# Pulling out all the stops

How do you respond to clients that are becoming increasingly critical about the contribution made by the design and designer to the business operations?

Roel is an independent Design Management consultancy specializing in graphic and corporate identity design.

Roel consults closely with their clients to help them achieve their company objectives by maximizing the role of communication and design within their business.
Roel acts as an advisor and intermediary for large and complex communication design projects. The consultancy helps both design agencies and business clients to make design-relevant decisions and to manage and monitor the process. Roel developed a special interest in internal communication and decision making.

Roel Stavorinus studied design and communications, communication management and design management. After working in several communication and marketing environments he started in the field of project management, account and strategy for design agencies. In 2003 Roel started his own consultancy and slowly switched from working at the side of agencies to the side of organizations. At present Roel works for a wide variation of public and commercial organizations.

Roel publishes articles for the Association of Dutch Designers (BNO) on design projects, managing design agencies and the collaboration between designers and clients.

roel

Illustration: Cyprian Koscielniak

Design: Rob van Hoesel

Roel Stavorinus

**Design can contribute greatly to innovation. And yet, innovation within the sector itself is rather disappointing. How do you respond to clients that are becoming increasingly critical about the contribution made by the design and designer to the business operations?**

The Netherlands, of course, has quite a number of top-class designers in the creation and design fields. Designers who make a difference – both in the Netherlands and throughout the rest of the world. Designers who come up with truly novel ideas – with designs such as the Senseo or the individuality of the Effenaar.

The majority of designers provide fine solutions for their clients' design needs. Ordinary, respectable, appropriate solutions. Within an extensive, fixed framework. These partnerships with, for example, magazine publishers, insurance companies and government bodies are often excellent and longlasting. Clients and contractors know what to expect from each other and how to contact one another, and generate a continuous stream of communications or products.

Design practice In their own design practices, conceptual designers and "all-round" designers often do not show much innovation. Both types of designers do not take advantage of opportunities.

I can discern four roles which design practice entails: being a designer, seller, entrepreneur and service provider.

The Designer True innovation can primarily be found in the designer's core business. A designer puts all its creativity into this. One designer sees being innovative as its goal, and is successful in this. Another designer thinks it's more important to provide an appropriate solution for a design problem and to work on developing a long-term relationship with the client. This designer often regards itself as innovative, too, because isn't this by definition part of a creative profession?

The Seller The average designer only plays the role of seller to a very limited extent. Designers are conservative or passive, certainly not innovative, with respect to the way in which they present themselves in the market. Very few designers have given a lot of consideration to their own positions and proposals.

Take a tour through designer websites, and try to imagine what a client's reaction would be. How does the one designer distinguish itself from the other?

Assuming that the average client does not know or hardly knows who or what it's looking for…how does it make a choice? There aren't many designers who take an explicit position. PingPong: "We are storytellers. The stories we tell are yours." Stone Twins: "… passionate about achieving memorable, durable and engaging creative solutions for each and every project." That's pretty explicit – these designers have made a choice. Many agencies don't go beyond: "We're X and we focus on …". And then comes a specific sector. Or: "We're an agency for visual communication … etc."

You see the same thing happen with designer presentations to potential clients. Work is presented: "… This is what we did". That's tiresome, almost intimidating. How useful is this to you as a client? What you're shown are the answers to other clients' questions. Solutions for problems that aren't yours. You feel almost compelled to say something about the work before you. Many clients are unable to judge creative work or assess its value, let alone talk about this.

Why do designers pay so little attention to the manner of presentation – on the Internet, in preliminary interviews or during pitches? And why does this so seldom result in new, original and, above all, worthwhile presentations that give potential clients a good idea of the agency's added value? Perhaps it's insecurity.

The Entrepreneur Enterprising designers know what they have to offer. They're self-confident with clients. At the start of the cooperation with clients: that's

where there's room for innovation. It's rare for an agency's involvement with a client to be expressed in a different kind of remuneration. This can be interesting, and partly determine what the cooperation in the project will look like.

Making proper agreements is therefore crucial. General terms and conditions, contracts, copyrights and other rights: these are all moments when you should be enterprising, keep a good eye on your own business interests, take different approaches, distinguish yourself from others and be innovative.

The Service Provider Its offer. A quick survey of clients reveals that there are many opportunities that aren't exploited. Merely because the designer doesn't respond to its client's needs. That's a shame, certainly these days, because the designer loses opportunities and, as a result, turnover.

Designers can make a true difference if they gear their offers each time to the clients' wishes. Start by asking questions. What is your client concerned about? Where does your role come in? What solution can you offer the client?

Be active in this regard. As the process unfolds, there will be developments that you may be able to capitalise on. Do this! Take on such a role if it's right for you.

It's also important that you understand your own position. That you know where your limits lie. That you try to develop a relationship with the client based on equality. That's often difficult, certainly if you work with larger organisations

where every little detail is formally regulated. Yet it's precisely those situations in which it's crucial that you also know when to say 'no'.

Designers need to focus more on the total process and not just the end result. In the many projects that I've done for various agencies and clients, the design, or the quality of this, was seldom a problem. The risks more often had to do with presentations, scheduling, money or expectations.

Keep your expectations realistic with respect to your client. Sometimes, the benefit from a project does not come from the fact that you've utilised your creativity to the fullest. Sometimes, the benefit comes from the fact that your design proposals have brought to light the real problem.

Know what's going on with your client. Make sure that you're up-to-date on the organisation; make an investment in this. You'd be astonished at how many designers work for provinces and still don't know after a year how the formal decision-making works. That's lethal – for the project, for your own motivation and for your credibility.

In terms of the agreements you make, it's also essential for you to know what the key factors are. In working for the government, for instance. Usually, the amount stated in the quote isn't the most important element. The manageability of the project is frequently much more important. So that the client knows: we're staying within the parameters that we agreed on and that were laid down

in the formal procedures. Make sure that you know what your client's issues are and how a potential buyer would look at your quote.

The future The rise of such countries as India, Brazil and China (and the quality of the designers in those countries), more critical clients, companies in which design is becoming more and more important, increasing brand orientation, other, spontaneous forms of cooperation… This is what the future holds.

The future demands a designer who can not only provide a fine design solution. The future demands a designer who can think strategically. A designer who knows what its design can mean for more efficient business operations and which savings this might bring. The designer of the future realises that clients will be critical about the design's effect on consumers and other stakeholders.

It's time to be innovative. To contemplate the questions what you're good at, how you can present this in the market and how you can be distinctive. This is the time to understand that you're a designer, seller, entrepreneur and service provider all in one.