



Interview: Jason Kirk, founder of Kirk Originals

Jason's grandfather was a pioneer in optical safety lenses back in the '40s and '50s, and it is based on this heritage that Jason has reinvented the family technology into a leading-edge eyewear company selling globally today.



Your grandfather was an innovator of lens and frame technologies; what was it about the work he had started that attracted you to revive it and grow it into the successful business it is today?

It was the fact that he was an inspirational character. His motivation was that he wanted to create an industry rather than just creating individual achievements of his own. He wanted to create the whole industry around what he was doing. He innovated optics; he innovated lenses. He innovated certain frame manufacture techniques and then he helped other people set up factories all in the same area so that London and all around where he was, could become a centre of optical excellence. He was really inspirational; the stuff that he did was amazing. For example, adjustable nose fittings. Well, you know how varied people's noses are, and to actually come up with that concept at that time was way ahead of anything else. He invented a certain type of safety lens called the Motek Safety Lens, used by pilots and by Malcolm Campbell who held the water speed record. They made special safety goggles for that, then they used them during the war. They used the safety lens to protect buildings and protect planes as well. Using safety glass in planes, it was amazing, really incredible stuff. These were really inspirational characters – they weren't just inventing commercially – they were inventing practically as well.

What have you learnt through the years that you believe has enabled you to create a well respected, thriving company set apart in the optical world?

I would say there were two things. One is to listen to people and the other is not to listen to people – if that makes any sense. Listening to people, learning and constantly absorbing what people are saying all around you, absorbing influences and stimuli. You receive inspiration from places you least expect to and it is being completely open-minded and never closing off any ideas. Also don't listen too much to people because if you are too influenced by what people are advising you or directing you then you lose a lot of creativity; you lose a lot of your own direction. For example in the fashion industry, it's very easy to be told that 'next

year everything is going to be yellow' and so you go and design everything yellow because that's what someone told you. Specifically in our industry, you might have opticians who come to you and say everybody is starting to ask me for rhinestones in their glasses. So you go off and you respond to that. I don't think that's the way to design – not if you want to be truly creative and ground-breaking. But that's not necessarily what people want to do and you have to ask yourself what your motivation is, what direction you want to go in and what you want to achieve.

What processes do you go through when you are preparing to develop a new idea or range into a finished project ready for market?

It starts with a concept of what you are trying to achieve and then it's about achieving that. It's almost like if design is solving problems, then we take a step further back and we try to create the problem first. We look at what gaps there are in the market and what the market needs and doesn't necessarily know it needs yet. Once we have that idea, we decide how we are going to do that, how we are going to achieve that. For example, the concept for Kirk Heroes Collection, which is being launched in the autumn, was to look at optics or look at glasses in a way that they haven't been looked at before. It was about thoroughly enjoying wearing your glasses, so much so that you just didn't want to be without them. For example, one of the major challenges facing our industry at the moment is corrective surgery for eyes. So we are looking at people who will really want to wear glasses and taking that step further is the association of glasses with happiness. That was the challenge; that was the way we set out the challenge, and then what we did was look at how can we do that, how can we make people smile? It's all very well when they go to the optician and they see something that makes them laugh or something that makes them smile, they enjoy trying them on, they have great fun with the person selling the glasses. But what happens six months down the line, when they are at home with a pair of glasses and they put them on to see, or because they want to look good in a certain way or with a certain

set of clothes? How can we as designers touch those people six months, a year down the line? That was the challenge. The idea was, what if you can get inside their heads, what if you can actually carve a little niche that stays there, that works there? What we've done with the Heroes Collection is we have created characters that are not only visual, but also have a story. The idea is that the story stays with you, you read the story, you associate it with your character. It's a story that you enjoy and you associate, every time that somebody talks about your glasses you want to talk about this character that goes with the glasses and subconsciously every time you wake up and put your glasses on, that story is there in your mind. If it's made you laugh and it's made you smile then it's going to be there afterwards as well. So hopefully we can stay with the wearer for months, years into the future or as long as they have got these glasses. So that's the kind of challenge we create.

