you get a very targeted, personalised offering that is based on your subscriptions and preferences. On top of all that, you get automated suggestions based on what you read.'

'Furthermore, we can use this data to offer readers the subscriptions they are really

interested in. We are convinced that this will enable us to increase the number of subscriptions even further. Roularta has built up a great tradition of this over the course of its history; now we're adding a hefty digital accelerator.'

'The prototype of the Roularta app is ready. The plan now is to start it up in the spring of 2021, focusing on reader comfort across the entire digital package included in the subscription to any of our news magazines. A subscription gives digital access to the six Belgian news magazines *Knack*, *Trends*, *Sport/Voetbal* magazine and *Le Vif*, *Trends-Tendances* and *Sport/Foot Magazine*. The new Roularta app makes it possible to read the digital version of all those magazines and all the content of their

websites directly, on a digital device.

The same Roularta app also immediately gives you direct digital access to the other big brands *Libelle*, *Plus*, *Flair* and *Feeling*. In the long run, we are going to put absolutely all Roularta's content on the platform, including publications like *De Zondag* and *De Krant van West-Vlaanderen*, for example. The websites will also be completely metamorphosed, ensuring that every brand is individually showcased.'

Employer branding

Why did you go for the name Roularta app? 'Well, we thought about giving it a more neutral name for a long time, but ultimately

we kept coming back to Roularta. We will be linking the launch of this app to a rebranding of the group brand. That could help recruit new profiles. First and foremost, we will continue to play on our strong brands to welcome the reader to the app.'

'Roularta has an enormously rich variety of brands in its portfolio. We have a wider range than any other Belgian media group, from news to lifestyle, young to old. Every reader finds something they enjoy with us, and every advertiser can reach their target group. We deliberately always start with our brands and their connection with the readers.' ■

'As a reader, you get a very targeted, personalised offering that is based on your subscriptions and preferences, and you get automated suggestions based on what you read.'

‘Over the past year we have seen once again how strong and essential the over-50s are in our society.’

Plus Magazine

Informing and inspiring the over-50s

Last year Roularta became the 100% shareholder of *Plus Magazine*. In the same year, the coronavirus presented us with several editorial challenges.

The age group over fifty is highly diverse in both their professional and private lives. They also have a lot of questions. *Plus Magazine* is aimed at that target group and based on five pillars: health, law and money, society, leisure and lifestyle. ‘With every possible topic we ask ourselves: is that item interesting, useful and inspiring for someone over fifty?’ says the editorial director, Anne Vanderdonckt. ‘Other newspapers and magazines are starting to write more about topics of interest to the over-50s. But *Plus Magazine* is still the only one that looks at things from their perspective.’

‘The over-50s are a steadily growing group; they are increasingly educated and becoming more critical. Unfortunately, the image of the over-50s still does not always correspond to reality. It is very important for *Plus Magazine*

to refute those prejudices. Take Claudia Schiffer and Barack Obama: they are both at least 50 and 60 but still very active. It is important for *Plus Magazine* to stay in that mindset at all times in terms of content and design.’

Expertise and pleasurable reading

Plus Magazine profiles itself as an expert. Its aim is to offer a response to all the questions that over-50s ask themselves. ‘We want to make our readers’ lives easier by providing comprehensible, concrete information about their health, money and rights, their mental wellbeing, but also about their holidays and need for culture’, says the editorial director, sketching the magazine’s purpose. ‘Incidentally,

we’ve been doing this since 1988, long before solution-focused journalism was a fashionable concept. We also simply want to offer our target group the pleasurable reading they need every month, with positive, encouraging articles and photos.’

Current topics such as the new inheritance law, the latest measures and debates surrounding pensions and the coronavirus are unmissable in *Plus Magazine*. ‘Because we’re a monthly magazine, we go into that kind of issue in thorough detail’, Anne Vanderdonckt explains. ‘Our editors’ extensive knowledge benefits the depth of our texts. We can also react more quickly on our website with updates and news flashes. But even there, we have no ambition to compete with the traditional news sites. Our web articles are generally reference texts that won’t seem dated by the next day.’

The coronavirus and the editors

2020 was an unusual year. The coronavirus had a significant impact on *Plus Magazine*’s culture pages, among other things. As Anne Vanderdonckt tells us, ‘We constantly had to anticipate lockdowns and reopening dates of museums and exhibition spaces, despite never knowing for sure how the situation would unfold. So we focused more than ever on books, indoor activities, games, podcasts etc., not forgetting our stories about walks in the countryside. The readers appreciate this editorial shift. The same goes for our tourism pages: we interviewed Belgians living abroad every month. Each of them offered a personal, practical and inspiring image of the country they live in now.’

‘We recently published an article in which we illustrated how the over-50s are playing a more important role than ever in the coronavirus crisis. On the one hand they are helping their elderly parents who live at home or are shut away in a nursing home. They do their shopping and bring comfort. On the other hand, they are supporting their own children who are confronted with fears, a loss of income and other financial problems. In the meantime, they are working their way through one video meeting after another at their living room tables. We have seen once again how strong and essential the over-50s are in our society.’

In Roularta’s hands

As its co-founder, Roularta had a 50 per cent share in Senior Publications, *Plus Magazine*’s publisher in Belgium since it began in 1988. The other half belonged to the French media group Bayard Presse. In March 2020, Roularta took over those shares, making it the 100 per cent shareholder in the magazine. This transaction created new opportunities for *Plus Magazine*, especially in terms of marketing, and has led to potential new collaborations.

‘The editor who had been providing our gastronomy pages retired at that exact time. So we went to talk to Karolien Van Dinter, the editor-in-chief of *Libelle Lekker*, who has a whole network in that area. Along with Karolien and her team of specialists, we came up with four new pages for *Plus Magazine*. Obviously you will find recipes there, but there are also all kinds of practical tips, useful kitchen objects, information about restaurants etc. It has turned out to be a very successful collaboration that has given our editorial lifestyle pillar a gigantic boost.’



© Frank Toussaint

Anne Vanderdonckt,
editorial director *Plus Magazine*

Lifestyle & Women

Readers and Audience (print + digital)

