



# Print, progress and

## The 3SMEDIA story

As 3SMEDIA celebrates 50 years in business, and MD Elizabeth Shorten marks a decade at the helm, we look back at the colourful history of the company and its founder, and forward to the fast-changing future.

**“Companies are built from passions, not from business plans,”** says Elizabeth Shorten,

owner and managing director of 3S Media, a print and electronic publishing house that celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary at the end of 2010, while Elizabeth marks ten years as managing director in March 2011.

Her father John Shorten founded the company, formerly Shorten Publications, in 1960. Largely self-educated after he left school, Shorten took one of his first jobs as a library assistant, opening him to an entire world of history and English literature. So avid a reader did he become that he could quote entire verses of the *Aeneid* without pausing for breath, a famous after-dinner pastime in a pre-television era, recalls his daughter Elizabeth. As a young man, he also developed a serious interest in labour

affairs and politics. At the age of 26, and with a campaign run on a shoestring, he contested a parliamentary seat as an Independent Labour candidate, standing against a well-known figure in the United Party, and losing by only a small margin.

His early business involvement was with a number of trade union journals. When being interviewed by the Board to work on the *South African Railways* magazine, he was asked if he spoke Afrikaans. Shorten, who was born in England, replied that he did not, but was perfectly prepared to speak English with an Afrikaans accent.

“That was typical of my father’s sense of humour,” says Elizabeth. “And somehow, he always got away with it.” He was a strong advocate of multiracial trade unions, and was

noted for his far-seeing and provocative editorials. Some of his articles were published in the *Sunday Times*. “People would ask my mother if the security services had come to visit us,” says Elizabeth, “but fortunately, they never did.”

With his remarkable ability to obtain advertising support, Shorten then established his own publishing house. “That’s when all my father’s passions came together,” says Elizabeth, “for politics, history and the written word.” Shorten Publications was born.

His first solo venture was *The Transactions*, a record of the bi-annual conference of the Institute of Municipal Engineering of Southern Africa (IMESA). He then approached them with the idea of publishing a monthly magazine. He called it *IMIESA* (the middle ‘I’ stands for ‘Ingénieur’ and the ‘E’ for ‘Engineer’, acknowledging the then bilingual composition of the profession). Today, *IMIESA* is probably the most successful publication in its industry, and the recipient of a number of awards.

Further magazines followed for SABI, the irrigation institute, and for SAESI, the emergency

one look at his biceps and beat a tactical retreat.”

Shorten was a natural salesman with a style all his own. “He would visit a client with his contract book,” recalls Elizabeth, “and speak about everything except the business at hand. If the client was a United Party supporter, my father would provoke a lively discussion on the policy shortcomings of that party, and argue the case for the Progressives. When they had passed a good half hour in heated debate, my father would suddenly produce the book and ask the client to sign his contract. ‘But I have no more money in the budget,’ the client might object. ‘Then why have you wasted my damn time



ABOVE: Founder John Shorten in Cape Town with his wife Shelley and their four daughters (Elizabeth on left)

OPPOSITE PAGE: The 3S Media team

# PASSION

services institute, of which he was made an honorary member in recognition of the magazine’s positive contribution to the industry. When he died in 1996, firemen from the institute formed an honour guard at his funeral.

“My father was one of the true founders of business-to-business publishing in this country,” says Elizabeth. “He became a larger-than-life character to the industries he served, and to councillors – a heavy-set Churchillian figure with a pronounced fondness for cigars and fine malt whiskey.” Equally well known – if not notorious – was his chauffeur Johannes, an ex-heavyweight boxer fiercely protective of Shorten and his family. “Once,” recalls Elizabeth, “a car stopped at a set of traffic lights well over the pedestrian lines, blocking the way. Making a deliberate statement, my father opened the back door, slid through the car and out of the far side, leaving both doors open. The furious driver was ready for a confrontation when Johannes appeared out of nowhere, rolling up his sleeves. The driver took

talk about politics?’ my father – who loved nothing better than a good political argument – would demand, and the client would be shamed into signing the contract anyway.”

But Shorten’s first love was always the written word. When he could afford sufficient consultants to sell for him, he approached the Cape Town municipality and was officially appointed to write the history of their city and its industries.

“Cape Town became our second home,” Elizabeth reminisces, “particularly Clifton Beach, where our favourite aunt and uncle had an apartment. My father became friendly with other writers who formed a colony there, like Jack Cope, Uys Krieger and Ingrid Jonker. We were always surrounded by people in literature and the arts.” *The Golden Jubilee of Greater Cape Town*



## 50 YEARS AT A GLANCE

- 1960** Shorten Publications was founded.
- 1975** *IMIESA* was launched.
- 1978** *Emergency Services SA* was launched.
- 1980** *SA Irrigation* was launched.
- 1996** John Shorten passed away.
- 1999** *ReSource* was launched.
- 2001** Elizabeth Shorten became Managing Director of Shorten Publications.
- 2003** *Transport World Africa* was purchased.