There are too many steps removed from our contact with the actual wearer and this is a problem a lot of designers face. For us ... let's just say, I am sitting in a room in France designing a pair of glasses. I design the glasses, I then go to an exhibition and sell them to an optician or perhaps even to a distributor. The distributor then sells them to an optician; they are then sold from the optician to the client, the end wearer. I have got very little control over the communication between the optician and the actual end wearer and that's one of the challenges because how can you make sure that the product is being sold in the way that you want it to be sold? How can you control the environment of sale? To an extent you can limit who you sell to – that just limits your market. Or you can help them create an ambience that you want to create to represent your product, which you can do through point of sale and peripheral products around the glasses. It's that communication; it's the distance between the creator and end user that we are trying to break down.

How would you describe the many young designers with whom you come in contact and whom you employ?

I think that there is a very high standard of design currently coming through. I think that because design education is much more accessible to people and many more people understand what a designer is – what a product designer is or what a graphic designer is – they understand how to respond to it. Because standards are so high, if you are going to get anywhere in the world of design, you have to have high standards because it is a challenging environment. You often recognise where people have come from, where their design formation is, and I think that's very important because they design in a particular way. You can say, 'Well, that comes from that kind of school of design.' I think that it's really important that young designers retain their individuality. Once again, it depends what they want to do, what they want to achieve from their design. Some people simply want to have a job where they are going to design anything, they just enjoy design. Other people want to create something completely different and completely new, and if you are going to do that, then that comes from the individual. It's really important that they retain their individuality if that's what they want.

If somebody is talented then they are talented, but then if somebody has got new ideas I think it goes back to what we were saying right at the beginning – that it's all about learning all the time and evolving all the time. Students just come out of college and they're full of fresh ideas and enthusiasm. There can be lots of great ideas then and there is no reason why those ideas shouldn't translate immediately into tangible projects. Also everybody is aware that they learn right the way through and that they evolve. If you look at the technology that's around that helps us to design, it is constantly and continuously evolving. There's a pressure to be up to date with the right technology. It allows you to achieve so much more if there is so much more there. It certainly makes your job that much easier but it also allows you to do things that have never been done before,

because the technology hadn't existed before. We have got to retain a certain Luddite element as well. If you go down too much of the technological route, you are limited by the technology. If you go back to the basics of what's in your brain then in some ways you are more limited. In theory you've got more scope because you can be creative and come up with something completely new, that just might be that notion that nobody else has got, by using and taking advantage of the tools that are around you.

What advice would you give to creatives who want to set about turning their own ideas into successful projects?

Listen – again, it's only about communication. I think that you have got to ask yourself what you want to achieve, that's the first thing. Assuming that you want to turn something into a creative project which also has some commercial viability, then you have to look at all aspects of that. You have to look at how commercial something actually is. The way that we normally approach projects is we normally look at existing markets. If we see the market is already there, there will already be people exploiting the market, almost certainly. Rather than looking for markets which are under-exploited, we have actually tried to create markets, and it's often an idea to try to create a market that doesn't already exist or that people aren't aware exists. Your Oculus is a perfect example where you're looking at the environment rather than the actual technology itself and people are unaware of that being a necessity. But it is a necessity and you have created a market that didn't exist before, or did exist but they weren't aware that it existed. I think that's really important.