Feeling/GAEL

Readers
425,502

Audience
63,428



Plus Magazine fr+nl

Readers
465,962

Audience
119,560



Libelle Lekker + Délices

Readers
701,603

Audience
154,754



Libelle + Femmes d'Aujourd'hui

Readers
1,229,111

Audience
217,029



Sabato fr+nl

Readers
130,000

Total circulation
116,678



Bodytalk fr+nl

Readers
296,460

Audience
144,161



Flair fr+nl

Readers
723,105

Audience
46,988



Knack Weekend + Le Vif Weekend

Readers
582,823

Audience
140,217



Online Reals users, visits, views per month

Feeling/GAEL

322,112

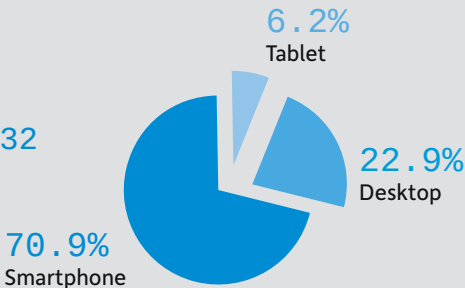
real users

780,332

visits

1,079,432

views



Plus Magazine fr+nl

90,720

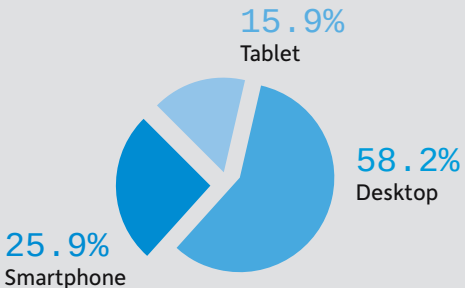
real users

135,694

visits

256,343

views



Libelle Lekker + Délices

1,145,200

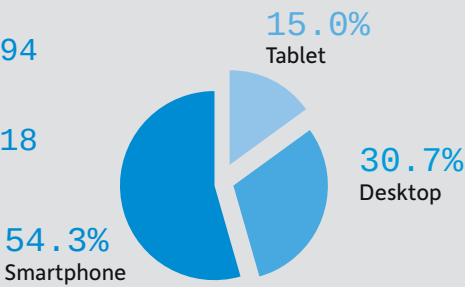
real users

3,906,294

visits

7,734,818

views



Libelle + Femmes d'Aujourd'hui

636,944

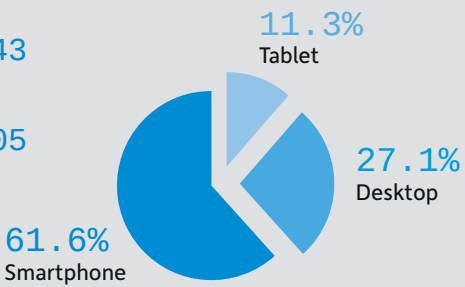
real users

1,599,443

visits

2,762,205

views



Flair fr+nl

1,229,172

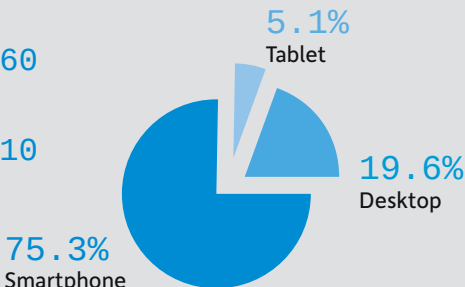
real users

3,979,360

visits

5,380,710

views



Knack Weekend + Le Vif Weekend

235,452

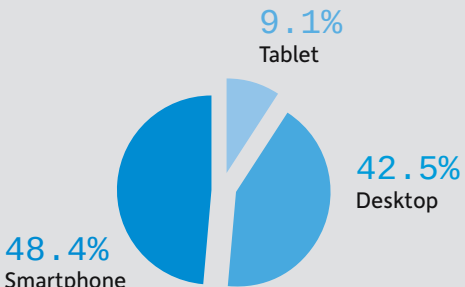
real users

530,141

visits

815,934

views





Correct information to suit everyone's needs in West Flanders

De Krant van West-Vlaanderen serves the large community of West Flemish people. The editorial team is focusing more than ever on bringing people together. 'After all, what we want most during a pandemic is to share emotions.'

With a good 405,000 readers, *De Krant van West-Vlaanderen* is a household name. The focal point is the provincial newspaper that appears every Friday. It is supplemented with one of the five local editions that vary from region to region and with the lifestyle and entertainment magazine KW Weekend. 'Besides the paper version there is also a digital section', says the general director, Stefaan Vermeersch. 'We offer non-stop reporting and commentary on the news in the region on our website KW.be. Twice a day, we also send out 120,000 newsletters with targeted updates.'

'Our local reporting is based on three pillars', adds the editorial director, Pascal Kerkhove. We focus on family news. We home in on clubs and associations, because after all they are the very heart of every community. Last but not least, we pay great attention to local politics. Unlike the national newspapers, we report on the situation in the 64 towns and

villages in our province, and on the impact on every reader's life. That is a challenge, because West Flanders is a close-knit community of 1.2 million people.'

'Those emotional bonds were clear, for example, from the reactions to an article about a mother of three children who died in an accident', says Stefaan Vermeersch, by way of an illustration. 'We kept our distance from the sensational press that immediately began to talk about the father's share of the blame, because point-scoring is the greatest threat to journalism. We opted to let the father tell the story from his own point of view in our newspaper. That article was read more than 300,000 times. Everything is open for discussion as long as it is done in a calm and appropriate manner.'

Encouragement and support

2020 was an unusual year for the editors that resulted in special coronavirus editions. As Stefaan Vermeersch explains, 'We spent ten weeks covering all kinds of topics within the issue, such as youth, humour and care. We distributed the newspapers for free in all the hospitals in the province as a way of offering the patients encouragement and support. After all, our aim is to stay as close as possible to West Flemish people. In contrast to our habit in other years,



Stefaan Vermeersch, general director
De Krant van West-Vlaanderen

by the way, our editors did not take a summer break this year. We kept on working to keep all our readers as well informed as possible during the crisis.'

'We take care only to spread correct information about the coronavirus', says Pascal Kerkhove. 'We'd rather double-check the facts than be the fastest. We combine that accurate reporting with a wider journalistic viewpoint. In that way, we aim to offer our readers hope and future perspectives as well. In an article about the impact of the coronavirus on young people, for example, we got grandchildren to do drawings for their grandparents. Sharing emotions: that's what it's all about. Even in a global crisis, a regional newspaper can make the difference by doing things like that.' Stefaan Vermeersch's mother is 84 and checks the coronavirus news in her son's newspaper everyday. He claims that that is a perfect illustration of the importance of regional journalism. 'All the national newspapers present more or less the same news. At most, they put their own emphasis on a few areas of their choice', confirms Pascal Kerkhove. 'But what is going on in my town or village? That is what West Flemish people want to know. Whether it's the coronavirus politics or the introduction of 30 km/h speed limits: our editors distil all this information into something relevant to West Flemish people.'

Hybrid formula

De Krant van West-Vlaanderen is a hybrid platform: paper (with a digital version) on Friday and digital every day of the week, 24 hours a day. 'Print and online are complementary', Kerkhove believes. 'Sometimes we start by launching the topic on the website and then develop it in our newspaper. For example, we put a digital map online that you can use to check the popularity of surnames in the region, and then we did interviews in print with people called "Desmet", the most common name. Sometimes we also work precisely the other way around: first on paper, then on the web.'

'All newspapers aim for a hybrid formula, but we have been offering that combination for five years now', Stefaan Vermeersch concludes. 'Our website has been further developed through the years, and last year we thoroughly updated both the layout and the content. That ongoing urge for innovation is key, without losing sight of our focus on the unique DNA of West Flemish people. Incidentally, *De Krant van West-Vlaanderen* will soon be added to the Roularta app: that may lead to even more mobile traffic.'

'Even in a global crisis, a regional newspaper can make the difference.'

Pascal Kerkhove



Pascal Kerkhove, editorial director *De Krant van West-Vlaanderen*

'We aim to offer our readers hope and future perspectives as well as accurate information.'

Stefaan Vermeersch

Roularta Local Media panel discussion

'As a local business, you need a presence everywhere'

Local businesses need to be something of a jack-of-all-trades. Roularta Local Media supports their regional marketing efforts with a comprehensive, updated package of services.



