

The business of 'designing better'

 By [Leigh Andrews](#)

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The design-boosting power of collaboration, moving beyond fear of data to implementing insights that create better user experience and using digital disruption to your own business benefit were all hot topics on the first day of #BODCT.



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The Spring 2016 session of Business of Design Cape Town was held on a clear chilly morning at the Inner City Ideas Cartel. Attendees mingled on the rooftop with coffee and pastries to warm us up before we got ready for two full days focused on all things design... Sadly I only attended the first day, with just a handful of my speaker highlights listed below.

Kicking off the first day, Business of Design's head of programme [Tracy Lynn Chemaly](#) welcomed attendees by speaking of the conferences' growth over the years, with 50 extra seats added for this version.

On the unorthodox design business

She then introduced the day's first speaker, [Trewyn McGowan](#), Business of Design cofounder, who spoke of 'working the business of design'. McGowan mentioned that her and her husband's company is in a time of expansion, currently responsible for 12 platforms. They decided they needed to retrofit themselves as the holding brand for [those companies](#) and as such will soon rebrand collectively as The Guild Group, with an associated culture of pioneering adventure and excellence.

On that note, McGowan said culture is more important than strategy, particularly for a design business. If you really stand for something and are true to your core values, in that will come your true success.

McGowan said as our experiences change the way we behave and the world keeps changing around us, designers need to focus on how to achieve business goals while still 'doing things differently' from that designer mindset. The theme of collaboration was strong in her talk, with McGowan explaining it's crucial to collaborate both with the people you work with and people outside your own company.

To bring this message home, her presentation included a TEDtalk by Brazilian CEO Ricardo Semler on building corporations in radically unorthodox ways and running them 'almost without rules':

“ Trevyn McGowan of [@SouthernGuild](#) shares Ricardo Semler's TEDtalk on running a business with almost no rules: [#BODCT](https://t.co/MvPkCPiAPj)— Business of Design (@busofdesign) [August 23, 2016](#) ”

It's about how to run your business with more focus on the work you get out of it than on the hours logged to do the work. McGowan linked this to the principle of doing things differently, and of the design industry in particular allowing workers to govern themselves.

On industrial design and material appropriateness

I never thought I'd be keen on industrial design, but the presentation by Brian Steinhobel, founder of Steinhobel Designs, was a true eye-opener. Steinhobel pointed out that design can be challenging and diverse, ranging from the highly technical to the highly aesthetic and even sculptural, which he says comes together to make it the best job in the world.

Speaking on the true value of design and unlocking your own ROI, Steinhobel said most people go to Austria to ski, but their technology is insanely awesome and inspiring to designers, so to go and experience that, if you can. It's not just about the big idea either, as those small ideas can prove hugely profitable. That said, he feels many young designers leave the station on the wrong platform. They need to realise that good design is a combination of compromises to make the best possible product. In doing so, finding the appropriate material and technology to get it to work is crucial. Moving on to the topic of polymer plastics, carbon fibre and the cost of pretty design, Steinhobel says to take the mundane and make it remarkable, and to redefine the existing through design with a differentiating factor, as that's how you disrupt. It costs the same to make something pretty as it does to make something ugly.

Watch the talk embedded below for more on Steinhobel's design thinking:

It's an excitingly diverse and technologically challenging field, and designers simply can't afford to ignore augmented reality innovation or that of 3D printing technology, which can be done at 100 times the speed of normal 'layering' as the product grows organically.

"Carbon 3D will disrupt the world, mark my words," exclaimed Steinhobel.

On crowds and clouds: 21st century creative organisations

Another top talk on the day was presented by Trevor Wolfe, cofounder of delw.io. He confessed to not being very creative, as he is from the start up world, but he did confess to many parallels between the paradigms. The crux of his presentation was on the fact that designers do a lot more than design, especially if they're also running their own business. That's why it's beneficial to future-proof your business by getting as much of the admin as possible done through automation. Take the [Tyler Sofa](#) for example. You visit the website, choose different colours and sizes, and a paper version of the couch is sent to you, that you can unfold in your lounge – all this without any human interaction or hefty fabric books making an appearance.

He also spoke of the fact that as a creative professional, you can only serve a limited number of clients. Crowdsourcing offers you independent individuals distributed across the globe who offer creative that transcends what an individual within an organisation can do. Execution of that ideation then spills over into concepts like outsourcing: If you own an online marketplace with quality individuals, use them to service your existing clients. You can use an automated bot process to do so, but remember that the process of creativity benefits from external eyes and peer feedback.

Ending off his session on the benefits of collaboration, Wolfe recommends asking the following four questions:

1. What tasks do you dislike that you think a computer could do as well as you?
2. If certain tasks were taken off your plate, how would you invest that extra time?
3. What task, if automated, would let you bring pricing down while maintaining values?
4. What elements of your business would best benefit from collaboration?

On digital disruption

Then, rounding out this handful of top talks on the day was Scott Gray, experience director at Quirk, who spoke of thriving in a digitally enabled world and the six things he knows to be true.

The first of these is that there is no more status quo. Disruption takes centre stage, especially as digital technology enables new flows of value with little regard for what was before, much like the geographical formation of an [oxbow lake](#).

He spoke of Clayton Christensen's book *The innovator's dilemma* in which he explained that the disruption wave is really all about being too focused on what you do to look at new ways of doing – Christensen also explains this in the video embedded below:

Making stuff people want is more important than making people want stuff, reminded Gray. Then, switching to stronger marketing focus, Gray said to remember that you're a consumer at heart, beneath your designer/creator/innovator hat. We're on our digital devices all day, not just checking emails twice a day as was the case a few years ago. That pane of glass on which we do everything from banking to private messaging is thus hugely important. Also remember that nothing is perfect, it only gets better as we're in a state of continual evolution, testing, measuring, learning and iterating what consumers are all about. With digital, your designs are instantly distributable in real time, and you can see how people engage with your product or service instantly as each and every interaction is traceable. It gives a window of how people are engaging and how to make their user experience more pleasurable.

A strong message for all attendees – use those insights to create more impactful designs than ever before, in any industry.

[Click here](#) for Jessica Tennant's overview of Ian Fuhr of Sorbet's talk at the JHB version of Business of Design Spring 2016, [here for her #WomensMonth-themed](#) Q&A with The Creamery founder Kate Schrire, and [here for her interview](#) with Business of Design's head of programme, Tracy Lynn Chemaly.

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