

#Behind the Selfie with... Vanessa Baard

By [Leigh Andrews](#)

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This week, we find out what's really going on behind the selfie with entrepreneur Vanessa Baard, currently director and co-founder of ByDesign Communications.



Morning routine at ByDesign Communications HQ.

1. Where do you live, work and play?

Baard: I'm a Joburg girl through and through. My two favourite times of living in Johannesburg are now, Jacaranda season; and in December when everyone flocks to the seaside. Joburg becomes a treasure chest of interesting places to eat, drink and be merry.

2. What's your claim to fame?

Baard: I pride myself on my relationships, whether it be my personal or professional relationships. This is even more important as an entrepreneur! I focus on building strong relationships with clients, media and influencers. Clients demand and deserve high-quality, experienced communications counsel. There is no substitute for a high-touch service offering in this industry.

3. Describe your career so far.

Baard: I would describe my career as one hell of an adventure! I started as a communications intern in 2001 at an international communications agency, some 15 years later, I left this same company as a director and partner. Let's not forget there was a short break in those 15 years, when I worked at a management consulting firm for about a year. I've always loved communications and the pace of agency life – so returned to the realm of agency life.

I've recently started a new strategic communications firm, [ByDesign Communications](#), with a long-time friend and respected colleague, Kevin Welman. We are a couple of months in and I know this is one of the best decisions I've made – to embrace entrepreneurship!

4. Tell us a few of your favourite things.

Baard: As I'm all about relationships, I love spending time with people – professionally or in my downtime. The cycling bug (both mountain bike and on-road) has bitten and I enjoy time out riding (trying most of the time to stay on the bike and not in the bushes)!

But above all, my two favourite things are my little people. I'm absolutely privileged to have Jessica (7) and Ethan (4) call me mom – #BestJobOnEarth.

5. What do you love about your industry?

Baard: When things go wrong, I love to help clients fix them! Some people shy away from dealing with a crisis, not me. I'm usually first in line to roll up my sleeves – a communication triage nurse of some sorts, maybe.

One of the very first projects I worked on as an intern was the [Ellis Park Stadium Disaster](#), which is recorded as one of South Africa's worst sporting accidents. On 11 April 2001, spectators poured into the Ellis Park Stadium for the local Soweto derby association football match between Kaizer Chiefs and Orlando Pirates. Overcrowding resulted in a stampede where 43 people were crushed to death. I will never forget that event, and I will never forget 43 people who tragically lost their lives that night. My agency at the time was assisting stadium management in handling crisis communication and my role was to send out the media statements (via fax, *nogal*... it's hard to believe email wasn't such a thing back then). There was something that happened in that process that I think rewired by work-DNA.

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

Baard: As an entrepreneur, I'm finding my day is filled with many cappuccinos at coffee shops (which seems to be my new office space), meeting with new contacts and connecting with old colleagues and business networks.

I love that I wake up and no two days in the communications industry are ever the same. It's a fast-paced environment and you have to have the ability to multitask.

An average workday starts with trawling news sites (*Daily Maverick*, *Rand Daily Mail* and *Business Day* are my starting point). Then it's a quick review of what's happening on my social networks (which continues throughout the day, in between meetings and events).

7. What are the tools of your trade?

Baard: Curiosity is at the top of my list!

8. Who is getting it right in your industry?

Baard: As a business owner of a small agency, of course I'm going to say the small agencies are getting it right. But, here's my argument: Clients want to be challengers and often small agencies have fearless leaders. There are many

consultants at big agencies, they win awards, they get paid, they go home. Someone who is brave enough to start a business is more likely to have an edge, and I believe clients want that. Smaller agencies are aggressively seeking more business outside of their geography and expertise and larger agencies are going after smaller opportunities in order to keep growing. Specialists will continue to broaden their service offerings to go after new prospects while generalists will add services to keep up with the evolving needs of their clients.

Why does everyone love craft beer? We love the little guy, the underdog – we want the small guy to win, the ‘homebrewer’ to conquer the global mega brewer. This analogy seems very relevant in the South African media and marketing industry. Over the last five years we’ve seen many global players enter the market by acquiring an established local agency. The market is now experiencing a major influx of smaller owner-run agencies, the new marketing ‘craft brewers’.

9. What are the biggest pain points/challenges/areas for improvement?

Baard: Companies spend millions of rands every year in building a brand or protecting the reputation of their organisation. In recent years, many companies have opted for a myriad of communication agencies from above-the-line, digital, activation and corporate communications – offering a little bit of this and that, rather than having all their communication needs met by just one agency.

But, clients will only realise the value of many agencies through integration – having an impeccable conductor who can pull it all together – a chief communication integration officer of some sorts. The importance of integration does not only refer to different agencies servicing a client. Integration of the marketing and communication departments remains a real problem.

Unfortunately, added to this, there is still a culture amongst agencies of protecting their own turf and fighting for the piece of the pie as opposed to doing great work, even if that means working along-side other agencies, for the best benefit of the client.

10. What are you working on right now?

Baard: I’m working on some really amazing projects at the moment. At the end of October 2016, the ByDesign Communications team worked with Libresse SA and Net#work BBDO to launch [#VaginaVarsity](#). Many girls and women feel uncomfortable and even ashamed to talk about vaginas. Libresse realises that women blush to even say the word ‘vagina’, which leads to shame, silence and possible health problems – and so we wanted to do something about it. Vagina Varsity aims to spark some important discussions around female health in South Africa and be a starting point for girls and women to better understand and love their bodies.

I’m also working on a number of change management and issues management programmes – but those are a little more internally focused, so can’t share too much on these. What’s really exciting to see is how communications is increasingly taking a seat at the CEO table.

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

Baard: Collab (although this is one I try to avoid as much as possible)!

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

Baard: There must be something about water and my ability to problem solve or come up with ideas when surrounded by water. I love swimming and it’s my morning ritual after I drop the kids off at school to try swim a mile. I love the quietness of swimming – time to think. Maybe it’s the rhythmic breathing, or the melody of hearing myself blow bubbles during every stroke. That or the cliché of great ideas in the shower... but hey, that’s sometimes where some creative-goodies come from.

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

Baard: I've been known to introduce tequila, tomato and tobacco to a few people in my lifetime.

14. Are you a technophobe or a technophile?

Baard: Definitely a technophile. My husband often says I should be married to my phone.

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

Baard: Selfies my kids have taken while I'm not looking! And probably way too many emails – I'm an email hoarder! Although I never have unread emails – I can't handle unread emails.

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

Baard: Don't be afraid to fail. If you're not failing, you're not learning. Allon Raiz, CEO of Raizcorp, has a great tweet that goes to his community most Sundays: "Same question as every Sunday: 'What have you tried and failed at this week?' Nothing = Bad #takeashot." As an entrepreneur, I'm finding this thinking even more relevant – embrace change and failure and learn from it.

The second thing for newbies is read, read, read! Pick up a newspaper and read. Don't just check social media feeds for news, but get varying opinion and analysis of what's happening in the industry. Yes, I love consumer magazines... but its perhaps because I've predominantly been financial services/corporate focused for most of my career that I lean towards media outlets such as *Business Day*, *Daily Maverick* and *Rand Daily Mail* for my daily news fix – and varying analysis.

Simple as that. [Click here](#) for more on ByDesign Communications, visit [their website](#), follow ByDesign [on Twitter](#), as well as Baard's [personal account](#). You can also email her at v.baard@bdcomms.co.za or call 082 331 8158.

**Interviewed by [Leigh Andrews](#).*

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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

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