→ Harald Dunnink (front) was a key creative force behind De Correspondent’s crowdfunding campaign, alongside Rob Wijnberg and Ernst-Jan Pfauth (center)
Cultivating calm on a global stage

Crowdfunding: De Correspondent has raised $2.6 million for its international expansion. The crowdfunding campaign was designed by Momkai, under the direction of Harald Dunnink. For Dunnink, it was the moonshot he’d dreamed of for so long.

"My mind works like a child's," says designer Harald Dunnink as he walks through Brooklyn, looking for the L train to The Correspondent's office in Manhattan. "I draw little rockets on everything, like those red-and-white checkered ones in the Adventures of Tintin." Indeed, the quest to take the Dutch journalism platform De Correspondent global in New York feels much like a mission to the moon, and a childhood dream come true.

Dunnink (37) is the founder and creative director of Momkai, an Amsterdam design studio specializing in digital design. The company is also one of the driving forces behind De Correspondent, which he and his partner at Momkai, Sebastian Kersten, helped to found. In 2013 Momkai handled De Correspondent's crowdfunding campaign and launch in the Netherlands. In these final months of 2018 he's in New York to repeat the feat, but this time "at the Olympic level." In the already crowded English-language market.
The Correspondent will ultimately reach its goal of $2.5 million in mid-December, but on this cold Friday in November when Dunnink finally locates the entrance to the L train, the campaign has just begun. He's barely slept and while we talk he's busy sending a steady stream of text messages to his team in Holland, where it's already evening. Then he puts his phone away. "Did you know that there were not two, but three astronauts aboard the Apollo 11?"

Neil Armstrong and Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin. But the third one? Dunnink is acutely aware of his name—and also a little of what he felt. "Michael Collins. He stayed behind in the capsule. No one's heard of him." At De Correspondent, Rob Wijnberg and Ernst-Jan Pfauth are the two men out walking on the moon. Dunnink is back in the capsule. With pleasure, he says; he chose the role himself. "My work is service-oriented. I build a stage to shine the brightest possible light on the key players: our stories, and Rob."

**Cultivating Calm**

Right from his very first meeting with Wijnberg in 2013, Dunnink decided that Momkai would support this uncertain initiative. He was infected by Wijnberg's daring, his critique of the media, and his ambition to use journalism to draw people into conversation with each other.

Dunnink and Wijnberg came up with the name "De Correspondent" together. The elegant logo is Dunnink's handwriting; the distinctive hand-drawn employee portraits come from his studio. His hawk-like gaze watches over the site's precise colors, typography, and styling. In 2013 Momkai was working for major brands such as Nike, Red Bull, and Bugaboo, but in the intervening years the studio has come to increasingly identify with De Correspondent.
Since August 2018 Momkai (roughly 30 FTEs) and De Correspondent (roughly 50 FTEs) have shared a building in Amsterdam, as if to underscore the fact that the two companies are effectively one. In our moon-mission analogy, Dunnink's partner Kersten is at ground control in Houston: De Correspondent's office in Amsterdam, where he strives to bring order to the company's mildly chaotic finances.

That's been Momkai's role from the start, Dunnink says: to cultivate calm at De Correspondent. Internally, at first: Momkai imposed structure on a rapidly growing company whose journalists lacked business experience. The quest for calm is more clearly visible in the design. De Correspondent's homepage is restful to the eye, certainly compared to the average news site from five years ago.

Dunnink and Kersten came up with the idea of using sidenotes and infocards for the site's articles: putting extra information in separate links so it doesn't distract from the main story. Three years later in 2016, when he was asked to create a personal audio tour for Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum, he called his design philosophy for the digital world "Cultivating Calm."

