



Vince Frost: Design Entrepreneur

When we collaborate, we provide an unbeatable interdisciplinary offer...When we work in our specialties, we draw on our expertise in strategy, built environment, brand, design, and digital to reframe and solve complex problems.

Vince Frost is a creative designer and a highly reflective practitioner who is totally open and candid about his life's journey, from his youth in Canada through education and training in the UK, to his current status as a successful top-flight business entrepreneur in Sydney, Australia. His passion is to create ways of supporting people in whatever enterprise they wish to do and that includes enabling his colleagues to achieve their best. His goal in creating a commercial collective is develop a more strategic way of working based upon measures of success. His aim is to transform the business design process using a more evidence-based approach to identifying and meeting the targets he sets. However, Vince is also clear that he prefers to respond positively to opportunities that walk through the door but which pose challenges because he has not come across the problem before. For him saying 'Yes' is a more productive response than 'no'. You could say that saying 'yes' without knowing what might follow, is a 'risky' strategy but in his case, it is one that clearly pays off. This aspect of his business approach makes even more sense if the fact that he also responds positively to surprises, another strong indication of being a reflective practitioner. Added to that his experience of the kind of "deep thought" that has turned adversity into a strategy for designing a creative life.

Risk-challenge- self -confidence: these different words apply to related aspects of being creative and reflective. A creative practitioner moves out of his or her 'comfort zone' to try out something they have not done before but which is motivated by vision, ambition, excitement arising from the individual's personal drive. In his interview, Vince describes his mission to make design the pivotal element in life and work and the paths he has taken to achieve that.

Interview

Q: Can you tell me about what you do and what motivates you?

V: My focus is creating successful outcomes through design. I discovered that I loved design. I loved ideas, I loved problem solving. I loved the craft of bringing it to life. That's what really excited me. And for a long time, I thought it was about the craft, I thought it was about making things look great. Then overtime I realised I was put on this earth to help people. I definitely do all I can every day to help people, whether it was an individual or a corporation or a start-up, whether it was a charity, whether it was a big organisation or small, whether it was here or anywhere in the world. I just want to help people and opportunity is what makes me seriously excited, I tingle with excitement around somebody in need, somebody that needs our help. Over time working with clients and growing the business, I realised that what was graphic design has evolved and changed. But also, I've evolved as I've deliberately wanted to be a generalist: I didn't want to be a specialist in one area...

Q: Do clients express their needs clearly? Is it a two-way process?

V: Absolutely it's a two-way process. There's all kinds. Even when we were not Frost Design but just a design company, clients would come to us for graphic design- sometimes they got it right, sometimes they came to the right company for the right task, right solution and other times we would wonder why the hell did they come here? But instead of saying that, I would go- 'we can do this. We'll find a way of making it happen.' And it still happens today where you get clients coming in for reasons that are not linked because they have a perception of what you are but they could be wrong. That might be down to human error or it might be down to how we position our business or it might be down to who referred them to us and they don't understand what the need is. The key thing in every opportunity is to sit down with the client who has contacted us and listen. It's is about listening to what their problem is, what they want to achieve, their timeline, what they've done before that doesn't work, what their goals and ambitions are. Then we work out how we are going to tackle that. Every opportunity is different. Sometimes a problem comes in and it looks on the face of it like something similar to what we have done. But I still want to hold back and listen and let the opportunity open up and see the clues for how we might tackle it and who might be best in the business to work on it. And where there's more potential than even what they think.

Q: How does designing success manifest itself?

V: I talk about it in one of my books¹. Early on when I left Pentagram- they had taught me that designers were like the guru, upstairs on top floor, the clients never went up there and it was top secret, and it was where the *magic* happened. It used to be the designer was the genius guru and the magic happened. What I found was that because I very quickly worked with absolute transparency. I worked one on one, collaboratively with my clients. It felt weird in the beginning but actually we got through things far quicker. I tested things, we explored ideas. I'd be designing while they were talking to me, trying to unpack their vision, their thoughts and it actually worked incredibly well. Most people think that sounds like hell- don't let your clients near your computer, don't let them in the same room with you. And I'd be going well actually *that* was the magic for me. That was what we would now call co-creation. That transparency, that engagement and that participation of all stakeholders with the designers is where things have shifted to. Most industry design thinking is very much in that space. I was doing that a long time ago. There was never us trying to sell an idea to someone, trying to convince somebody because they were part of making that idea. *They* had the ideas.

It's always dynamic, it's always evolving. You do get some clients who say 'I just want a solution' something that's live in three weeks' time. They're very project based and once that's done never to be seen again. The best clients are the ones we maintain a relationship and we stay on the journey with them.

Q: Is the core of your creative practice, your creative life?

