



profile



Collaborate and Listen

When approaching people to profile for this magazine, we immediately attempt to put them at their ease – after all, you good, good people are far more likely to give a good story if you are fully relaxed (or at least as relaxed as you can be with a voice recorder shoved in front of you) in an environment of your choice.

Maybe the choice of venue also says a lot about our subject. Obviously, many people like to have their tools of the trade to hand – i.e. furniture designs, products, marketing material – whilst explaining their business and their work. Others would rather take a more informal line, and retire to an informal part of the office or showroom, whilst some like to get away from the working environment altogether. The people who fall into this latter category, we often find, are gregarious, confident and passionate individuals, or they come across as exactly the opposite. There's little doubt which of these two camps Collaborate's Richard Martin falls into.

We start by asking Richard about his career route. 'I was studying furniture design at university (well actually it was a polytechnic back then),' he recalls. 'I began with three-dimensional design and later moved into furniture design in Nottingham. I was immediately thrown into the marketplace, at the height of the recession in 1984. My initial plan was to wait for an invite to London to become a top furniture designer, but sadly the phone didn't ring.'

'Eventually I was contacted by some of my poly-mates who were working at Herman Miller, and they asked me to come down and join them. It was a great introduction to the commercial world, as it felt as though we were still studying – albeit with more money and a

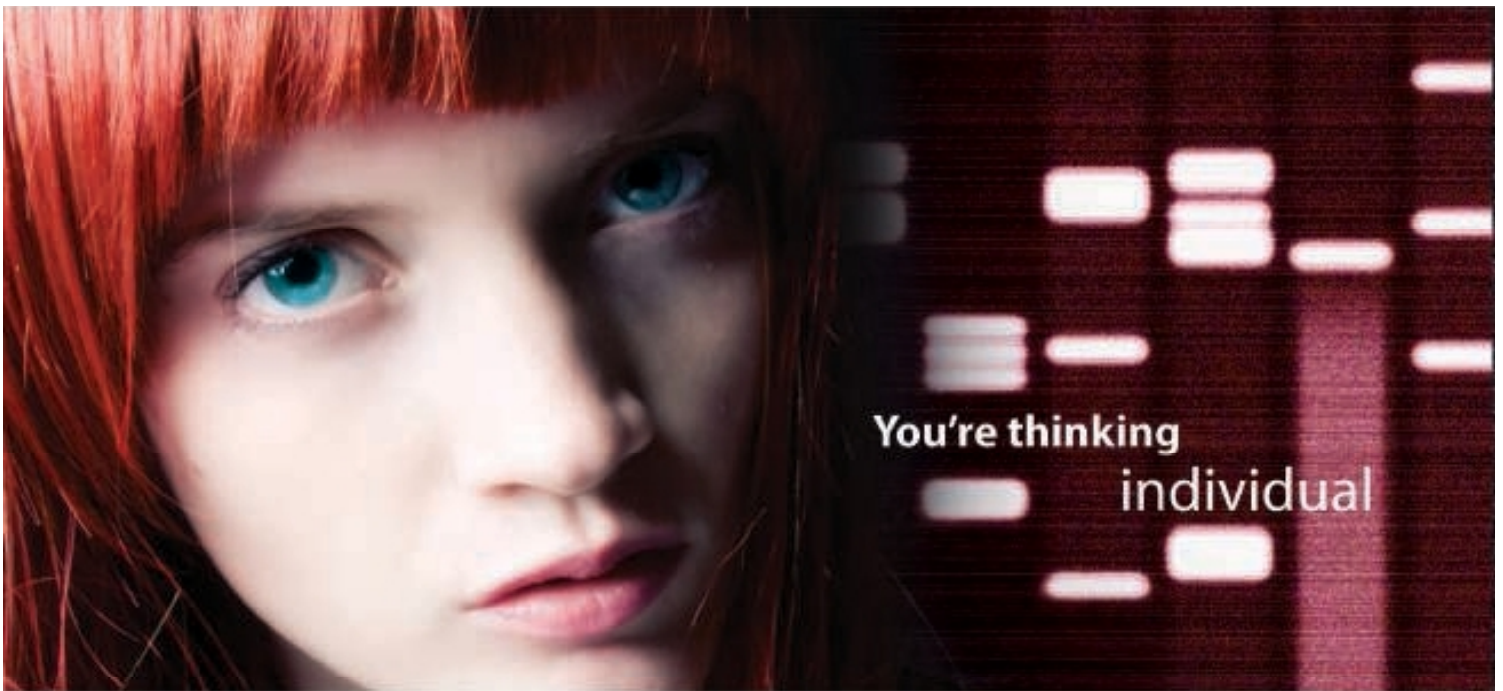
company car...life was good! My official title was 'Design Application Specialist', no less.