You also have to look at commercial viability from lots of different points of view, but there is a temptation as a designer not to look at commercial viability. The temptation to view it as, 'This is my idea, it's a great idea, it's going to work' – you have got to be realistic about it and you've got to say, 'Well, financially, what can I do here? Have I got the backing I need in case this project doesn't work out? Have I got the backing to sit around for two years while the project takes form? Is the risk worth taking?' But my first answer is to listen, go out and talk to people. One of the best pieces of advice I ever had was from a marketing director who worked at a very high level for like twenty or thirty years. My grandfather and I just happened to know him and I said, 'Can I have half an hour with you?' He sat and listened to what we were trying to achieve with these glasses made by my grandfather and at the end of it he said, 'Well, I'll give you one piece of advice. It's take out the unique sales point that you have, the one unique strand in your story ...' (which was my grandfather) '... and use that history and never let go of it and keep that strand running through so that it's always recognisable as your own.' So if we attach the history to everything that we do in some way then it becomes recognisable as Kirk Originals. Therefore we do. It's a strand of recognition. If we then go off and start providing jewellery or furniture or whatever and we can attach that brand recognition to whatever we do then we have already got the advantages of the twelve-year history that we have in the commercial side of the product and the 100-year history that we have in the backing of the product. You can transfer your skills to other areas.

What characteristics are essential for turning an idea into a sustainable reality?

I think it is recognising your strengths and weaknesses. It's very unusual to find an individual who has all the necessary characteristics, the creativity, the drive, the commercialism, being able to do the press, being able to run the business; all those different things. It's virtually impossible to find all those characteristics in one person. It can exist but I haven't seen it before. Generally speaking, you have to recognise your strengths and weaknesses and then find those weaknesses and plug them up with other people who complement your skills. I think that's essential, that you don't leave gaps.

What do you think of the level of expertise demonstrated by new graduates that you have come in contact with?

I think it's pretty astonishing. I think that there is a lot of confidence and enthusiasm which comes through with ideas, which gives me the opportunity to force home ideas and make them into reality. For example, we had a lighting guy come into the shop and simply said he was doing lighting at St Martin's College in London and he wanted to do a project and could he use our shop for the project. His ideas were so good and so strong that we put his project into reality afterwards. I also have people coming to me directly with glasses and they often seem to be too influenced by existing products. I think that's a danger when people look to see what's going on. It's trying to be too commercial. It's trying to be too – 'I like sports glasses or I like the wrap-around look – these are the big players in the market at the moment and this is what they do, so if I do something like that then we are going to make money.' Or, 'If we are bringing you our designs or if we come up with something along those lines then Kirk Originals can make more money.' Well, that's not the way that we think. It's important that the designer targets their ideas. If they're taking their ideas to someone else, they target their idea at the person to whom they are bringing their idea. It's about targeting. It's about tailoring your idea.

If you take someone like Paul Smith for example – everything that they do is recognisable as Paul Smith, because there are certain strands of design that go with the Paul Smith brand, Paul Smith label, Paul Smith marketing. You will always recognise it as Paul Smith. That can be hugely varied. That can be photographic prints, it can be the Bar Code idea. There are two or three things that are going on in there but it has managed to translate into accessories, into clothing, into all sorts of things that I would always recognise as Paul Smith. Their designers all understand that they have to get the strand of Paul Smith into whatever they are doing. It's an understanding of the environment in which you are working as well.

Do you believe that the graduates and students could be doing more or other things to better equip themselves for a professional career in design?

I think it is important for graduates to move from theory into practice as much as possible during the course and as soon as possible after it. I think that boundless enthusiasm, which is an attribute, needs to be tempered with reality as well. Once again it is about tailoring to the environment in which you are going to work. If you work for yourself and you're going to create something for yourself and go out and sell your own ideas to other companies, then you are less restricted in terms of freedom of thought. But it depends on your financial capabilities as well and that has to be taken into consideration. If you want to work in a particular industry, optics for example, then you need to look at the kind of companies you want to work for. Do you want to work for a big company and create products that work under certain well-known labels, or do you want to work for a small company like ours and create something completely different and unique that flies against all those big labels? Do you want to go and move around all different companies? Do you want to be a freelance designer and sell your ideas to lots of different people? If you are going to consider that, you really need to taste some of those different products and different commercial environments to understand what it is that people require. When you pitch your idea to them, and

more importantly when you pitch yourself to them, it has to be tailored to what they are looking for, or what they don't know yet that they are looking for. In that case, you must convince them that it is what they are looking for.