Thijs Naeyaert, Luk Wynants and Barbara Spyckerelle

'A business only needs to buy one ticket to appear on all our channels.'

Barbara Spyckerelle

As a trendsetter and market leader in regional marketing applications, Roularta Local Media supports local businesses in every aspect of their communication. Its many years of experience as a publisher of door-to-door newspapers and magazines, in combination with a thorough knowledge of digital applications, guarantees a 360-degree service. That applies both on paper and online, from concept to publication. Three experts from Roularta Local Media reveal the innovative approach they take at their no-hassle, one-stop shop.

With 1.4 million readers in Flanders and Brussels, *De Zondag* is your most important local medium. How has it evolved through the years?

Barbara Spyckerelle (director of Roularta Recruitment Solutions and Retail East): With 16 regional editions per week, *De Zondag* is indeed our most important newspaper. We use it to make the news on Sundays. In recent years, we have regularly tweaked the brand, although we have always kept it subtle. That way we keep *De Zondag* up-to-date and relevant. Compare it to Coca-Cola's branding strategy, where the brand has been adjusted slightly over time.

Luk Wynants (general director of Roularta Local Media): Last year was *De Zondag*'s twentieth anniversary, but we have shifted the anniversary celebrations to 2021 because of the coronavirus. We are now putting the brand in the spotlight from March to September with several historic events. Besides a special opening and closing edition, we are also adding a new cover and a new logo. Along with the restyling of the content in 2020, this means *De Zondag* has been completely revamped in one year's time.

***De Streekkrant* has been a household name in every region for more than sixty years. That is another door-to-door newspaper that was recently updated.**

Thijs Naeyaert (director of Retail West and Roularta Real Estate): That's right. *De Streekkrant* is put through almost 900,000 letterboxes in Flanders, once a week or once a fortnight depending on the region. It is a paper for and by residents, in which we have recently started focusing on local, editorial content even more than in the past. This content is provided by local authorities in cities, towns and villages and local clubs and associations, for example. We have also improved the quality of the paper. This update is a way to respond even better to the local market.

Roularta targets a predominantly female audience with the lifestyle magazine *Steps*. The monthly paper also has a digital component.

Barbara Spyckerelle: *Steps* is distributed monthly from pick-up points in shops and supermarkets and as a supplement to *Libelle*. The focus is indeed on women, with plenty of attention to fashion, beauty, living, travel and leisure. We also regularly launch thematic editions on luxury, first communions or staycations, for example. Readers can also view the content online at *Steps.be*. Twice a week, the editors also send out a newsletter intended to stimulate traffic to the website.

How important is the combination of paper and online for local advertisers?

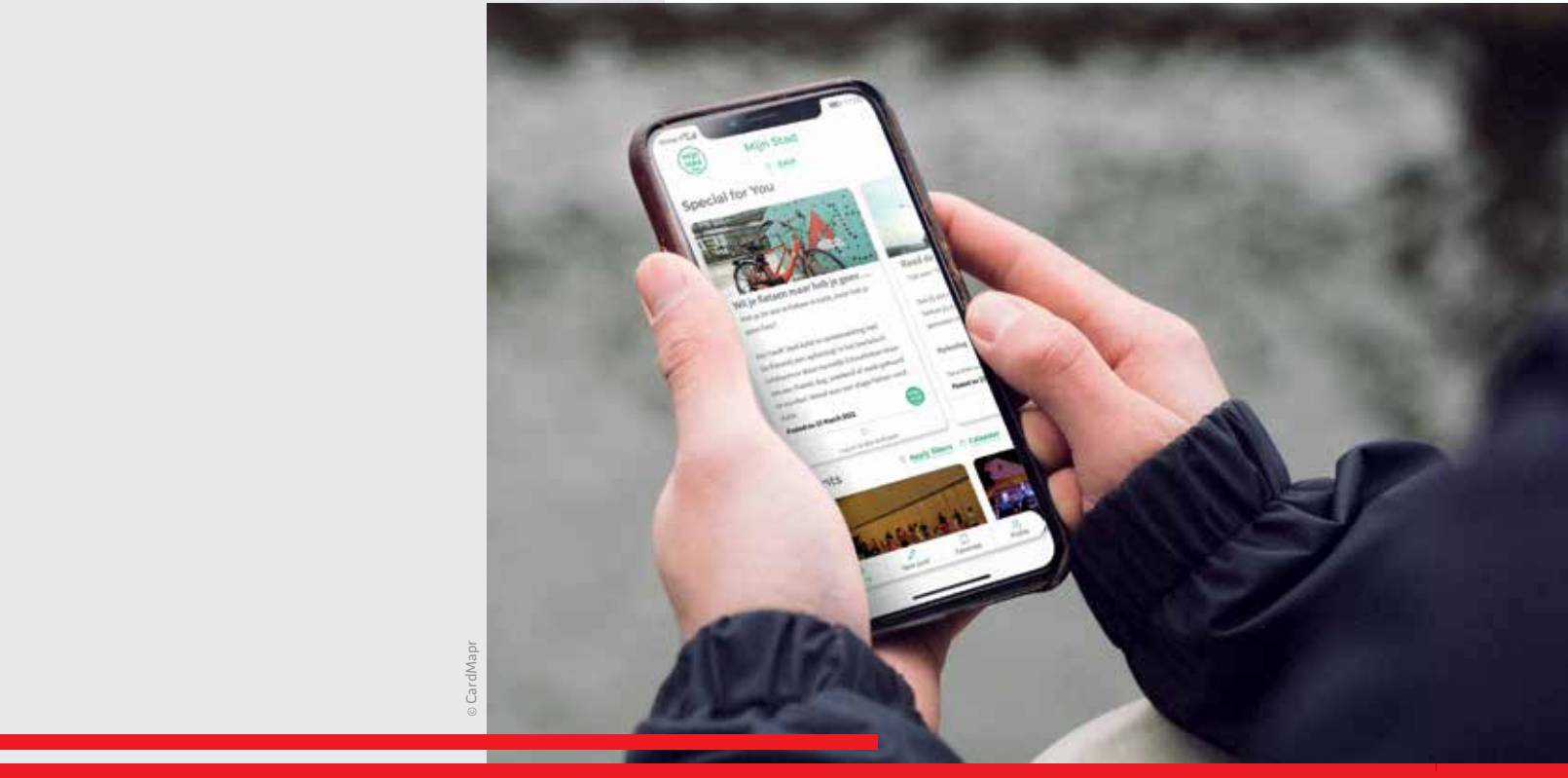
Luk Wynants: As a local business, you need a presence everywhere. That omnichannel approach is crucial to establish or confirm your place in the region. Roularta Local Media offers all kinds of possibilities for combining print adverts with online variants. They reinforce each other. That is also clear from the figures: our advertisers return to us frequently.

Barbara Spyckerelle: It is perfectly possible to advertise locally online on the websites of our national publications, such as *Knack*, *Trends*, *Flair* or *Libelle*. ▶



© Frank Toussaint

Barbara Spyckerelle, director of Roularta Recruitment Solutions and Retail East



© CardMapr

With the Mijn Stad smart-phone app, you always have all the great addresses in your city in your pocket.



Luk Wynants, general director of Roularta Local Media

‘An omnichannel approach is crucial to establish or confirm your place in the region.’

