

Creating a CUSTOMER Journey

After years of having an operations focus, BOAL is shifting its modus operandi to incorporate stronger relationships with its staff, suppliers, and particularly its customers.

Images by Huib Nederhof

“There is continuous innovation—working with our customers on where value can be created: what is technically possible, what makes economic sense.”

- Ronald Boers

Ronald Boers, CEO and majority shareholder of BOAL Group, had worked in Italy, the UK and Germany before returning to the Netherlands. Educated at international universities and having worked for global multinational corporations, Ronald was strongly motivated by the opportunity to work on something of his own. In 2007 he purchased BOAL Group, a company consisting of three subsidiaries in the Netherlands, one in Belgium and one in the UK. Together with about 550 employees, Ronald started transforming the business.

BOAL Group has almost always been a family-run business. Buying the organisation was a big move for Ronald because although the company had a well-established position in the market, it also required serious ‘updating.’ “It was,

at the time, a classic production-focused organisation; you produce wonderful products, you have the best engineering possible, and therefore the outcome must be wonderful products that the market wants to buy from you. It was that kind of attitude. In itself, there’s nothing wrong with that because the company had already existed for almost 40 years, so who was I to say that’s no good? The big thing that I noted was that in today’s market and especially tomorrow’s market, this attitude might become outdated quickly.

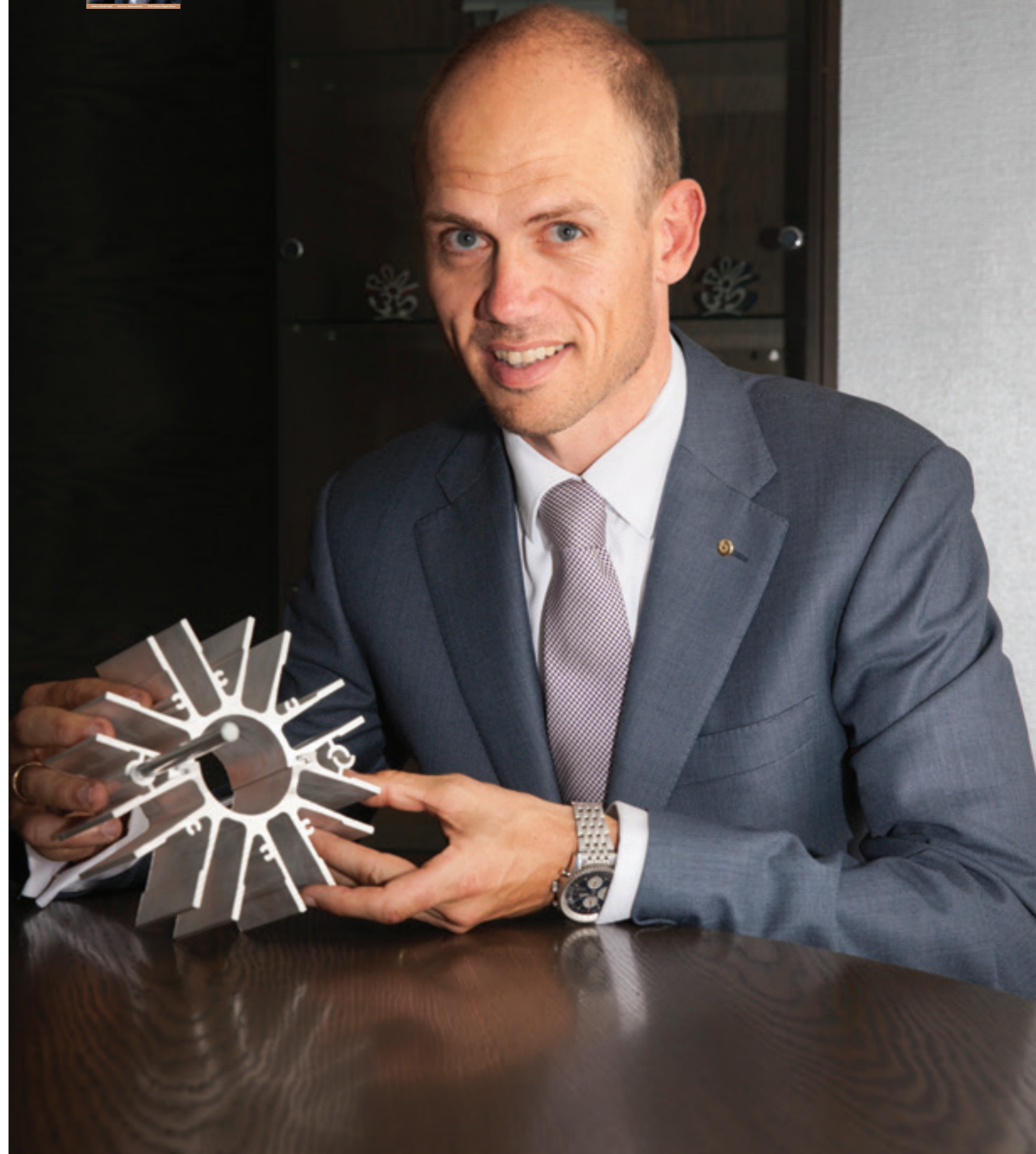
“I believed that there was a great opportunity if we could change the culture of the organisation, towards more market focus and truly understanding how we add value for our customers. What I saw was that most of the commercial discussions are about two parameters, volume and cost; whereas I learned over time that

the real customer needs are actually much more complex and interesting than that. The focus on volume and cost was not just in the company, but for a good part of the whole industry too.”

