



FUNNY BUSINESS

Evert van der Veer, the head of Comedy Central Africa, knows that humour is big business

Born in 1972 and the son of a Dutch doctor in what was then called Zaïre (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), Evert van der Veer moved back to the Netherlands with his parents when he was three. There he spent his childhood and most of his adult life.

'I studied social psychology but never did anything with it,' he says. 'Then I had a holiday job as a scheduler – those are the guys who put the programmes in order on television – and liked that.'

Thanks to his talent and hard work, Evert was promoted to senior scheduler

and then later to channel manager of a Pan-European art channel. But this position was made redundant, so there weren't any further opportunities. Luckily, a generous severance package left him free to pursue other interests.

'I wasn't attached to anything or anyone, so I travelled for a year,' he says. 'And when I got back to Amsterdam, I still had money left. Another dream I had was to have my own gallery, so I opened one in the city centre. But I got into so much debt that I had to go back to work!'

That's how Evert began his career at Viacom, an American media conglomerate

whose brands include Paramount Pictures, BET, VH1 and more. He began working on The Box, an urban music channel, and rose through the ranks. Later, in his role as acquisition manager, he got to work with brands such as MTV and Comedy Central.

'Viacom is an amazing and transparent company,' he says. 'It's different from other companies I've worked for. If you work hard and you have a goal, you can achieve anything. You can try things sideways – for example, different jobs or other brands – because senior management empowers the people who work for them. You can grow fast.'

THRIVE PERSONALITY

Indeed, as Evert continued to grow in Viacom, he received more responsibility. The company's first launch of Comedy Central outside the United States was in the UK (where it was called Paramount Comedy). They later decided to expand to Germany and rebranded The Box to Comedy Central in the Netherlands.

When this happened, Evert became responsible for programming and new acquisitions for MTV and Comedy Central in Amsterdam. 'Then the territory grew to include Scandinavia and Germany,' he says, 'and I became responsible for the programming and acquisition in all those regions. I realised that what I liked most about the job was launching new channels. So imagine a territory where there is no Comedy Central. You go there, you see what's possible, you talk to the operators, and then you sell the brand. You put a team together, you put the programming schedule together, you acquire programmes, and then it's there. I love that most.'

A few years later, Evert made the move to London. It was there that he became director of entertainment, content and creative (emerging markets) at what was then known as MTV Networks. His job involved working with the vice-president of entertainment to identify and shape the content vision, supervising programming strategies, positioning statements, delivering viewership goals, determining marketing strategies and overseeing budgets.

But at this stage, with him launching channels as places far afield as Russia and South East Asia, he was travelling so much that he was only home for as little as one week a month. And when his wife became pregnant with their second son, Evert decided that it was time to find a place to settle down.

'When you introduce a brand into an emerging market, the last person the local team hires is a brand head,' he says. 'We hadn't done that yet in Africa, so there was an opportunity to take on that position.'

'It's funny, because I remember asking my managing director Alex Okosi, who runs Viacom in Africa, why he thought I could do the job. And he said that if

you want to open a bakery, you should rather start by putting someone in there who knows how to make bread. Then you put someone in there who knows how to run a shop. So, with my programming and acquisition background – knowing how to build a brand on various platforms – he was right.'

More than that, Evert found that the new job gave him a broader set of duties. Instead of only being in charge of content, his duties now encompassed marketing, public relations, digital, programming, acquisitions, scheduling and more. 'It's a great job,' he says. 'Some things just don't feel like work at all. Of course, there are always administrative and reporting parts of the work that are maybe not so nice to do. But with this brand, we do so many fun things.'

As the largest producer of stand-up comedy on our continent, Comedy Central Africa pumps out an incredible wealth of content on a monthly basis. Besides sending local comedians to international festivals and hosting open-mic stand-up competitions, Evert enjoys acquiring new programming for the channel. He says it's more than a little satisfying to see the direct results in the form of ratings the following day, because he's able to play around with the content to make things work and drive those ratings up.

'Above that, the atmosphere and energy in the office is great,' he says. 'People really want to work here. Young adults come to do internships with us, and the staff are motivated. Especially with our brands, for example, the staff will attend parties like the MTV Awards and hang out with each other. It's a great company to be in because people work hard and play hard.'

Still, the long hours can be challenging, especially at a company that Evert describes as 'lean'. With teams that aren't big, how does he handle so much responsibility?

'I just work hard!' he laughs. 'But what keeps me sane is going to the gym every morning for at least an hour. I release a lot of stress in there, so I really need and enjoy that part of my routine.'

Evert also makes sure he balances his work and family life as best he can. So,

COMEDY CENTRAL AFRICA

- Launched on 6 December 2011
- Africa's only 24-hour comedy channel, reaching some 2.4 million viewers each month
- The debut of *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* was the highest rated show on Comedy Central Africa.