Luk Wynants

Roularta Local Media events

RLM’s 360-degree package also includes communication possibilities for the recruitment and real estate markets. Not only in print and online, but by means of events as well. ‘Twice a year, we organise our Nieuwbouwzondag right across Flanders’, Roularta Real Estate director Thijs Naeyaert tells us by way of an example. ‘That is one Sunday when we open up as many newbuild places as possible to the public. In spite of the coronavirus, October 2020 was the most successful edition for everyone involved. The next Nieuwbouwzondag is planned for the end of April 2021.’

‘We have also been organising our Jobvillages in Flanders for eight years now’, says Barbara Spyckerelle, the director of Recruitment Solutions. ‘There were ten of them planned for 2020, but the coronavirus put a spanner in the works. So we looked into the digital possibilities with our customers. After three successful online events, we are convinced that they are complementary to our live events. The two variants attract very different profiles. So we are going to continue offering both. Besides two online fairs, we have ten physical Jobvillages planned for the autumn of 2021.’

Thijs Naeyaert: Digital geolocation and geotargeting enable advertisers to define their target audience clearly. Our possibilities with our appropriated editorial context are much more refined than those offered by Google. That is an important advantage for businesses that work in a very specific region: it enables them to maximise their focus on their intended audience without wasting advertising budget. Incidentally, we can also segment easily according to readers’ interest.

“Mijn Stad” is a newcomer: a unique platform that informs, connects and activates people with positive, local posts. What exactly does that mean?

Luk Wynants: It might sound strange, but the coronavirus has created something unique, a kind of momentum. The lockdown has made us realise how badly we miss urban leisure – things like shopping, bars and restaurants, culture and nightlife. Mijn Stad is intended to put that local experience firmly back in the spotlight again.

Thijs Naeyaert: We want to inspire people with the best places to be, the most interesting trivia and the latest news in their favourite city. At present, our platform already covers 13 important Flemish towns and cities.

Luk Wynants: You can imagine that concept as a suite of four rooms. There are the Facebook pages, that already had about 200,000 followers collectively when we started out. Then there is the website Mijnstad.be, which also has a B2B section for local businesses. There is the smartphone app, so you can always keep the city in your pocket. And last but not least, there are the digital screens that combine commercial messages with useful information at busy locations in the city.

What are the biggest benefits of Mijn Stad for local advertisers?

Barbara Spyckerelle: We’re a one-stop shop. A business only needs to buy one ticket to appear on all our ‘Mijn Stad channels’.

Thijs Naeyaert: I believe the greatest added value of Mijn Stad is the fact that it is simultaneously digital and very local. Other solutions often have that to a far lesser extent: for

example, their regional focus is no more specific than an area such as a province. An extra benefit is the combination of push and pull marketing.

The digital screens are one of the four pillars of that marketing strategy. How important are they?

Luk Wynants: The Mijn Stad TV screens offer all kinds of communication opportunities. We have already installed about 300 large screens in sandwich bars, newsagents, in short, the places where people often stand in line. Their presence and visibility have met with a very positive reception from consumers, businesses and advertisers.

Thijs Naeyaert: Our local salespeople seek out attractive locations themselves. But we are already getting spontaneous requests from local businesspeople who have seen one of our screens in another shop. After all, they can use half of the broadcasting time for their own messages. ■

‘We are focusing even more on local, editorial content than before.’

Thijs Naeyaert



© Frank Toussaint

Thijs Naeyaert, director of Retail West and Roularta Real Estate

Innovating range of services

Classified ads platforms are evolving fast

Roularta has shares in Gocar.be and Immovlan.be. Both online platforms are committing more than ever to innovation and digitisation. The focus on an optimal user experience is always key.

The coronavirus crisis meant that 20 to 25 per cent fewer new cars were sold in this country last year. The second-hand market remained relatively stable, however. Private individuals and professionals can find a good 60,000 ads for new and second-hand cars on Gocar.be. Moreover, the online platform that absorbed Autovlan.be in 2019 welcomes more than 100,000 visitors every day.

‘Our website is constantly evolving with a view to an even better user experience’, says the Head Digital Advisor, Wim Moyson. ‘For example, we recently introduced the option for users to save their favourite cars in their personal profile. Then they receive notifications about price changes, among other things. This also means that dealers can approach them proactively with attractive offers or alternatives. That ultimately leads to more conversions.’

‘It recently became possible to compare cars with each other on Gocar.be as well. A leasing category has been added, and we have integrated handy extras such as up-to-date information on the weather and traffic. All these innovations are part of a clear long-term vision in which we are evolving towards a genuine mobility platform.’

Response to the motor show

At the recent virtual motor show, Gocar.be launched the Car Festival platform in partnership with various importers. ‘Interested parties can use it to obtain information, book test drives and request quotes for various brands’, Wim Moyson explains. ‘We check every request ourselves and send the validated leads

‘Our innovations are part of a long-term vision in which we are evolving towards a genuine mobility platform.’

Wim Moyson

on to the dealers.’

Roularta created Gocar.be six years ago, along with the Rossel group for French-speaking Belgium. In response to the virtual motor show, the two partners published three editions of the *Gocar.be Krant* together in January. This printed car special by *De Zondag* turned out to be a success. New editions will follow in June and September.

Explosion after the lockdown

Like the car market, the property sector is also feeling the impact of the coronavirus. ‘During the first lockdown, the housing market came to a complete standstill, but that was immediately followed by explosive growth’, explains Eric Spitzer, the CEO of Immovlan.be.

That platform hosts more than 130,000 ads from a good 3,000 real estate professionals and private sellers.

Besides the Roularta and Rossel groups, Belfius also became a shareholder in Immovlan.be last year. ‘This collaboration has pooled our digital expertise’, Spitzer tells us. ‘It has already resulted in a new app that is even handier and more user friendly, which offers potential buyers various ways of finding a property.’

‘Our app currently welcomes about 8,000 visitors per day, but our goal is 35,000. We are making every effort to keep on improving the user experience. Users can set an alarm, for example: then they receive push notifications in real time about new properties that fulfil their criteria. That increases responsiveness. Geolocation also offers all kinds of opportunities.’

190,000 visitors

Even though Immovlan.be is going all-out for a mobile first strategy, the website is still a very important platform, with 190,000 visitors on peak days. ‘Here, too, innovations provide a user experience that gets better and better’, Eric Spitzer says. ‘During the first lockdown, for example, we introduced Cozyvisit. That feature enables potential buyers to visit properties virtually and interactively. It was a smart, fast reaction to a market that was plummeting at that point.’

This interactivity has turned out to be very important. It is why Immovlan.be is working on new functions to make contact between the estate agent and user even easier. What is more, the platform will be integrated in to the Belfius banking app later this year. ■

‘Our app currently welcomes about 8,000 visitors per day, but our goal is 35,000.’

Eric Spitzer



During the first lockdown, the housing market came to a complete standstill, but that was immediately followed by explosive growth.