Do you think the universities are equipped to be able to transfer those skills – do you think they have the knowledge base to be able to inject that amount of reality into what they are doing?

Yes in the sense that, for example, if you do a language course you generally go and live in that country for a year. It's the same principle. If you do a design course, if you do a product design course, go and work in a company, go and do a placement in a company that uses product designers. It's specifically looking at the area that you are looking at because you are not going to know. If you look at people who come out of business school who are brilliantly qualified, who write fantastic business plans and are taught how to run a company, when it comes down to it, there are commercial realities that they have no experience of. Without those, it's the experience of being open-minded and able to learn. It's the experience that you can't directly give unless you do placements and I think the placements are the most important thing.

How could designers learn to communicate better with people in other industries around them?

By trying to understand what those other industries are trying to achieve and what their boundaries, their strengths and their weaknesses are in the other industries. If you are a manufacturer, then you are generally trying to produce a product with the least amount of difficulty possible in the most efficient and cost-effective manner possible. You are not looking for complications, you are looking for simplicity. For designers it is a question of understanding that. Now for us, for example, when we go to half a dozen manufacturers that we work with most of the time, they know that we are going to present them with something that presents lots of problems. For example, we take an idea to a manufacturer as a challenge rather than directly asking if they can make

it for us, because if we did, they would just say no. But if we say, 'Here's an idea, have you done this before?' And they say, 'No,' these are the people we tend to go further with than we do with the ones who have been making glasses for thirty, forty years. If you can show them something they have never come across before, they are fascinated, they are interested, they are into their industries and they want to rise to that challenge. It's about gauging and understanding your colleague because that's what they are. Even if you are not actually directly working with them, it's about understanding what they want to achieve, what they want to do, what they get out of that business. Are they there just for the money? Well a lot of them are, in which case you have got to present them with something that shows them at the same time where they are going to make their money by having something simple, something easy and inexpensive to produce. On the other hand, do they want the challenge: are they really into their industry, and if they are, do you present them with a challenge? Understanding marketing people is the same thing: what do the marketing people want to get out of it? What do the press want to get out of it? You go to your press people and you say, 'I've got this product, here's the story behind it, here's what's interesting, this is the angle the press are going to grab on to.' It's understanding what each person, what each individual element of the project wants to get from it and how they are going to achieve it and presenting it to them. It's no use being lost in your own little world as a creative because it's not enough.

Do you believe universities are providing all the tools necessary for new graduates to grasp the complexities of the world of professional design? What would you suggest they might look at if they are not currently providing all the right tools?

I think the most important thing that universities can provide is communication with the people that are actually doing the design, the people that are actually hands-on. Understand the day-to-day issues that are involved in design, in whatever product or project there is. It's about communication with them and having the right teaching staff involved. It's offering people the opportunity to do placements. It's hands-on design for the graduates themselves. To me, that's the most important thing because you can do what you want. All the theory in the world is great but when you actually get down to it that's what you have to look at: the actual product itself. The reality that's involved in creating the product or creating the image or whatever it is you are trying to create. It's being able to talk to people who have been in the right position. For me the idea of university is teaching you how to seek knowledge for yourself. Firstly, I don't believe that creativity is something that can be taught. I think it is something that people either have or don't have. If you take for granted that people who have been accepted for a university course in design have that level of creativity, you don't necessarily have to be creative; you have to follow a set of rules. You have to solve a set of problems. It's learning how to approach a problem because generally speaking you establish the parameters of the problem yourself as a designer. That's one of the key points really. It's about learning how to do it yourself, because it's all very well having your two or three years at university or at college or wherever it is, but once you get out there you haven't got a tutor, you might not even have a team of people around you. You might just be there yourself. It's about absorbing what questions to ask yourself to actually get to the crux of the problem, the crux of the issue, and to me that's what university's job is, is to teach you to do it yourself. That's what students have got to grasp.