

AMSTERDAM WORLDWIDE  
Brian Elliott,  
CEO and Founder



# Wired advertising

Two years ago Brian Elliott and his partners found themselves at a crossroads, with their advertising agency in urgent need of reinvention. Driving this realisation was – and is – their conviction that the traditional ad agency business model has its lost currency in today's world. Or, as Canadian Dutchman Elliot (who received his Dutch passport last year) explains during our conversation in a modern minimalist-styled room in a 17th century house along one of Amsterdam's canals, "The emergence of digital forms of communication means that advertising agencies no longer need to maintain a physical presence in all the key markets. With economic relationships changing drastically as a result, national borders are now becoming steadily less important, cultural differences are taking on new dimensions and it has become relatively easy to work from a remote location.

This also means you can now put together creative teams of talented people from all over the world, working together in a fully online environment".

Clients' demands, too, are keeping pace with the changing digital economy. "Just five years ago they would have called in a single agency with a similar scale and global network of offices to orchestrate a worldwide campaign. Now, however, they prefer to co-ordinate marketing publicity themselves and choose agencies based on their creative ideas and capacity to translate those ideas into multimedial communications." It was against this backdrop of groundbreaking market developments that the agency Amsterdam Worldwide was remoulded from the former Strawberry Frog. "We had already jointly come up with the plan to separate the Amsterdam branch from

the head office in New York. We considered all the options – even, for example, of relocating to London or Barcelona and directing operations from there."

"But we quickly realised that it is precisely our location in the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area that is one of this agency's most valuable assets. The crucial factors determining the success of a business like ours is being 'wired' to the international community on all fronts. We have to identify emerging trends and developments before and better than anyone else, we have to be connected with every media platform and network through which to feed brand perceptions and, most importantly, we have to appeal to the independent-thinking, creative types whom we want to have working for us or with us. Ultimately it became clear to us that



our current location offers more value in terms of all these key requirements. What did need changing, however, was our own organisational structure – only then would we be able to profit fully from our location. Having taken that step, we now offer a rock-solid business proposition. We also changed our name to Amsterdam Worldwide, with the idea of tapping into the international appeal and dynamic of this metropolis. Plus, we feel we truly reflect the characteristics that define Amsterdam."

## CREATIVE CROSSROADS

The (re)birth of Amsterdam Worldwide is proof once again of the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area's position as a creative crossroads, with an advertising cluster that is fast becoming a large and international presence. Increasing numbers of advertising and marketing agencies are responding to the attractive mix of a transparent and provocative culture that Amsterdam has to offer, the city's international elite of creative talents and its unlimited access to one

of the world's most prolific networks. This sector of the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area's creative industry alone is responsible for an estimated annual five billion euros in turnover, and although the credit crunch has tempered growth to some extent, there is no question that this segment will continue to flourish over the years to come.

Interestingly, the sector's fastest-growing players are mostly small to midsize ad agencies with a strong international

orientation. Recently, agencies like the British-born 180Amsterdam, American Wieden+Kennedy and Canadian TAXI have all made successful debuts from premises along Amsterdam's canals or in the new business centre linking the City of Amsterdam with Amsterdam Airport Schiphol. Since their launch, these agencies have been behind a number of high-profile brand campaigns. Today, athletic and clothing labels Nike and Adidas have their worldwide campaigns conceived and designed in Amsterdam, and heavyweights like Coca-Cola, IKEA and Sony are increasingly 'shopping' here for agencies to supply their international marketing publicity.

As Amsterdam Worldwide Director Brian Elliott sees it, all this is just the beginning. "Amsterdam is evolving into a creative hub distinguished by its strong international orientation and maximum integration of digital communication channels. Nowhere else will you find an industry so keyed into understanding what is and what will be important to the global consumer, and on how to create added value. Advertising today is about giving a brand its own unique personality that transcends all boundaries and with which potential consumers can and want to identify themselves with. A brand's market value lies in what it can do for you, not in what it claims to do. So today's advertising designer has to be linked to a creative, multidisciplinary community that occupies a trendsetting position in terms of what people around the world are going to be defining as important. Amsterdam has long combined that streak of independence and open outlook in which such communities thrive."

### HYBRID

In its new guise as Amsterdam Worldwide, the agency will be in a better

position than ever to profit from these attributes, says Elliott, who has now been living in Amsterdam for 25 years. "We opted for a hybrid business model, one that combines the strengths of the traditional ad agency organisational model with detailed knowledge of digital communication forms and how these can best be used to reach people. In this business, we are seen as a trendsetter in the field of digital communication. We have already received a few Webbies [an award for the best web-marketing publicity, ed.] for our digital campaigns, and we have pioneered the use of social networks like Hyves, Twitter and Facebook, which have huge potential. In this respect too, Amsterdam provides added value: nowhere else do people make as much use of these networks as here, as a result of which nearly all the major Internet network providers have set up offices in the Amsterdam Area in order to test their new products and applications. And when it comes to this category of innovations, we're in the vanguard."

No wonder, then, that Amsterdam Worldwide was the agency selected by the French mother company (Pernod-Ricard) of an Armenian brandy producer (Ararat) with the assignment to inject this once-famous brand with fresh, international appeal. "Our client indicated that they saw us as a culturally neutral party due to our Dutch background. They feel that we, as an Amsterdam-based agency employing 20 different nationalities, are better poised to rediscover the brand's authenticity and to give it an affective charge that will appeal to cognac drinkers all over the world." Ararat is thus the latest addition to a client portfolio that already features such big names as Belgian beer brewer InBev,

American chip manufacturer Intel and Japanese athletic shoe and clothing brand Asics. Joining these clients is an expanding number from Russia, where the communications field is gradually maturing. "Even with the credit crunch we have continued to see growth, and that's an exceptional achievement in this sector at this point in time."

But the most important development – according to Brian Elliott – is the one he has seen in himself and those around him. "One major additional factor in our decision to keep Amsterdam Worldwide operating from its current location is that it gives us an edge in recruiting the best creative minds in the business. Everyone is keen to live and work here, and this aspect is only weighing heavier as we enter an age in which people are feeling a deeper need for engagement and placing greater demands on their work-life balance."

"I suppose I would be a prime example of this: I live five minutes away, take our kids to school by carrier bike before heading to the office, have given up my car, and if I need to visit a client abroad I can be at Schiphol in under half an hour. Just recently I had to be in central London, and I later calculated that my travel time from Amsterdam was less than when I still lived and worked in a London suburb. In this sense, too, we're at the heart of the action here."

AMSTERDAM WORLDWIDE  
**COUNTRY OF ORIGIN** CANADA  
ESTABLISHED IN THE AMSTERDAM  
METROPOLITAN AREA IN 2008  
**EMPLOYEES** 45  
**INDUSTRY** ADVERTISING AND BRANDING  
**ACTIVITIES** GLOBAL HEADQUARTERS