V: In the very early days I was absolutely obsessed and excited about my career. I couldn't sleep, not because I was an insomniac but I just thought sleeping was a waste of time. Weekends were hell because they were a break. I worked holidays, weekend, and I was obsessive. It wasn't that someone was making do that. I was told by so many people that it was wrong... to find a balance, my parents said it all the time. But actually, for a lot of people who say that they actually have an imbalance because they see it as two different things whereas I just saw my life as one. I was excited about my life and I couldn't get enough of it and I still feel the same way. But by constantly giving, *working* at it at 100 miles an hour, (I call it living in italics, living in italics) is that your energy is constantly going out and going into things which is great because it gives you energy back.

Q: In designing your life, what happens once you've identified the problem?

V: I think like a lot of people that we get labelled with depression when all it's about is thinking and thinking and thinking and not having a solution- not knowing your way out of the deep thought. The deep thought for me is in 'what is my life about? Am I doing the right things? Am I putting my energy in the right places? Often that is caused by me not being aligned with my vision, my purpose and probably eating and drinking the wrong stuff and not exercising. Our natural state is a state of well-being and our bodies are constantly trying to get back to that state every day.

Q: I am wondering how that deep thought has affected the way you generate ideas and work?

V: I realise that the reason I am good at solving problems is because I am obsessive. If you came in today and said Vince I've got this problem, I would immediately go into 'Let's solve this right now.' That obsession is interesting because when a client comes in with a problem, with an opportunity, we discuss a budget, we discuss timing, when it's going to be delivered by- it has an end date. But when you are talking about your own personal life, there is no end date, no fees, no timing.

Q: People talk about intuition –what does it mean to you?

V: Intuition is something you feel from within- it's an inner voice. It's something that's been revealed. There's something from somewhere. It could be seen as spiritual. Often, I have a situation where I think of something and within minutes it happens. When I say something like 'this is really interesting. This project's come in, there's a 7 in it- it could be an address or the number 7 of a building' And the next day another 7 comes, and another 7 ... People say there's no opportunities for them but there are opportunities everywhere. All over the place. It's about you being aligned to it being open to those opportunities. If you are shut, blinkered... if you say no, it shuts doors. No closes things. No affects energy and flow. You have to be open. Be positive. Be present. Own it and the world is there for you, the world is open and the opportunities are flowing and it's not as hard as people think. I want to create a business that has that same energy.

Q: How do you respond to the unexpected, the unforeseen?

V: It's disruptive of course. You stop and think or rather it stops the flow. The danger with it is it then takes you down. It makes you slip into that 'no' state of mind. You start to drown to go under. It is really hard to back out of that. You are looking for something to shift your energy. It's a bit like me going to the gym. I didn't go all last year. I don't know how many minutes of the day I had as guilt 'I know I need to do that'. Three weeks ago, I started going again. I go about six times a week now for a half an hour and I love it. The energy ...it was hard initially and then I started to get positive flow and energy and I go 'Jeez I should have done this my whole life!' It's a bit like this when negative things happen whether they are self-induced or there are external reasons for things to happen- you could be in flow with a project and then for some reason the client says we're going to can it...It's frustrating. Something happens and initially you think 'that's annoying' or you ask 'why is that happening?' and then after time you think, that's a positive addition that's come into the scheme that you didn't know and it's affected it in a positive way.

Q: Does that mean the surprise can be a good thing?

V: Absolutely. I look for surprises, look for clues. I call it a gift from the project. I look for the project to give me the solutions. It's not for me to impose the solutions on it.

Q: Would you describe yourself as a 'risk taker'?

V: No. I don't take risks. That really annoys me. I heard a podcast about this last night. Advertising comes... 'we pride ourselves on taking risks. 'Come to us because we take risks'. What idiot would commission a company to take risks? I wouldn't. I would want you to prove to me that you can create a successful outcome. I have no time and energy for risks.

Q: Some artists think of risk as when you make an artwork you are putting yourself out there so in a sense you are risking yourself.

V: That's not commercial. Every day, I am working on strategically ensuring my business remains in business. I can't be erratic, I can't be irresponsible. I am a control freak. I don't want to be out of control. I don't find that healthy.

Q: How is it possible to know what success is before it happens?

V: That's why we want to know what quantifying success is: gauging it, predicting it accurately. This is something really important and something we need a business to get better at. I don't want to say this is a brilliant intuitive idea. For years and years, when working as an individual in the business, I would take the brief, design it, cost it etc. But maybe about ten years ago, we say with every single project 'what does success look like for you- the client? We never asked that question before. We just did the job, the project, we did what we thought was right and no clients ever questioned that. In a way that's why I created a company called 'Pivot' 6 months ago and that was to have a strategic business that is not brand strategy but business strategy, business systems etc. and utilise innovation and human centred design was created to solve those problems. It's beyond design in terms of physical but going higher up into a business to think about the bigger problems. That's what I'm interested in because you can do a brochure but that doesn't fix a business. It might communicate with your shareholders but if we can actually use our capability to help transform that business higher up that's what I more interested in. And then that flows through to the physical space, the communications, the tone of voice, everything that business is associated with. I want us to become better at designing businesses, experiences, customer journeys, user experience...

