


interview



**‘PER
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IS AN
UTOPIAN
IDEAL’**



Ebele Wybenga spent a morning with Harald Dunnink, the 34-year-old creative director of digital design agency Momkai and cofounder of The Correspondent. They talked about the importance of keeping things organized, Dunnink's handwriting, and the fragility of creative work.

BY EBELE WYBENGA, PHOTOS BY JEROME DE LINT

It's an ordinary Wednesday in Momkai's Amsterdam studio, an open-plan working space with a view of the waters of the Westerdok. It's 9:30, and I've been invited to sit in on the weekly "prospect meeting." Harald Dunnink and co-owner Sebastian Kersten – both wearing sober but casual black and gray – are discussing new clients and projects with their team. I'm getting a look inside the engine room of perhaps the most admired digital design agency in the Netherlands. A flat screen shows the status of current and potential jobs for clients like Bugaboo, the Royal Netherlands Football Association and a well-known Swedish department store.

Also up for discussion is a to-do list for the developers of The Correspondent. The Correspondent is their own baby, not a client, and it's growing by leaps and bounds. Dunnink and Kersten set up the innovative online journalism outlet with Rob Wijnberg, former editor in chief of the daily newspaper NRC Next, and former blogger Ernst-Jan Pfauth. The Correspondent's development gets done in-house at Momkai. The editorial team has its offices a 20-minute bike ride away, beside the Amstel River.

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'If I'm to give you something truly transformative, we have to start from a place of calm'

The meeting is a picture of efficiency. Each employee sets his or her coffee mug down neatly on a black coaster. After precisely an hour, the discussion is over.

COACH

At 11:40, Harald Dunnink takes a phone call. He accepts an offer on his house. Less than 10 minutes later, he's pulling up a wooden stool to the "design island" – where the designers work – just outside his office. Dunnink assesses a Bugaboo product page the designers are working on. "It feels less shopping-cart if the product's on the left," one of them says. The changes they make on their giant monitors are instantly viewable on an iPhone. In this work, balance, precision, and respect for the users mean everything.

Dunnink is clearly in his element. He sees himself as a player-turned-coach. When he started Momkai at 21, he did everything himself. "I still design things, but I'm not always the one moving the mouse," he says. "It's gotten easier for me to let go, but I still like detail work best. My goal is a result that feels complete – a harmonious whole. But I also know that perfection is a utopian ideal."

CALM

A near-monastic silence reigns on the Momkai work floor, though dozens of people are on the job. I ask office manager Lianne Simon, who's in the kitchen preparing lunch for the staff, if it's always like this. "The Correspondent's editorial team used to work in the lunchroom," she says. "The contrast was funny. Harald's so neat, and they were really messy. There was paper everywhere, and they smoked all day long."

Dunnink compares the silence at Momkai to the peace and quiet of a library. He issues employees with courtesy headphones. "It still isn't quiet enough for me, though," he says. "That's why my office is in the far corner. Organizing things and creating context: that's what I do. I strive for calm in my work, and I like to have it in the studio too. I like things to be neat; I'm hypersensitive to that. But there's a reason for it. If I'm to give you something truly transformative, we have to start from a place of calm. Only the content should drive you to distraction.

We have always worked in a structured way at Momkai, right down to the file names. When you have structure, you create space to think. And that's what I try to do with The Correspondent. If you exude professionalism, you come across as a much more credible media organization. If you're going to be judging others, you can't have a childish startup feel."

At 13:15, Dunnink takes a lunch break. As is his habit, he plays a FIFA soccer game against a coworker, a plate of hot food on his lap.

DRAWING

A to-do list sits beside Dunnink's laptop. His handwriting is exceptionally elegant, like a 19th-century notary's. You almost want to frame the sheet of paper. "I never used to understand why everybody didn't care about their handwriting," he says. "Even other designers. Capitals are my favorites. Every few years I might change a B or an F or an H."

It took a while before he was able to use this self-taught skill in his design work, though. "Client after client said no. So I thought, I'll use it someday, when I'm in full control." He hand-calligraphed The Correspondent's logo and one for Lowdi, a Bluetooth speaker codesigned by Momkai.

So Dunnink's projects literally bear the mark of his hand. "When I was a kid, I used to draw all the time," he says. "I never had any problem having fun by myself." He grew up in Velp, near the eastern Dutch city of Arnhem. As a boy, he longed to be part of the wider world. "I got a paper route when I was 12. The money I earned made me feel independent. I craved self-determination; I longed to be an adult. So it was no surprise that I started my own business."