**Beating the Drums**

All that is in strong contrast with his mission in New York. There, Dunnink must strive to make The Correspondent a household name. And so, during the crowdfunding campaign, The Correspondent's social media accounts issue missives to the beat of a fast drum. Some of them are self-congratulatory—see how we're transforming journalism—and some criticize the media in ways that feel alarmist rather than calm. Wijnberg's claims during the campaign—that "the news" is bad for our health and that it helps autocratic leaders into the saddle—rub his fellow journalists the wrong way.
The oddity of running a campaign with the hashtag #unbreakingnews while trying to become breaking news yourself is not lost on Dunnink. "It's not bad to advertise yourself. That's part of running a campaign. We're promoting the content."

Amid the clamor for attention, the visuals must express that calm. And so, during the runup to the campaign, he created a booklet that explains The Correspondent's ten founding principles. Wijnberg and Pfauth used it as a calling card in the US. The booklet is dark blue with red letters and stitched with red thread; it's shaped like a passport. "I wanted to design something that you always have with you. Rob wears a suit jacket, and that shape always fits in his pocket. And you really are giving people something valuable: our principles."

At that time, the two Dutchmen needed to find as many ambassadors as they could for the international expansion: famous Americans who could convince their fans and followers to join. Dunnink's passport was intended to create trust. "The red and blue are a subtle nod to the American color scheme; that makes it feel less foreign to them." Whether that was the reason or not, The Correspondent ultimately gained the support of prominent Americans such as pollster Nate Silver, Black Lives Matter activist DeRay Mckesson, and other activists, filmmakers, comedians, and digital entrepreneurs.

**Fly Me to the Moon**

In New York Dunnink has teamed up with Blue State Digital, the campaign agency that handled Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 campaigns, among others. In a large meeting room on the twelfth floor, one giant monitor displays Dunnink and Wijnberg's presentation; on the other, two employees in Washington follow along. After the meeting, managing director Andrew Paryzer seems impressed by what he's seen.
"Normally we're the ones giving presentations like these. This is one of the best designed campaign decks I've ever seen."

Dunnink is a stickler about those things. The presentation lists the precise color codes for the blue and red in De Correspondent's house style. He can't resist noting that the renowned campaign agency's projector was just a little bit off in displaying the colors.

Dunnink prefers not to delegate such matters. That's why he was also frequently on the road during the campaign, shooting video and photos for The Correspondent's social media accounts. Including during what would turn out to be the crowdfunding campaign's most crucial moment.

After De Correspondent's Dutch members got the campaign off to a running start in its first few days, the counter inched forward at a snail's pace. Dunnink, Pfauth, and Wijnberg just couldn't manage to reach the massive American public. But with just eight days to go and the counter barely topping $1 million, their key ambassador, media professor Jay Rosen, snagged the chance to talk about The Correspondent on The Daily Show.

Dunnink filmed Wijnberg and Pfauth backstage as they watched the show on a monitor—it would make a good Instagram post, after. The men listened, excited and nervous as cats, while Rosen promoted their journalism initiative. And then suddenly Dunnink saw Wijnberg and Pfauth turn around and look directly into his lens. What had Rosen just said to millions of Americans? "If you don't have ads, you don't need daily traffic quotas. [...] And you can cultivate a kind of calm in your news site that differs from the rest of the web." Cultivating calm. The third astronaut back in the capsule has gotten a nod after all.
When the campaign closed in mid-December with more than $2.6 million and 45,888 members, Dunnink sent everyone in his network “greetings from space,” embellished with a tiny astronaut and rocket. He signs off his regular newsletter with “To infinity and beyond!”

The Correspondent's founders are now back in Holland to work out the details of the next step: setting up an international journalism company. Dunnink sees two major design challenges: both the site and the organization must be overhauled. “We need to create a new international theater where I can highlight the key players. There's not really a good example of an online journalism platform that's done it this way before.”

He sometimes discusses these challenges with one of The Correspondent's ambassadors: Jimmy Wales. Wikipedia's founder sent him a personal e-mail in 2017. He wanted to know more about the way De Correspondent uses its members’ experience. "It was one of the most extraordinary e-mails I've ever received." The two are still in regular contact. It was one of the moments when Dunnink's enjoyed playing in the Olympics of digital business.

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