© Marius Serban

Local



Eric Spitzer, CEO Immovlan.be



Wim Moyson, Head Digital Advisor Gocar.be

© Frank Toussaint

Local media

Readers and Audience (print + digital)

De Zondag

Readers
1,434,292

Audience
494,346



Steps

Readers
388,247

Audience
249,657



Source: CIM; CIM Internet 03/2021 - Monthly average

Online real users, visits, views per month

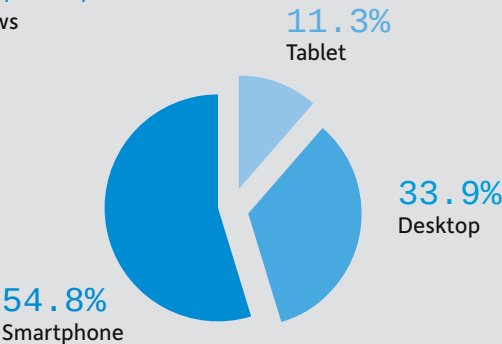
immovlan.be

853,188

real users
3,261,568

visits
12,698,317

views



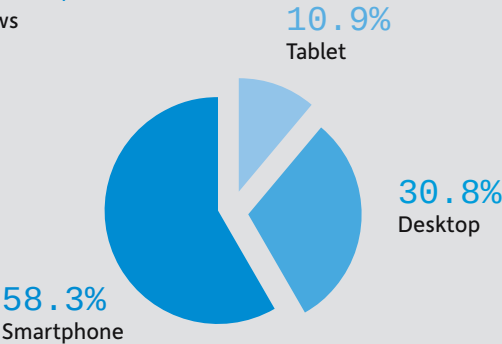
gocar.be

469,952

real users
1,149,972

visits
3,183,998

views



Roularta Healthcare

‘Training in combination with publications’

Along with Information and Communication, Events & Education is an important mainstay of Roularta Healthcare. What is more, the coronavirus crisis gave the entire virtual offering an extra boost.



Jan Bamelis, director
Roularta Healthcare

Besides the publication of medical titles such as *Artsenkrant*, *De Apotheker*, *Belgian Oncology & Hematology News* and *AK Hospitals*, Roularta Healthcare also focuses on training healthcare professionals. ‘Training takes the form of webinars and e-learning courses linked to an accreditation platform that records training credits’, says the director, Jan Bamelis. ‘There are also symposiums and conferences, along with debates in the broad sense of the term.’

‘So we are much more than just a medical publisher. We offer a total package to advertisers and investors as well as to healthcare professionals, our ultimate target group. Incidentally, print and training complement each other well. More than that: events and education are ideal in combination with our publications. After all, every initiative needs to be communicated, both in terms of announcing the event itself and transmitting the valuable content it generates.’

Digital acceleration

The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated demand for digital solutions. ‘Between June and December, we organised about a hundred e-learning courses, e-conferences and other virtual events’, Jan Bamelis recalls. ‘There are

countless virtual possibilities. Our offer ranges from videos on demand to podcasts to interactive live streams.’

‘In the past, experts had to travel all over the world to convey their medical knowledge. The coronavirus has forced them to learn about the digital alternatives. Today we find that they are more convinced than ever of the benefits of these virtual tools and the possibilities they offer.’ Jan Bamelis also believes strongly in a hybrid model. ‘Over time, we want to combine e-events with a select live audience in the studio. That creates a unique, physical VIP experience whilst still reaching a large, online target group.’

Custom recording studios

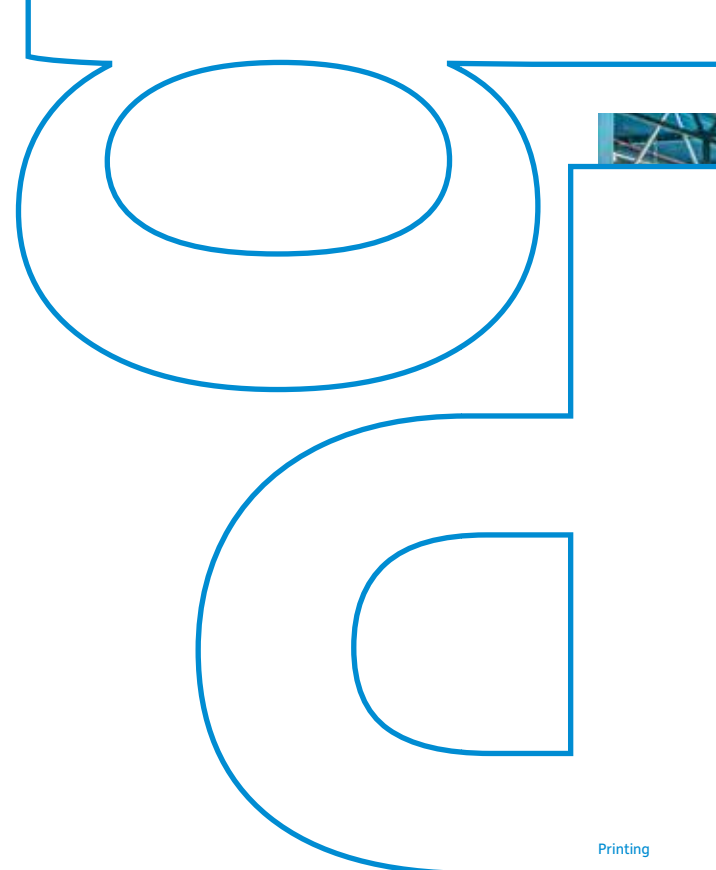
To make its recordings, Roularta Healthcare gave the former *Kanaal Z* studio in Zellik a complete makeover. ‘We can put six people in there’, Jan Bamelis tells us. ‘Since the start of the pandemic, we have also fitted out a large pop-up studio in which various settings are possible, like the one used for the political news show *De Zevende Dag* on the VRT. We also have a third recording studio in a cosy setting where three people can sit on a large chesterfield sofa.’ ■

‘Experts who were forced to use digital alternatives because of the coronavirus are more convinced than ever of the benefits of these virtual tools.’

Report

'I believe in print, 200 per cent'

Steven Renders has been the new frontman of Roularta Printing for the past half year. He's an old hand at figures, but he has now developed an equally great love of letters. 'I believe in print, 200 per cent, otherwise I would never have taken on this challenge.' The main theme of this story is: keep on investing in sustainable, state-of-the-art printing capacity.



Printing



The new press can print 50,000 sections of 64 or even 72 pages each per hour.



Although print has been hard-pressed for years, Roularta is continuing to invest in new, ultramodern printing capacity.

Sections of the most wide-ranging publications imaginable flash past at dizzying speed on various rotary presses, the newest of which is a good 65 metres long. We dodge back and forth between dozens of pallets holding finished magazines. Man-sized rolls of paper are scattered around the printing works like haystacks. 'The new press can print 50,000 sections of 64 or even 72 pages each per hour', says Steven Renders with pride.

Until he came here half a year ago, the 48-year-old general director of Roularta Printing was still a stranger to the world of printing presses. After his degree in Applied Economic Sciences, Renders worked for two years at Ghent University as an assistant to Professor Werner Bruggeman, who was also the president of Vlerick Business School at the time. 'I taught students at Ghent University and Vlerick, coordinated projects and wrote articles. I really loved speaking in front of an audience, but when I was asked to do a doctorate, I left the university.'

