



## **Caroline Vermeulen**

**Profile:** Caroline's work in Accessibility, including her experience with Visual Impairments, colour blindness, Dyslexia, and learning about her own Endometriosis and ADHD, has shaped her approach to design.

These experiences have fuelled Caroline's empathy and reinforced her belief in designing with intention. She is passionate about sharing this knowledge with business owners, helping them implement inclusive design practices.

To Caroline, Graphic Design is about conveying a message effortlessly, while branding reflects a business's core values, quality, and expertise in a strategic, meaningful way. This balance is what drives her work and brings her joy.

## **Transcript:**

[00:00:00] Caroline Vermeulen and recently diagnosed with ADHD. I'm about over a year and a half of figuring out the ADHD of me.

(Voiceover) Why is it important to have diverse inputs in research?

[00:00:14] I can give an example that explains it really well. I used to work for guide dogs, so I used to always say, Oh, I must be really good because I designed for the blind.

[00:00:23] I'm a graphic designer, but I loved learning about the accessibility of design. And I remember that our team, I think they were the policies team, they've created shared, I think it was called shared spaces. And they basically changed the floor near a traffic light so that the dogs would know that means stop for traffic light.

[00:00:45] But they didn't consider people in wheelchairs with pains and aches in their bodies, and how bumping over those dots in the road would affect it. And I think it's things like that. And when you're so focused on one disability, like visual impairments, as Guide Dogs was, they didn't consider that there could be co-occurring disabilities, or just other disabilities that weren't anything to do with them.

[00:01:11] So I think that's why the more diverse an audience you have, then you get loads of different inputs so that you can make a well-rounded solution.

(Voiceover) What advice would you recommend to early career researchers to create inclusive settings when co-creating or conducting research?

[00:01:27] I dunno if I'm the best person to answer this it, 'cause I don't, I'm not involved in anything like that.

[00:01:32] I'm quite insular, which is starting to make me think I need to actually get some people to collaborate and get some ideas. I think medium to large size businesses should create some sort of a think tank or a research project, and I'm starting to realise there's lots of those companies out there.

[00:01:49] Which I never really realised before. So it didn't make sense. So there's been a lot of talk around flexible working in order to get the best out of someone. And I think COVID has definitely made that more possible. Flexible working because of COVID people couldn't go into work and then businesses are now seeing the benefit of that.

[00:01:49] Which I never really realised before. So it didn't make sense. So there's been a lot of talk around flexible working in order to get the best out of someone. And I think COVID has definitely made that more possible. Flexible working because of COVID people couldn't go into work and then businesses are now seeing the benefit of that.

[00:02:11] And us neurodiverses realised that actually we work I know for me, I work so hard, but I don't necessarily work nine to five. And I did try and get back into normal employment and it was nine to five. And I was like, Oh, it's like a prison sentence. It feels really awful to be like, I have to sit by my desk and I have to do my work.

[00:02:33] Whereas normally I'll have TV playing because the noise has helped me to focus and I'll work Maybe 8 till 10, might have a two hour break, but then I'll be working at 9 till 10 that evening as well. So I'm all over the shop and I have to listen to my own energy levels. And I think that's the best way is to start understanding that neurodiversity people for ADHD, autism, dyslexia, they've got skills in different areas that might not necessarily be traditional.

[00:03:03] So creating flexibility around the workplace. is starting a conversation, I reckon.

(Voiceover) In terms of your lived experience, what have you seen done well, or what has worked well for you in the past?

[00:03:19] So there's a lot there's a lot out there. I think I'm more aware of it because I've gone ADHD, about my ADHD, and I'm hyper focused on learning everything I can, and I've attracted a few neurodiverse clients that way as well, and I'm getting a real understanding on how to.

[00:03:30] improve on work with the idea of accessibility and neurodiversity being in my mind, but that still benefits the much bigger picture, because I always think that graphic design should be digested, not distract from the content. And so I've put that thought into it anyway. But now my strategy is looking at layout and understanding that text overwhelm is a thing.

[00:03:58] And to actually format text in a really good and clever way. So the research I've fallen into it. I've been really lucky. So when I was at Guide Dogs, what I loved the most was designing for accessibility. From the very basic level, it's upping the text size. So instead of starting at 10 point, if I remember correctly, I think we started at 12.

[00:04:18] So making the text bigger, understanding things like putting light text as in weight and colour on a dark background. If it's printed, that could fill in and disappear. So you got to think about that. People that are reading, people that wear glasses designing for people that are colourblind, which is a really large majority of men, there's a large percentage, something like 68 or 86.

[00:04:43] I don't know numbers in me, but a really large proportion of men are colorblind. So thinking about contrast ratio, and then I've gone throughout the years to like different webinars and courses and talks, and I've made an effort to learn about layouts and topography and just making simple things like instead of on an A4 piece of paper, having one column that stretches across the page, maybe breaking into two columns because it's smaller bite sized pieces for people to read.

[00:05:10] And then recently I went to a talk on dyslexia and, not dyslexia, accessibility and graphic design, but it reminded me about the stuff I learned about dyslexia from guide dogs. And that is things like, it. I like learning about the, mind your P's and Q's, came from like the printer's thing, because they were next to each other in boxes.

[00:05:31] But that also applies for dyslexia. If you flip the letters so that they overlay each other, and there's no difference whatsoever, the P and the Q could get mixed up. Or the B and the D. So things like putting that flick back on. Don't be oversimplifying your font, because dyslexia people, their brain moves too fast, and they can't absorb the information if you're making it hard for them.