Over the years, he says, he's become less of a solo traveler. "I've always been a big admirer of cartoonists like Hanco Kolk. But



I've also realized that he does his best work in collaboration with Peter de Wit. And I look at our projects in the same way."

NICE GUY

One of the most important lessons Harald Dunnink has learned as an entrepreneur is that you have to protect your creative work. Choosing his words carefully, he says, "I've shared my knowledge, and other people have gotten rich off it more than once. Now I have a better understanding of the value of what I design. You're creating something new. It's a fragile thing. People don't realize how much of yourself you put into it. Money is a consequence, not a goal.

"But you have to be sensible about it. I know more now about intellectual property law, and when it's appropriate to claim your share. The nice-guy approach isn't always viable. I prefer to wield a pen, but know my way around a sword."

'I prefer to wield a pen, but know my way around a sword'

HARALD DUNNINK

Harald Dunnink, 34, is creative director of the Momkai design agency, which he founded in 2002. He's also the cofounder and creative director of the online journalism platform The Correspondent.

Since the early days, when Dunnink met clients like Kawasaki Europe and Oger in his living room, Momkai has grown into a full-fledged agency that's worked for organizations including Amnesty International, ING Group, the Dutch public library system, Peugeot, Adobe, Nalden.net, and the Royal Netherlands Air Force. Current clients include Red Bull, Bugaboo, and the Royal Netherlands Football Association. The agency is co-owned by CTO Sebastian Kersten.

Dunnink was also a cofounder and creative director of Lowdi, which designed a wireless Bluetooth speaker for phones, laptops, and mobile devices. Lowdi was the product of a partnership between Momkai and the French electronics manufacturer Linkeet.

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BRANDING

The Momkai logo, a square made up of diagonal black stripes, is all over the office – on coat hangers, the kitchen soap dispenser, stickers covering up the Apple logos on laptop lids. An animated screensaver version tumbles across a TV screen in the lunchroom.

But The Correspondent's brightly colored branding is making inroads. Line drawings of correspondents' faces look out at me from square compartments in the shelves. Attached to a whiteboard is artwork for the website's first big event, the Festival der Vooruitgang (Festival of Progress), which took place in October in Amsterdam's Felix Meritis cultural center. Everything was designed to match The Correspondent's visual identity – badges, wristbands, speakers' slides, maps, even a menu.

Momkai and The Correspondent are inextricably intertwined. Dunnink puts about 30% of his

time into the platform, and his agency works for it at a reduced rate. "I don't want the studio and the editorial team to become two separate cultures," he says.

So he's striving to bring The Correspondent's editorial team and Momkai back together in one building. But to do that, they'll need a space bigger than the current studio. Momkai has 26 employees, The Correspondent 30.

PRINTING PRESS

Dunnink and Kersten have invested hundreds of thousands of euros in The Correspondent. "In terms of The Correspondent's development, we're only at 5 to 10% of the potential right now," Dunnink says. "Momkai is good at creating showcases for others. For The Correspondent, we've essentially developed the pen and the printing press, but not the content. I envision a future where The Correspondent is more of a platform than a media organization. We already get a lot of input from the users, but soon they'll be able to contribute even more content. And the correspondents will act as discussion leaders. There's so much knowledge out there.

"We want to create a place for solid, in-depth discussions with experts. So from the smallest detail to the largest whole, you'll be able to gain a better understanding of the world around you. We're developing the whole flow and the user experience

'When you pay for news, you can have truly independent, in-depth journalism'

to achieve that. The knowledge we've built up dealing with the members of The Correspondent – there are 42,000 now* – can also be used for clients like the Royal Netherlands Football Association, which has 1.2 million members who also interact with each other every week, but at soccer stadiums.'

AD-FREE

An additional earnings model is in development: Respondens, The Correspondent's back end, which comprises a content and member-relationship management system. "We eventually plan to sell licenses to other media companies for use of the system." Dunnink says they've already seen plenty of interest from countries ranging from the United Kingdom to South Korea. He maintains that The Correspondent's biggest strength is that it is entirely free of advertisements. "When you pay for news, you can have truly independent, in-depth journalism. With The Correspondent, there's no appearance of a conflict of interest, because there are no collaborations with advertisers. With other news media, that's increasingly in doubt.

"Look at branded content, for instance, which we're seeing now even in the big newspapers. Your brand makes claims, and our news organization gives them a sheen of credibility. I think that hypocrisy is a dangerous development. It's the end of independent journalism. But if it continues, the need for a countermovement will grow."