

# TALKING BRANDING

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
DAVID AIREY

**HCG**  
CORPORATE  
DESIGNS

In November 2017 I had the honour to talk with David Airey, one of the most renowned brand and logo designers out there. He also is the author of several books, such as Logo Design Love that was published as a second edition in 2015. As I found this book so inspiring and useful for my daily worklife, I wanted to talk with David to get to know his views on some interesting aspects that I, and certainly many other graphic designers, come across on a regular basis.

(This is a transcript of the recorded audio interview which you can listen to on Soundcloud.)

*Helene: When a client approaches you and wants you to create the branding for them, what things do you have to know in order to deliver a great design? What questions do you ask in the course of the briefing?*

*David:* I have a set of questions that I changed quite recently. That was after picking up a copy of Michael Johnson's book Branding in Five and a Half Steps. That's a super book by the way, I highly recommend it. The questions that he recommends all center around the client's ambition, their purpose for being here. They might seem easy to answer but they really get the client thinking in terms of what'll be most helpful for us, for the designer.

The first question is: Why are you here? That's a tricky one. You want the client to summarize the answer in a few keywords or phrases. Imagine, someone asks you what you do for a living. They don't want to hear a lecture. At the same time, you want to show some kind of purpose and meaning behind your own living, what problem do you exist to solve.

The second question is: What do you do and how do you do it? This usually results in more descriptive statements where the client can give a deeper insight into their day-to-day process and steps involved, main tasks that they do.

Third: What makes you different? Because it's the uniqueness of a brand that not only helps it to succeed but it also helps designers to position it away from what their competition is doing.

*Helene: I think that's also one of the most difficult questions for some clients.*

*David:* Yes, it can be hard to answer, especially when there are so many competing companies. You know, it's rare to find a company now that is the only one selling what they sell. Which is fine, just because you sell something that somebody else sells, it doesn't mean you can't do it better. Think of how many designers there are; thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands around the world. But, there's nothing to stop you from being one of the best if you have the devotion to it, keep learning and you feel curious enough.

*Helene: Yes, definitely.*

*David:* The next question is: Who are you here for? Branding can look quite different depending on who it's aimed at. Think of the difference between kids who love camping for example or people who like listening to relaxing, classical music. The design message needs to fit with the audience, and that can be very different depending on who you want to attract.

*Helene: Makes sense.*

*David:* The fifth question is: Who do you value the most? It's good to dig into the emotional aspect of the brand because that isn't always easy for a client to answer. You can ask the question in a different way, like: If you currently stand for this, what do you want to stand for in the future?

The questions might be straight-forward for the client to answer. But it gives you the information that you need.

*Helene: Yeah, I think it really kind of forces the client to think about themselves as well which is very good.*

*David: Yes. I tend to get quite a few enquiries from people who don't seem very interested at the start. All they want is just a price from me. So I come back to them with these questions. It can also act as a filter, so you get rid of the clients that only want a price and then move on to something else. They are not contacting me because they are generally interested in hiring me. So even though the questions might be difficult, it's a good way to pull in people who you want to work with in the first place.*

*Helene: That's a very good tip. I have not really done it like that before. But I think I will pick up on it now, as you say it.*

*David: Yeah, I've been trying these questions for a few times now, and it's only recently when I bought Michael Johnson's book. So far, so good. It's been working out well. There is one more question, there are six questions in total and the sixth one is: What's your personality? And that's something that would cover the client's voice, the message and the copywriting that might be used. So whether that's something you as a designer are going to handle or if you're working with a copywriter, it's still going to be useful.*

*Helene: My next question is: When do you personally consider a design job as "finished"? With every creative job, there's never a 100% end line so to speak. It's not like book-keeping where something is either correct or incorrect. You can basically design forever, more or less. When do you personally think "I stop designing now, that's it, it doesn't get any better than that."?*

*David: Well, sometimes I think my work's done only for the client to disagree. I'm sure any designer who's been in the job for a certain amount of time will have the same experience. So I need to go further than before, hopefully coming up with a design that gets the client excited. There were big projects that were for one reason or another distant where I received the downpayment that I invoiced for and started to work. I thought what I came up with were excellent ideas only for everyone to get rejected. But it happens to every designer, they are not all homerun projects, just as your favourite band doesn't always write number one hits or no sports team wins every time. So it's important to be realistic about it and as a designer not beat yourself up too much when a project doesn't work out, because we all deal with failure. I think the more we fail, the faster we learn.*