The call of the business world was too tempting. Thanks to the same Professor Bruggeman, Renders found himself working for the shelf builder Stow (awarded Business of the Year in 2020). 'I became the financial director, replacing Jos De Vuyst who is still the

company's CEO.' After ten years in finance, Renders worked there for eight more years as the operations manager, doubling the capacity of the factory in Dottignies. He also moved a factory to China and set up a new plant in the Czech Republic. 'In 2012 I got a phone call from Philippe D'heygere, the former owner of Stow. He was looking for a CEO for his new company Lapauw International, a producer of industrial laundry machines.'

Renders was CEO of Lapauw for eight years, and then he got a call from Roularta's head-hunter who offered him the job of general director of the printing works. 'I had no affinity with the graphics sector, but after a thorough analysis I came to the conclusion that Roularta is a financially strong group that invests in the future. It is also a challenge to follow in William Metsu's footsteps: he was a monumental figure here with almost 40 years of experience.'

Renders started on 1 September 2020 and is responsible for Roularta Printing (400 employees). He is also the president of both the Safety Committee and the Works Council for the whole group. 'A magazine is an attractive, tangible and emotional product. People know the titles. And that's something you don't have with industrial washing machines', he laughs. I really love it.'

Invest, invest, invest

Although print has been hard-pressed for years, Roularta is continuing to invest in new – and ultramodern – printing capacity. The 100-million-euro investment programme started in 2005, which was a real milestone. 'That plan was crucial, because it was when the publisher decided to keep the printing works under its own roof. It was a way for the publisher to be sure that high-quality magazines would be printed on time, and for the printing works to be sure of a major internal customer. Because the planning is extremely long term, you also create a futureproof building in which all the machines are immediately put in the right place.'

That investment plan was completed last year with the installation of the most recent rotary press, an investment of 12,5 million euros. 'It has been operational since 1 November and has four times the capacity of the previous press. The new press is already up to full speed. Our capacity has increased significantly in the past fifteen years and even now we are using almost all we have. That is no mean feat in a declining market. Our volumes for magazines are 60 per cent higher than in 2005.' ▶



Steven Renders, General Manager Roularta Printing

© Frank Toussaint

‘A magazine is an attractive, tangible and emotional product. People know the titles. And that’s something you don’t have with industrial washing machines.’



© Frank Toussaint



Roularta goes for new, sustainable technology. Almost everything in the printing works has been updated in the last fifteen years.

When it comes to magazines, Roularta is the biggest player in Belgium. Its own news magazines, such as *Trends*, *Knack*, *Le Vif*, *Sport/ Voetbal* magazine and *Plus Magazine* roll off the printing press here, along with the women’s brands *Libelle/Femmes*, *Flair*, *Feeling*, *Gaël* etc. However Roularta Printing also prints many French luxury magazines (such as *COTE Magazine* and *Idéat*) as well as large amounts of commercial printed material, brochures and catalogues. Its customers come from many countries, with Belgium, the Netherlands and France as its most important markets. Even the European editions of *Bloomberg Businessweek* and *The Economist* roll off the presses here.

Sustainable: on paper and in figures

The decision to make long-term investments in the printing works was well considered, but the quality of those investments is equally important. As Renders explains, ‘We go for new, sustainable technology. Almost everything has

been updated in the last fifteen years: prepress, new rotary presses, and new gatherer-stitchers and magazines with straight backs in the finishing department. Our people are even more important: we make ongoing investments in a multi-skilled, loyal team. I was immensely impressed by the experience the people here have. Many of them have been working here for at least 20 to 25 years. It is thanks to them that I can mainly concentrate on strategy. The good balance between technology, sustainability and the right people in the right place enables us to offer our customers perfect service.’

That focus on sustainability is becoming increasingly important for the customers. ‘We recently published our fourth sustainability report on our website. Sustainability is primarily a question of environmental friendliness. 60 per cent of Europeans still believe that paper consumption leads to a reduction in forests, which is not true. There are now more forests being planted than disappearing. Paper essentially also comes from the “waste” from trees, and you can reuse it up to seven times. Roularta



only uses PEFC paper from paper suppliers who are committed to this kind of sustainable forest management’, Renders says.

This year Roularta also switched to exclusively using inks that are produced in a way that is as environmentally friendly as possible, under the Blue Angel label. ‘We have also obtained our ISO 50001 certificate, which means external parties check every year whether we have achieved our energy performance indicators. When it comes to the production process, the oven is the biggest energy consumer in the rotary press. It has an integrated afterburner which has now reduced gas consumption by 52 per cent for the same number of m². A heat exchanger recuperates the residual heat for heating or cooling. Everyone says they are sustainable, but it’s nice to be able to prove it with hard figures.’

In 2020, around 15 million euros were invested in the printing works, with a few more million in 2021, for example for a new gatherer-stitcher that will be installed in September. ‘We have also invested in a paper-wrapping installation for sending magazines by post, replacing the film around the magazine packs with paper’, Renders tells us. ‘We are the first printing works in the Benelux to have one of those in house. We aim to be pioneers here. I expect they will become obligatory in Europe by 2025. They are more expensive, but you can print the outside with commercial messages. The disadvantage is that paper wrappers are less transparent.’ ▶

‘60 per cent of Europeans still believe that paper consumption leads to a reduction in forests, which is not true.’

Roularta printing works: 5 key figures

35,000 m²

surface area of the printing works

80,000 ha

printed surface area of paper per year

500,000 km

unrolled length of paper per year (= twelve times round the world)

1,100 tons

ink used per year

135,000 m²

print plates per year

‘We still prefer to read in-depth articles in print. What is more: a magazine in your hand is a form of digital detox.’



© Frank Toussaint

Reading and printing after the coronavirus

The coronavirus also had an impact on the printing works. Print runs for subscriptions have increased at Roularta Printing, but the number of pages has decreased due to a declining advertising market. In commercial printing, supplies to the cultural, travel and catering sectors have decreased or dried up entirely. ‘But they will soon be back when the pandemic is over. We’re not at all pessimistic. Professional magazines, niche magazines, luxury magazines and the strong brands will continue to exist. We still prefer to read in-depth articles in print. You remember them better and read them when you

feel like reading them. What is more: a magazine in your hand is a form of digital detox.’

Steven Renders wants to continue the trend of forward-looking thinking and acting at Roularta. ‘I also want to keep our team together: it is very experienced but getting on a bit in years. We will have to continue training new printers ourselves. But our biggest challenge comes from outside: it is important that publishers and advertising agencies continue creating content that we can print, and we have relatively little impact on that. But I believe in print, 200 per cent, otherwise I wouldn’t be here. The future is for strong brands that combine print with extra digital content’, he concludes. ■

‘Everyone says they are sustainable, but it’s nice to be able to prove it with hard figures.’

‘Energy efficiency targets for 2022 are still within reach’

Roularta Printing invested 12.5 million euros in an energy-efficient printing press last year. One year earlier, the printing works in Roeselare obtained an ISO 50001 certificate.

Roularta Printing is the largest offset printing works in the country. It prints newspapers, magazines and catalogues for the domestic and foreign markets, achieving an annual revenue of 60 million euros with its 400 employees. Roularta’s own titles, such as *Knack*, *Trends*, *Libelle* and *Feeling*, account for half of its printing capacity. For the other half, there are printing contracts with major European players for publications including the Belgians DPG and Mediahuis, *The Economist* and *Bloomberg Businessweek* etc.