Ronald notes while BOAL is one group, there are two different businesses within the group. “One is the extrusion business where we extrude aluminium profiles which have either been designed for a particular application of a specific customer such as a window frame, or are an industrial standard such as tube section. A customer may buy a single-profile design or hundreds of different profiles according to their needs. A die is a steel tool you use to create the profile by squeezing aluminium through it. Our design team works closely with our customers to help them to create the profiles that they will use in their products. There is >



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“The other business is focused on the industrial greenhouse business. This industry has seen huge innovation in recent years as farmers strive to improve yields. We supply the roof system to these greenhouses, which may sound quite simple, but there is a constant drive to produce ever lighter-weight structures that maximise the amount of light reaching the crop.

“Due to the increased need for food globally, financial institutions have purchased projects of between 20 and 40 hectares of greenhouses that are to be built at once in one location. We do not only supply the aluminium, but also make sure it’s a smart building block so they can build as quickly and safely as possible. We have a portfolio of patents that we defend

when necessary, but we feel our strength is in continuous innovation and staying two steps ahead of our competitors.”

When Ronald acquired BOAL Group in 2007, the company lacked clear direction regarding its purpose and operations. This needed to change immediately. “The first company-wide project I launched was called ‘Basics First’ and it was all about getting focus on the business fundamentals and measuring how we were doing. Once we had established the accurate reporting of the data each week we established targets and set off on a path of continuous improvement.

“Extrusion is a 24/7 business. We do maintenance during pre-planned shutdowns at the weekends but the process is almost non-stop. In our group, this means we’re pressing over 55,000 tonnes of aluminium each year. Every minute that a press is not pressing or is pressing in an

inefficient way, it costs us money, so efficiency is key to the success of our business.

“As a result of our various initiatives we’re getting good insight into what the market expects from us and how we can best meet those needs. In particular, our process of getting more customer-oriented means we have open discussions with our customers.

Being a mid-tier organisation, BOAL Group works with some of the biggest names in the industry to ensure continuous improvement and growth through collaboration. “We’re working with companies like Rio Tinto Alcan and Hydro, and these are companies that are more than 100 times bigger than we are. It’s not smart to look at them as suppliers and nothing else. We actually take a completely different path and try to bring these companies on board. We tell them that we’re in this market together and we can both benefit. My value proposition in any discussion is that if there isn’t a win-win then it will never be sustainable. For us, it became crucial to bring our suppliers on board and make them aware of what we’re doing.

“We have quarterly meetings with our suppliers where we actually give them the same presentations that we give to our banks with insights into our strategy: where we want to go, our financial performance, our factory performance. We want to make them aware of where we are heading, how we are growing our business, and how we want them to be a part of it. Although we are a small part of their businesses we have found them willing to invest the time to understand where we are going and how they can best support us. At the same time, we discuss with them shorter-term operational issues if there has

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been a problem with on-time delivery or we want to increase our volume of raw material. We want them to be aware of these things so they aren’t caught by surprise in the future. These companies appreciate the openness and our relationship is very much based on honesty and trust.”

say, ‘Finally, someone is truly listening and trying to understand what I really need’. We want to make the buying process as positive an experience as possible for the customer; it takes a lot of effort and there’s a lot of learning that we’re currently going through to get that organised.”

A more recent development within BOAL Group is the Customer Journey project, which aims to create consistent positive customer experiences and so encourage loyalty. “The Customer Journey project is all about creating awareness among the BOAL staff on what it is to be a BOAL customer. This is still a ‘work in progress’ within the business. You present to people and say, ‘You’re a customer yourself every single day when you go to the grocery store to do your shopping. What are the things you like and dislike?’ Once you enter an office, you’re still the same human being and you still have the same likes and dislikes about how people treat you, how the environment is, and how quickly you get a reply. The team has quickly understood that the same goes for our customers and so we have to treat them how we’d want to be treated. Within the first few months of launching the program we got all kinds of examples and, fortunately, we are getting a lot of positive feedback from our customers. They

According to Ronald, BOAL Group is focused on being fast, reliable, and trusted. This has helped develop a family mentality that permeates throughout the business, particularly with staff, suppliers, and customers. “Contracts are always a part of business, but ours are extremely simple if you consider the financial value of them. Let’s say you call me, or one of my sales teams, and we agree upon a price, then we have a contract. After the event, we will follow up with the necessary paperwork but our relationships with our customers, many of whom have been with us for many years, are based on trust. Our customers tell me that they appreciate these values and I believe the future for BOAL looks very good because we can offer something that is honest and sincere. Since we’re a privately owned business and have been around for many years, I don’t need to focus on quarterly reporting—it’s a long-term journey together with our staff, suppliers, and our customers.”

“From a simple transactional relationship, BOAL and Rio Tinto Alcan have forged a long lasting partnership characterised by trust, solutions oriented collaboration, and value adding services. Rio Tinto Alcan is proud to be part of BOAL’s success.” - Mario Trépanier, Commercial Director - Strategy Optimization, Rio Tinto Alcan



Delivering a responsible future

At Rio Tinto Alcan, we care about our clients’ success. We work in partnership with our customers to provide products and services that respond to their needs.

We are proud to be part of BOAL’s success and we are looking forward to continue our partnership.

RioTintoAlcan