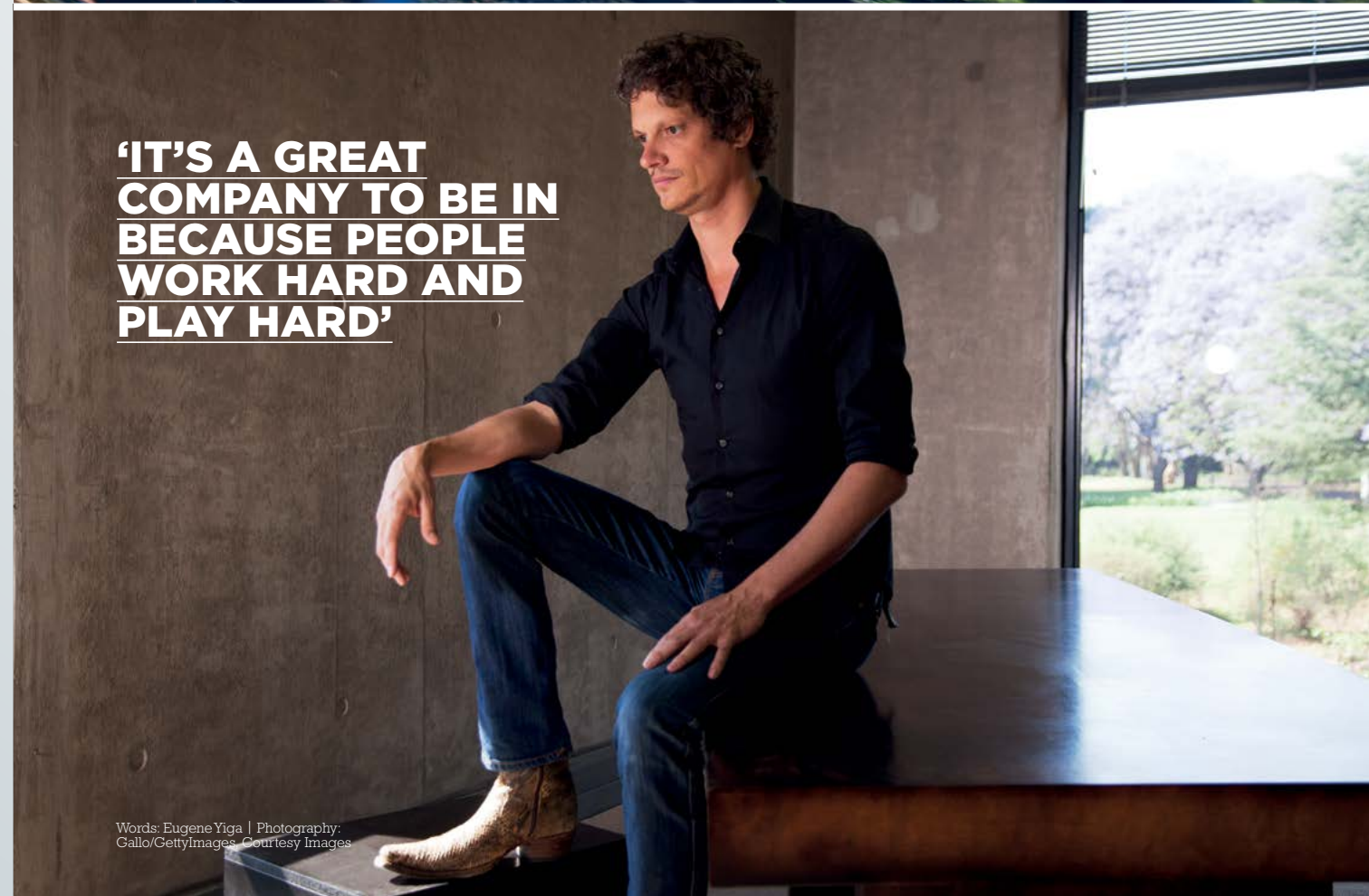
EVERT'S CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- Producing the *Comedy Central Roast of Steve Hofmeyr* in 2012 (featuring Trevor Noah, Anele Mdoda, Casper De Vries, Robert Whitehead, David Kau, Minki van der Westhuizen, Shaleen Surtie Richards and stand-up genius John Vlismas), the first time a roast of such magnitude had been produced outside the United States.
- Creating last November's Comedy Central International Comedy Festival (in partnership with Savanna Premium Cider), which featured comedians from the US including Jeff Ross, Aries Spears and Hannibal Buress, as well as locals Trevor Noah, Chris Forrest and John Vlismas, and Salvado, from Uganda, Churchill, from Kenya, and Nigeria's Basketmouth.

rather than staying late at the office, he's home for dinner at around 6:30 pm. This means he can put his sons to bed – the boys are aged three and eight – between 7:30 and 8 pm. And when that's done, there's time to finish up some work or respond to emails before calling it a day.

'Working in broadcast media, the pace never stops,' he says. 'But I try hard to carve out weekends as non-work time, especially if we have something planned as a family. Yes, I'm always on call, but sometimes I just need to turn my email off, put my phone aside, and not think about work. And sometimes at home I just want to laugh with my wife about some of the hilarious things that our children do. Because without comedy, what is life? It makes everything much more bearable.' **Man**

Watch Comedy Central on DStv (Channel 122) or get online and check out comedycentralafrica.com for a full programming schedule, competitions and more information on your favourite comedy shows.



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