At the end of 2019, Roularta Printing was the first and only printing works in the country to reach an important milestone: it obtained an ISO 50001 certificate. For an energy-intensive company, that is a remarkable achievement.

‘All the printing processes that happen

here have been covered by this energy certificate since it was awarded’, explains Peter Leroy, production manager at Roularta Printing. ‘Specifically, we are committed to consuming a little less energy every year in our production process. That sounds a bit easier than it is, because we have had a project manager here who has been working on energy efficiency for years. We’ve already picked the low-hanging fruit.’

Roularta has a fairly long history of energy-saving measures. In 2005, the company joined the Flemish government’s audit covenant, which was intended to help meet the Kyoto targets. An energy expert drew up a plan that Roularta implemented. It was then subjected to a Flemish audit.

Paper and electricity

Now the company is raising the bar again with ISO 50001. ‘We need to create a separate energy performance indicator for all processes that require significant energy consumption’, Leroy tells us. ‘Then it is up to us to fulfil those indicators by taking all kinds of smart measures. In terms of working with a printing press, that means for example that we need to print an increasing number of square metres of paper with one kWh of electricity. We currently have a total of 14 processes here for which we have introduced energy performance indicators. Over time, of course, that will enable us to systematically reduce our entire energy consumption.’

It is not easy to obtain an ISO 50001 certificate: Roularta called in an external specialist who took almost two years to complete

the task. ‘Now we have set ourselves new targets for 2022, and we evaluate each year whether we are on track. We set the bar a bit higher every year. That means constant pressure from now on. We have already achieved the big wins in terms of saving energy. In the best case scenario, we will be able to perform a few percentage points better by 2022.’

Impact on production volume

2020 was an abnormal year because of the coronavirus. The pandemic had a major impact on Roularta Printing’s production volume. Peter Leroy explains: ‘The sudden drop meant that we could not improve our energy efficiency last year, even though our absolute energy consumption dipped sharply.’

The decision had already been made the previous year to replace the last old rotary press with a newer model in 2020. The cost was 12.5 million euros. The coronavirus didn’t change that plan at all. The new printing press has been in action since the beginning of October. It can print 50,000 copies per hour, and its capacity represents almost ten per cent of the entire Belgian magazine market.

‘The new rotary press is equipped with the very latest technology, which increases our energy efficiency’, Leroy says. ‘The improvement we hoped for was confirmed as soon as we started up the press. The energy saving is the equivalent of the annual energy consumption of eighty households. Thanks to these great results, we are still well on the way to achieving our 2022 targets.’ ■



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Peter Leroy, production manager Roularta Printing

New CEO for Mediafin

‘Credibility mattered to people more than ever’

Peter Quaghebeur took the helm at Mediafin, the publisher of the business newspapers *De Tijd* and *L’Echo*, in November. He came from the television company SBS. ‘So I moved from entertainment to news, and “news” was exactly what everyone was waiting for during the coronavirus crisis.’ It is still a bit too early for big plans, although readers can certainly expect more from their newspaper in the months to come.

Looking back on 2020 means looking back on the coronavirus crisis. Like all companies, Mediafin sent its staff home to work remotely. ‘It is still extremely quiet, particularly in our commercial and supporting departments’, says the CEO, Peter Quaghebeur, from Mediafin’s offices at Tour & Taxis in Brussels. ‘It was already standard practice here to work from home one day a week, but we are bound to keeping doing it more than that when the coronavirus is over, even though we have just completed a major expansion. Some of our new or renovated office spaces are still waiting for a final lick of paint.’

When the coronavirus reared its head, Mediafin saw the advertising market collapse by 30 or 40 per cent. The company had to cut its costs, among other things by dismissing some of its staff. ‘In the last three months of 2020, the market recovered as if by magic. Fortunately, we don’t get all our income from advertising, so we ended up only just under the intended budget. It’s little short of a miracle.’

Peeking over the wall

‘The readership market has boomed in the past year. People were hungry for reliable news, and credibility is exactly what they find in our newspapers and on our websites. That

confirms the trend that the readership market is becoming more important for Mediafin than the advertising market. The proportion currently stands at 55 versus 45 per cent. Both *De Tijd* and *L’Echo* – representing a total of 70,000 subscribers (53,000 and 17,000 respectively) – have been able to present better subscription figures than ever before. We want to seriously increase that figure over the next three years as well, taking it to 100,000 in an ambitious plan we have baptised Hyperion.’

Quaghebeur does not believe Mediafin will return entirely to the way it was before the coronavirus. ‘Events are really important for this company, but obviously they couldn’t be held physically. We switched to digital initiatives and they proved popular. Our “De Belegger on Tour” (the investor on tour) event usually attracts about 300 people, but the digital version had 3,000 attendees. “Finance Avenue” usually gets 3,000 to 4,000 visitors; this time there were 10,000. In the future, we need to concentrate on hybrid formulas that give both the digital and the physical visitors a positive experience. After all, networking is still essential at business events, of course.’

All that working from home is a necessary evil, Quaghebeur believes. He is looking forward to getting back to normal, especially to stimulate creative processes. ‘For example,

we are working on a complete reshuffle of the newspaper: the first since 2012. On weekdays, we are going to remove the four investment fund pages and replace them with editorial content – although you can still continue to consult the funds online with the Fondsenradar (fund radar), of course. That is an operation that should take about four months, but with all this working from home, it will take eight months. You can’t just test an idea by wandering over to someone’s desk, and you don’t set up a Teams meeting for every little thing either. Or scribble on pages and then hang them on the wall, you can’t do that either.’

Quaghebeur himself immediately announced when he arrived that he would be setting up aspects to work on. They might be focused on all kinds of issues he has stumbled

upon during countless conversations with staff, from HR to IT and from audio to accounting. ‘Obviously I don’t want to completely demolish the wall between the editorial and sales, but there’s no harm in peeping over that wall now and again. Or opening a gateway and looking to see whether you can learn anything from a colleague, even if they are on “the other side”. These aspects to work on have only just been set up, so I don’t know what will emerge from them yet. I do know that people work very much in their own silo here. Everyone sticks to their own territory. People from different departments don’t know each other well enough. I hope to improve that.’

Quaghebeur is not only in favour of collaboration within the company, but also outside its walls. ‘We don’t have to keep on reinventing

the wheel. Sure, Mediafin was a digital pioneer with the first news sites in the country and the first paywall in Europe, but we need to be wary of the law of first-mover disadvantage. The other market players have not been twiddling their thumbs in recent years either. We mustn’t rest on our laurels. And that means we need to look for smart partnerships. They might be with our shareholders’ companies, of course, or with other national or international media companies. If we complement each other in the creation of new initiatives, you get a win-win situation.’

Accelerate digitisation

Mediafin is a small player in the advertising market, between local heavyweights such as DPG and the agency composed of Mediahuis, Telenet/SBS, Proximus/Skynet and Pebble Media. ‘That’s not necessarily a disadvantage. That kind of media agency, which caters to a wide audience, has to compete with the international giants like Facebook and Google. We have our specific niche, working almost B2B rather than B2C. An advertiser can use us for very targeted communication with a specific, wealthy audience, whereas you have to take a broad aim with the major players and hope there won’t be too much waste.