[00:05:55] I love learning about stuff like that. I go to loads of talks.

Some of my clients actually deliver talks on accessible accessibility and with training and stuff. And so I see that side of the things, cause obviously I read the things that I design. But yeah, I also just think I've naturally been drawn to designing that way because without knowing I was ADHD, I was just thinking Oh I'm everyone's worst client.

[00:06:19] I've got a low attention span. So you have to design for an attention span. So yeah, so I've just lucked into these situations without knowing why, and that's how I've done my research.

(Voiceover) Can you share any common mistakes that researchers should avoid?

[00:06:46] I think the example again about the shared surface area from guide dogs about not having a collaboration. It's hard for me to talk on what researchers should do. Cause I don't look at things in that way. I'm not really in that world. So the research I get is mainly from people who have niched into a certain job. So one of my clients is a trainee and she's discovered her kids are autistic and now she discovered she's autistic.

[00:07:05] And so she's obviously learning about what she does with that slant. And now she's niching towards there. So I pick up information like that. Things like my daughter's recently diagnosed autistic. So now I'm looking into obviously learning about the autism because I've got to understand her brain.

[00:07:24] And that leads me to understand Oh, okay. There's many overlaps with ADHD and autism. And that applies to the work that I produce.

(Voiceover) Is there anything else researchers should be mindful of when working with the disabled community?

[00:07:52] I think it's the same with anything. So my viewpoint on, I don't even know if it's politics, because I'm like surface level. I'll look at TikTok for my news. So I'm not like super clever, but I can see things, and it happened I think in South Africa as well, with the apartheid, the country's so big and split apart. And when you're in a group of like minded people, that's all very well, but you're not stretching your brain or growing your soul.

[00:08:04] And I think that applies with anything. If you get a diverse range of people, you will have their thoughts and their opinions will influence the research that you're doing. So as long as you can get a diverse audience set where you can get a lot of opinions rather than just one. And the famous example of seatbelts and cars being designed for men, and then it's killing a bunch of women.

[00:08:28] It's just get a woman in the room and just maybe have some input. So you can be like, Oh, okay. I didn't realise it was a problem because I'm a man, just that, just including loads of people put requests out there for, we're doing this project, we would love input. And we want a wide range of people to do that.

(Voiceover) Do you have any final tips or recommendations you would like to share?

[00:09:15] I've done a lot of learning over the last year and a half, mainly about myself and my neurodivergent, and it's been quite a journey, and I think people fall into the trap of, oh, now it's everyone talks about neurodiversity and it's the flavour of the month or whatever. And it's no, I think it's the flavour of the month because I think COVID did a lot of damage.

[00:09:40] People that are naturally masking, like myself, like I didn't know that's what I was doing. Gets pushed right to the end when you're in like a high-stress situation and neurodiversity; neurodivergent people are more prone to PTSD because of the way their brain works really well in a crisis. But then when the crisis is over, we're still in crisis mode and our brain is going like a hundred miles an hour.

[00:10: 05] So that's pushed that flavour of the month forward. So people are talking about a lot more and I think just having conversations I've had conversations with friends where they're like, Oh yeah, but everyone's a little bit neurodiverse. Like we were all on, on like the spectrum and I'm like, okay, but I dare you to live in my body for a day because it's not super cute and fun.

[00:10:29] I know I'm like the cute, crazy one and I'm so like, quirky and it's just, yeah, but I also have seven techniques to remember an appointment. It's that's not easy work. So I think just with anything, just, be curious and be kind. And maybe, it's coming from me. It's hilarious, but don't put your opinion first, which I'm like always do because of my ADHD, but that's the only thing I can think of is just to be curious and kind and understand that everyone is different, whether they're neurotypical or neurodiverse or walking or in a wheelchair, everyone has a brain and everyone has things that we can connect with.

[00:11:11] We can have more in common than we have. Difference. And just, yeah, I guess just be curious and kind. So I guess my input always comes from a place of branding and graphic design because that's my job, that's my passion, that's my love. The thing with the design that I do that I think a lot of people don't understand is the strategy that's involved.

[00:11:33] So this applies with an overall core values of a company or a brand. And so I start always with the brand personality. And I divide that up into sections, but what a lot of people don't understand is how that permeates through everything they do. So it's a question of, are you going to use contractions when you talk?

[00:11:59] So for example, You are going to the shops today can be you're going to the shops today. And the difference is you are, is a lawyer. You're is a approachable, casual company and everything. If you are wanting to be an intelligent brand, Then that gets translated through the way that you speak in your language, that you use, the way that you interact with people on social media, and obviously the way that you approach design, the types of images you choose.

[00:12:31] So it's, The brand story kind of interweaves through everything. So my input's always going to be from my knowledge base, which is how to come across. And then for my, I don't like, I haven't gotten to the word disability yet. Cause I think I think if anything, I'm over, ability, like I've got so much going on that's what makes me Don't even like saying the word disabled because I feel like I don't know there's people worse off than me I just have a brain that's too much but my disability I would come from the point of view of accessibility means options. So if you're designing a website, for example, have the freedom to choose how you want to read the website So you can get some plugins where the person can change from the normal design to reversed out.

[00:13:27] So it can be white text on a black background instead of how I've put it, white, black text on a white background. Just things like that. So my input in any kind of research program will always be from a design point of view and what I've learned about neurodiversity. So I would only be one voice and I would hope that they would have other voices because I don't know what it's like to be other disabled.