**2005**  
- *Meetings SA, SA Conference*, [www.saconference.co.za](http://www.saconference.co.za) and [www.hrhighway.co.za](http://www.hrhighway.co.za) were purchased.  
- *Occupational Risk* was launched.  
- Shorten Publications was renamed 3S Media.

**2006**  
- *Water & Sanitation Africa* was launched.  
- *Local Government Supplier* was launched.

**2007**  
*Enterprise Risk* was launched.

**2008**  
*Inside Mining* was launched.

**2008**  
3S Media became the South African representative for [www.miningne.ws](http://www.miningne.ws).



was published in 1963, followed by the even weightier *Johannesburg Saga* in 1970. Both were critically acclaimed, and the latter remains

the most substantial record of the City of Gold ever produced. "Not bad for a man who never got a university degree," says Elizabeth, who, thanks to her father's generous support of his four daughters, has a BA (Hons) in English and French and an MA in English and the Visual Arts.

By then, her mother Shelley was running many aspects of the business. "She somehow managed to do the layout, proofreading and bookkeeping. She even proofread my father's two historical manuscripts, which must have been a massive undertaking. She was always the backbone of the family and the business."

Shelley took over Shorten Publications after her husband's death in 1996, together with her daughter Patricia, who made a significant contribution to the company over many years, including bringing *ReSource* magazine into the stable. In 2001 Elizabeth, who had been living and working in London, returned to take the helm.

Inheriting her father's passion for the written word, Elizabeth started her career as a journalist. "I was used to a very different kind of publishing," Elizabeth says. "I cut my teeth on big consumer magazines like *Woman's Own*."

"Princess Diana was often on our cover, and asked to visit our offices to see a 'normal working day at a magazine'. That was never going to happen. So many flowers were delivered that the place looked like the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, and every stray piece of paper was filed away. But one staff member had forgotten to hide her grapefruit, and had perched it on top of a cupboard. When Her Royal Highness walked in, her eyes zoned straight in on the offending

fruit and she asked, 'Who's on diet?' We didn't know then about her battle with bulimia. She was very sweet and charming to everyone, but she didn't get what she wanted – a taste of normal life – which I thought was rather sad."

It was a glamorous world, but Elizabeth also braved the trenches at Fleet Street, working for *The Daily Mail* and *The Times*. "At the *Mail*, we knew the papers had to be in the vans and out on the street by 10pm," Elizabeth recalls. "We would furiously write a story to deadline, and the editor of our section would often wait till about 7.30, then tear it up and tell us to start again. He knew the pressure he was putting us under because the entire paper still had to be set in hot metal, we had to sub it on stone, and the presses had to roll, all in time for the waiting vans. But our rule was that we never showed any emotion in front of him. Only once we were in the pub with a well-earned drink, his ears must have burned!"

Elizabeth credits this experience with teaching her, as a writer, never to get too attached to her work, but always to accept criticism and change.

She wasn't quite sure what to expect when she moved back to South Africa in 2001 to take the reins at Shorten Publications. "I became immersed in engineering, water, waste management, emergency services – all matters of life and death. It was very challenging and I knew had to get to grips with it pretty fast."

Which is what she proceeded to do. She inherited four publications, and soon set about launching and purchasing others. The stable now boasts 10 print publications, almost all of which have won or been nominated for PICA Awards for publishing excellence and some of which have also gained Mond (now renamed PICA individual) Awards for journalism. This is an astonishing feat in a competitive market.

"We are particularly strong in the engineering, infrastructure development and service delivery sectors," says Elizabeth. "We also cover mining, transport, enterprise-wide and occupational risk, as well as the meetings and events industries." More recently, the company has launched newsletters, five websites with more to come, several corporate supplements, and events for related industries.

## AWARDS

**1999**  
- IMIESA wins a PICA Award

**2001**  
- IMIESA wins a PICA Award  
- IMIESA wins a Highly Commended PICA Award  
- ReSource wins a PICA Award

**2003**  
- ReSource wins a Highly Commended PICA Award  
- Emergency Services SA wins a PICA Award  
- Elizabeth Shorten wins a Mond Journalism Award

**2004**  
- *Transport World Africa* wins a Highly Commended PICA Award  
- ReSource wins a PICA Award  
- SA Irrigation wins a Highly Commended PICA Award  
- Elizabeth Shorten wins a Mond Journalism Award

**2005**  
- IMIESA wins a PICA Award  
- Elizabeth Shorten wins a SAACE Excellence Award as Journalist of the Year

**2006**  
- IMIESA wins a PICA Award

**2008**  
- IMIESA wins a Highly Commended PICA Award

**2010**  
- *Inside Mining* wins a PICA Award  
- *Water & Sanitation Africa* received a PICA nomination  
- *Enterprise Risk* receives a PICA nomination



- *Inside Mining* received a PICA nomination



the Word," quotes Elizabeth, "and – giving due recognition to the image – I believe that's what it still comes down to in the end." 3S

The magazines and their accompanying online products serve unique niche markets, Elizabeth states, and competitors seldom operate in the identical space. "IMIESA goes all the way from local government infrastructure planning and development, the responsibility of the municipal engineer, through consulting engineers, to civil engineering contractors and their suppliers. There is nothing else like it in the market. Likewise, *Enterprise Risk* is South Africa's only business risk and insurance magazine distributed to both broker and consumer. "We like to keep an angle to all our publications that differentiates them from the rest."