'Soon after joining HM I realised that the aspect of the job I enjoyed most was meeting clients to identify issues and work with them to provide solutions. With the introduction of Auto CAD (or in the early days – not so auto) the job became more and more desk-based, so I quickly realised that a change was needed.

'I moved into the A&D team, responsible for promoting Herman Miller to the design community in and around London, which I enjoyed immensely. I remember the launch of Ethospace and the average cost per workstation being around three or four thousand pounds, with an enormous array of different components needed. Life today seems so simple.

'After three years I took an international role in Dubai managing a couple of large projects, including Etisalat – the UAE telephone provider, with towers in Dubai and Abu Dhabi totaling about \$6 million. After a couple of years I returned to the UK to find that there wasn't really a role that suited me at Herman Miller anymore, so I decided to move on.

'I jumped the fence from manufacturer to dealer, which in itself was an interesting transition. Suddenly I was seeing the company I had been very proud to work for through a clients' perspective and ▶▶▶▶▶



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▶▶▶ the client has specific needs to support their individual businesses through periods of transition.

'We already had the necessary skills, the benefit of previous contacts, not to mention the enthusiasm and belief to succeed, and at the end of the day, people buy from people.'

'So we phoned around our clients and got a massive amount of support them. I know it's very easy for people to be sympathetic and offer supportive comments in such times of adversity, but to be fair to them, they've all delivered and we've had a fantastic first 18 months and we would like to thank them for all their ongoing support.'

We move on to ask about the Collaborate offer, and how it differs. 'We had clients offering to give us 100% upfront when we were looking to set up – that's just fantastic. And we thank them on a daily basis by giving excellent service back – sorry if that sounds a little 'sales-speak', but this is a really personal thing for us now. They really stuck their necks out for us, so we want to do the same for them.'

'We have been appointed by a nationwide company to support their furniture requirements at over 300 sites. During the contractual discussions with the Purchasing Director he explained that we had been chosen as we were 'big enough to have the robust systems in place to support their requirements', yet 'small enough to care'.

'We also decided to have service 'collaborators' rather than full-time employees that we can call upon as and when they are required

during the life-span of a project,' Richard grins. 'We received sound advice from industry professionals and also Business Link and we have an excellent business adviser, who fully understands what sort of company we want to be and challenges us in every meeting. He pointed out that we needed to focus our efforts on the selling aspect of the business, and rather than trying to do everything ourselves, we should consult specialists to assist us when necessary – and the results were great.'

'Other vital aspects for us were to retain our independence and to offer a high level of service without having an aggressive growth strategy. This meant keeping it personal and real, open and honest. It makes a huge difference working in the Clerkenwell area, when it comes to dealing with our suppliers, because we have to walk down the street every day and look people in the eye. We can't very well tell people they have a good chance on a project when in fact they haven't. It's important to have an open and honest relationship with your suppliers – you have to be able to deliver bad news as well as good news. It makes life a lot simpler, and what we're doing really shouldn't be that difficult.'

With a new office, recently opened in Clerkenwell, Richard, Helen and Dwyn – as well as the rest of the team at Collaborate – have reason to be incredibly optimistic. And it's clear, as we're joined by the rest of the Collaborators, that they're loving every minute of it ●