Q: If you are thinking about success, does it have to be immediate or longer term?

V: We do a lot of projects around the customer experience, customer journey. We've done the Maritime Museum, the Australian Museum, those are arts, cultural organisations but we are also working with big property organisations like McGrath where we are looking at touchpoints, every single touchpoint with that brand. Looking at that compared to other organisations as well. If you think about it, we have an opportunity to play with the senses. Everything is a stimulus (picks up book) this is a stimulus, the weight, the texture. Sometimes it's accidental, sometimes its deliberate. We want to be deliberate, we want to understand how people think, how they engage with things and design to create that. Like intuition is great and we can use the experience in doing things but if that was the target, we might get within the circle, we might get outside that circle. We've got away with it for a long time of just doing it and making it- it's better than not doing it- but I want to be focused on hitting that target. I don't want any vagueness. I believe our responsibility as an ideas business, designing success is that we have to recommend the most accurate solutions, the most accurate experiences.

Accurate is the desire it sells, desired message, communications, connections. A lot of design companies aren't interested in that; they just think it's scientific; they see themselves as creative artists. Things have shifted and we need to be- the people who are advising our clients what to do need to be far more accurate at getting it right. I want a richness of understanding, a richness of data. I want to track and tweak what we're doing constantly to get to that point. And there's an abundance of information, data, understanding that we're still not connecting with anywhere near what we should be or will be.

Q: How would you describe the Frost Collective?

V: I don't see what we do as art. It is creativity. It's commercial art- or was called that. I've been in business for 25 years now. I did two years of design school. I saw it as a disadvantage personally. I thought I didn't know enough. It's like a blank page. I didn't know what the rules were. That naivety was good for me because it didn't close doors and make me think in a certain way. I had the freedom of a child to play. And that playing is what I've done over the course of time. I want to learn every day. I never feel like it's ever right. It can always be better. When it was just me and I called it Frost Design because that's what people did then and my name has two meanings and that was helpful. It quite quickly got a lot of attention because I was so obsessed about doing what I was doing and that came through. There were positive repercussions of that. I won an award, did talks around the world, which was cool but that was a bi-product- it wasn't why I was doing it.

Over time, the knock-on effect, the work attracting like-minded projects created a portfolio, a stream of work, and I looked at that and thought that's interesting we've done quite a lot on hospitals, we've done a lot of arts organisations, a lot of magazines, books, environments- that looks like a pattern. As a business, as a generalist, we were constantly chasing the next thing that came through the door. Chasing that work was the objective: it wasn't strategic, it wasn't going right. So, this is what happened.

I tried several times to grow a digital business internally. But it didn't succeed at that very well. So, I decided to look for a digital business that existed, a small business, and I would bring that in and that would become Frost digital. So, I found something called 'The Nest'. I made this decision- and everybody was saying 'Vince you've got to bring them in and they'll earn less now but next month they'll be Frost Digital'. And I said 'I don't want to take that name away. It wasn't a very successful business but it was a business nonetheless of six people. They had a reputation... and work was coming to them on a daily basis, they had their own work culture and all that. I thought 'You know what I actually want to grow that. I don't want to flatten it.' When I acquired that business, I decided to call it Frost Group.

In the course of events what I did was to redesign my business and I created the Collective. And then it made sense: it started with 'The Nest' and from then on, this deliberate journey of creating new businesses, new brands, new people but in a shared environment, a supportive environment. What was lacking in a lot of businesses, and a lot of small businesses I've talked to is that they are in the same place I was where they are not so good at business; they may be great technicians, great at creativity and be great at making things come to life but at the fundamental day by day invoicing, costing, marketing, the PR, the HR, they struggle with that. So, I decided to create the Collective basically to support the other businesses to be the best they can be. There are six businesses and there will be eight. Each has a head. Prior to that there was just a bunch of people about 25 and very little structure. I decided to create stand-alone businesses within the Collective... They are focused on incremental growth and these businesses are steadily reaching those targets. That is the thing that is phenomenally exciting. Prior to that it was 'what are we doing this month?' Now I have designed a business to not need me.

Q: Is the crucial thing in your business is to be adaptive, to be responsive?

V: Absolutely. To be open to being challenged, to say yes to things you don't know the solutions for. You will always find a way. I try to find people who are going to share my vision and values and direction. I want them to thrive. I would not do it for my own personal pleasure or financial return but because I really want these guys to be the best they can be. I want them to be proud and confident, I want them to enjoy, to grow, to be inspired, question, challenge. I want them to be determined to be the best they can be and I want them to be determined that everything that they do, what they're working on that they'll find their way through to create the best outcome without being reliant on me or someone else. There are things bumping into you all the time that challenge you or make you alter your path, your decisions. For me it's the growth from day one to today. This for me is the challenge for being a *true* entrepreneur. I find that really exciting.

¹ Frost, V. (2014) Design Your Life, Lantern, Penguin Australia.