Elizabeth has personally won three awards for excellence in journalism. Two were Mond Awards in the industry category, for a 2003 article she wrote for *IMIESA*, and a 2004 article for *Transport World Africa*. She also won the SAACE (now CESA) Excellence Award from the consulting engineering fraternity for Journalist of the Year.

"My father wrote massive history books, and I write novels and film scripts," Elizabeth says. "He was always in B2B publishing, and I started out in consumer. There was a time when I knew more about talking to a princess than a pipe manufacturer, so I felt a real sense of achievement when I won awards for my articles on engineering and transport. I think my father would have been proud of me, had he lived to see what I've done with the company."

It was a difficult decision, in 2005, when she changed the 45-year-old family company name from Shorten Publications to 3S Media. "It's a question of having the vision and courage to acknowledge what the future holds," says Elizabeth. "The Internet had already been in popular use since the 1990s. The writing was on the wall – or rather, it was no longer just on the printed page. Publishers had to adapt to the fact that we needed to deliver content across multiple platforms. We are no longer publishers, but media owners."

The other challenge was to find a name, in a country with 11 official languages, that was neutral and inclusive. After intense brainstorming resulted in a deadlock, Elizabeth said she was looking for something like '3S' – which popped into her mind because the three children in her



Elizabeth Shorten with her husband Colin Jordaan and their children Sebastian, Sandra and Stephen (left to right)

family are called Sandra, Stephen and Sebastian. She wasn't looking to perpetuate a family-style business, but liked the abstract letter and number, and the almost mirror-image shape they make. "Everyone loved it immediately, and could think of nothing better," says Elizabeth. "When something strikes an instant chord, you know you have to go with it. So 3S Media became the brand."

All the three children after whom the company was not quite intentionally named have worked for it at one time or another. Sandra, who has a business science and law degree, became the editor of *Enterprise Risk* and its website, and is currently master-minding the adaptation of a CRM system for the company's specific needs. Stephen worked in sales and marketing, and has now started his own business on the printing side. Sebastian, who has just finished a film and television degree, assisted during holidays in the art and online departments, and may help the company with video programmes for its websites.

Elizabeth's husband Colin Jordaan,

outgoing Director of the South African Civil Aviation Authority and formerly GM: Flight Operations of South African Airways, is the chairman of the Board.

Nonetheless, 3S Media is no longer structured as a family business. The company employs editors who are experts in their fields, and heads

of department with strong track records in publishing. Staff numbers have increased from about four in John Shorten's day to about 38 full-time employees and 10 outsource consultants. It is a significant expansion.

In line with the new name and multi-platform direction, Elizabeth launched newsletters and websites for 3S Media's business communities, and entered into an agreement to represent the international site [www.miningne.ws](http://www.miningne.ws), which has seen a significant growth

in traffic. She built her own web platform with full social media functionality, which is being rolled out to support all 3S Media's print products.

Elizabeth, who is dedicated to serving the media industry, has been a Board Member of the Magazine Publishers Association (MPASA) since 2003, and chaired the PICA Awards for three years.

She was invited to be a panel speaker at the First Media Summit, before the 2010 PICA Awards, on the topic of traditional magazines redefining their businesses into a broader media landscape.

While she believes that 3S Media's print publications will always form the backbone of the company, and are unlikely to disappear any time soon, she also sees a great future for niche titles in the electronic space, without the limits of time and geography.

"We already have access to well-defined communities with similar interests," she says. "Now that we're engaging with them through web,

mobile and social media platforms, the possibilities are limitless."

But as it was for her father, the passion for Elizabeth is not the technology, or the means of delivery, but the message itself, and how it can touch the lives of those it reaches. "In the beginning was

## KEYS TO SUSTAINABLE PUBLISHING SUCCESS

- **Editorial excellence.** Whatever the exciting technological developments, content is still king.
- **Differentiation.** Use the right content for the right platform/means of delivery.
- **Relationships.** Know your clients, and take the time to understand their needs.
- **Consistency.** Deliver what you say you will, when you say you will.
- **Defined target markets.** Understand who you are talking to, and who your advertisers want to reach.
- **Premium brands.** Aim to be the market leader in your field, and make sure everyone knows it.