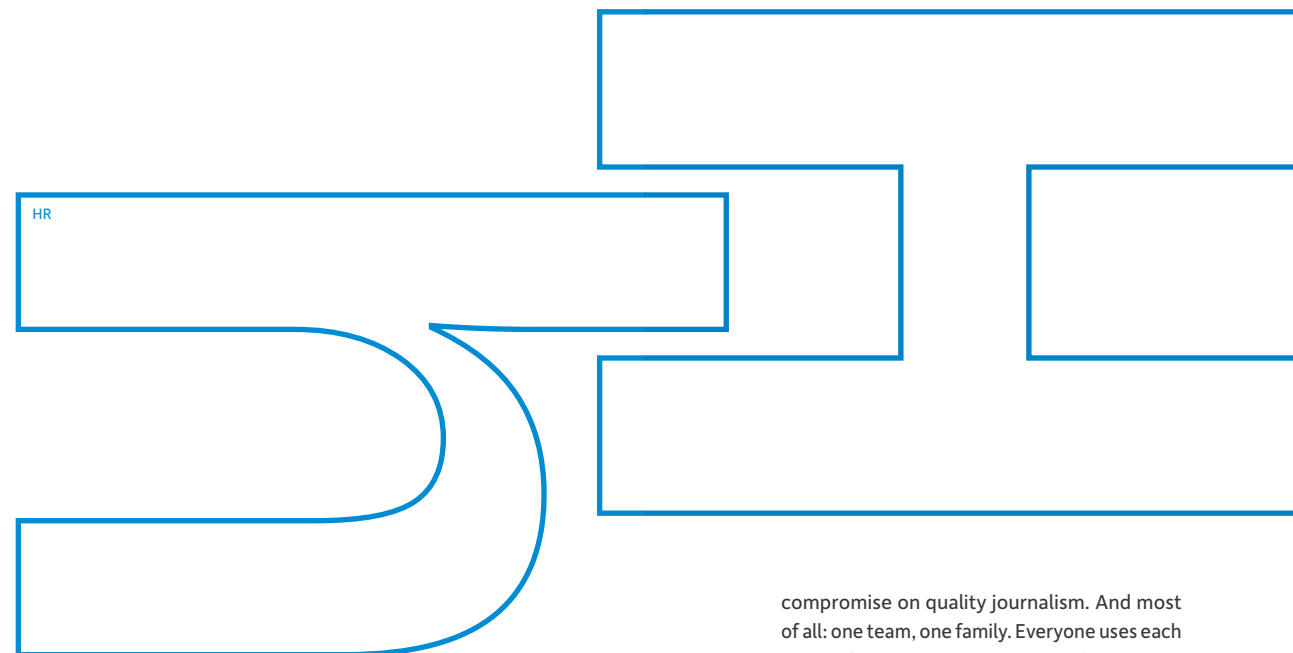
‘By the way, we are also developing editorial initiatives with that in mind, to bring the journalistic content to our readers in a far more targeted way, once again without telling journalists what they have to write. We are developing digital tools to ensure existing content reaches interested readers optimally. Digital subscribers constitute 85 per cent of all growth, even though “paper” subscribers are now stabilising after years of decline. We want to provide these new digital subscribers with even better service. This will be our most important project for the coming years.’ ■



Peter Quaghebeur,
CEO Mediafin

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‘Fortunately, we don’t get all our income from advertising. That’s how we ended up only just under the intended budget. It’s little short of a miracle.’



Column

Keeping going in the age of Zoom

When the coronavirus tsunami crashed over the world in March 2020, we didn't know what had hit us. We had no idea what to expect. Roularta started holding daily crisis meetings with the health and safety advisor and the CEO. Obviously we were concerned about our staff. But you don't want to take drastic decisions about working from home too quickly either. Our publications emerge from brainstorming of creative minds, and you can't just switch to doing that online from one day to the next.

We soon started experimenting with Zoom. Most of our employees said: 'We're keeping calm and carrying on.' But we also sensed that several of them were afraid. It was crucial to reassure those people quickly, because people living in fear tend to freeze up. After a few weeks, Roularta Media Group (RMG) transitioned structurally to working from home.

Except for the printing works, that was, because our magazines don't roll off the rotary presses all by themselves.

I am proud that all our titles continued to appear throughout this pandemic and that the technology has not let us down. Heading an editorial team from home is not easy. People don't like change, they sometimes say. We have witnessed the opposite: we found ourselves on a rollercoaster ride, but each department – from the editorial teams to marketing to the back office – adapted with remarkable speed and no grumbling. We spent 2020 dashing from one virtual meeting to another. Let's be honest: we all missed warm, human contact. Some of our colleagues struggled psychologically and are still struggling now. If you no longer see each other, you are at risk of becoming estranged. That is why we set up a few original initiatives to

connect to our colleagues as much as possible. There were extra webinars on all sorts of topics, for example. There was 'how to increase your immunity' with Professor Eric De Maerteleire but also 'how to make delicious Christmas snacks and cocktails' with Ilse D'Hooge, the head of cookery at *Libelle*. On our internal Facebook page, our staff talked about discovering new hobbies or how they kept a healthy work-life balance. There was also a webinar on mental health. And we gave staff who were struggling with their mental health the opportunity to do a workshop with a clinical psychologist.

Roularta is and remains a family business. We have grown and grown over the years, but our basic values are still the same. First and foremost: a passion for our customers, our readers; the rest follows on from that. Secondly: we go for brand and quality, and we never

compromise on quality journalism. And most of all: one team, one family. Everyone uses each other's first name; there is plenty of team spirit and a warm atmosphere.

In terms of business, our subscription figures grew but the advertising market took some heavy blows. So we did have to use the furlough system, even though that is never an easy thing to tell people. In this unpredictable pandemic, however, it was the best solution. We interviewed job applicants on Zoom and signed employment contracts digitally. For the first time in the history of Roularta, new employees joined us whom we had never met before face to face.

The coronavirus has been at our throats for a good year now, but we need to look to the future. We continued to invest in 2020, for example with our new rotary press that cost 12.5 million euros. There are innovative projects in the pipeline for 2021 as well, including the Roularta app. We want to communicate more under the Roularta banner. We intend to offer our subscribers more within a single app, so we are putting all our energy into a fresh new image so that our 'love brands' make people happy and really eager to have them. We used to say: 'Don't make your mind up before Wednesday, because that's when Knack comes out.' Now we offer non-stop news every day. Many freelancers contribute to creating that news. We want to involve them more in our company as well. We have already taken steps to do so, but there is always room for improvement in everything.

Keep going: that is our motto. That is why we need to keep investing in our staff, even in the age of Zoom, enabling them to grow and flourish.

Katrien De Nolf,
HR Director



'For the first time in the history of Roularta, new employees joined us whom we had never met before face to face.'



Roularta
Media Group

**Annual
Report
2020**

Roularta Media Group
Headquarters

Meiboomlaan 33,
8800 Roeselare
+32 (0)51 266 111

BMC
Editorial department &
advertising management

Raketstraat 50
1130 Brussel
+32 (0)2 702 45 11

Mediafin
De Tijd | L'Echo

Tour & Taxis,
Havenlaan 86C bus 309
1000 Brussel
+32 (0)2 423 16 11