*Helene: Speaking of learning, as you just mentioned the word "learning". I think we all learn to deal with more and more digital things. Everything becomes more digital, there's less and less print people say, we have always new smart phone versions and devices coming up. With so many different sizes of screens where design can be visible, how do you see that, what is your challenge here? A brand has to look consistent across all sizes, may it be digital or print, it has to look the same on a small app icon as well as on a big billboard on the street.*

*David: Yeah, you're absolutely right. App icons and social avatars play a big part in our brand scene. You've got to make sure that your design idea remains intact whenever it's*

scaled down. I always keep my sketches simple. That doesn't mean you can't come up with a fairly detailed symbol or crest, because you can have miniature versions where the most detailed is to be used above a certain size and when the dimensions or the canvas gets smaller, you swap it for a less detailed mark. If you put each variation alongside one another in your design presentation, they should all share the same idea in the same form.

*Helene: Would you say, the simpler a logo is the easier it is to use as an app icon let's say, or in a small size?*

*David:* Yes, definitely. Just yesterday there was a new one that came out. The Formula 1 logo was redesigned and I've noticed it on Twitter, it doesn't scale down too well because there's a gap in between the characters - an F and a 1 monogram. So that's something you really have to pay attention to because people will see it smaller and smaller, especially on things like Twitter and Facebook where an avatar is a little bit bigger than your profile on the top of the page. But when you make a comment, it's going to be quite small.

*Helene: Yes, I think this is a big challenge. Because everybody wants to create a totally unique and outstanding logo that is different from anything else seen before, but at the same time it has to look outstanding on a very, very small size. So it's really difficult sometimes.*

*David:* It is, it's a challenge. You mentioned how the mark has to be distinctive, something that hasn't been seen before. If you search long enough, you're going to find something that's pretty much exactly the same as what you've created. But you can't spend so long looking, which is why you should always look at your client's competitors, within their own marketplace. A symbol as trademark costs a lot and when you need to trademark it across a wide range of industries and sectors ... if you focus on the client's sector, that's generally where any trademark disputes are going to come up. It's rare when a company is going to register a trademark across multiple markets that they don't operate in.

*Helene: I see, because trademarks or patents are paid for by business sector, right?*

*David:* Yes.

*Helene: That's a good point.*

*Thank you very much for the interview, David. It's been an honour to talk with you.*

*David:* Thanks again for considering talking to me today, it's been a pleasure.



## ABOUT DAVID AIREY

*Since becoming an independent designer in 2005, David has collaborated with a diverse range of clients in more than thirty countries. His speciality is in the creation of meaningful and enduring logos and brand identities that help his clients to better communicate the value of what they do.*

# HCG

## CORPORATE DESIGNS

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hello, my name is Helene Clara Gamper. I'm a graphic designer that believes in a common thread – as illustrated in my logo. I help businesses build a visual identity, translate data into graphic landscapes and help publishers make their magazines look great.

I grew up in a publisher family. About ten years ago I started working in the creative field what in 2010 made me start my own business called HCG corporate designs.



Since then, I've designed for companies of many sizes from the German speaking area but also from other countries such as the USA or the United Kingdom. I created corporate design concepts for business start-ups, established editorial designs for publishers, designed and implemented rich media magazines for tablets and smart phones and visualized complex data for some great infographics.

When creating designs, I always try to get to the very essence of the character and the philosophy behind my clients' businesses and their products. This essence I include in a holistic design approach, that follows me through the entire creative process. Collaborating with my clients and exploring what makes their businesses and their products unique and stand out, I believe is an important part of my job as a designer. This is how I can develop unique visual concepts with a common thread running through them, which is something I'm really passionate about. It puts a smile on my face when I see people respond and interact with my design creations – and when my clients tell me about that.

Some of my clients say they appreciate my flexibility and transparency. I believe that being open and straight with my clients is a matter of fairness and respect and contributes to a positive and successful collaboration.

When I'm not designing you can find me doing sports, exploring nature or travelling. I get a lot of inspiration from seeing different places, doing new things or trying out new recipes with exotic spices I bought from different corners of the globe. In 2014, I fulfilled one of my biggest dreams: travelling through Peru and Ecuador and visiting the giant tortoises of the Galapagos Islands.

I live in the wonderful city of Innsbruck, Austria, the so-called "Capital of the Alps". The lovely scenery here inspires me every day.

Want to get in touch?  
I'd love to hear from you.

## DESIGNS FOR DIGITAL AND PRINT

