From product to person: wealth management in a new era

By Michel Wetser & Marlies van Boven

Wealth management is rapidly shifting from 'portfolio management' towards a broader, personal service. This is precisely the theme of the VBA Journaal summer edition 2026: from asset management to wealth management.
In this interview, Richard de Groot (ABN AMRO) takes us through the forces behind that shift: customers who expect a 'digital first' approach, have less time but more information, and therefore demand transparency, overview, and customization.

This directly relates to the practice of portfolio construction: equities remain the primary source of return, but their implementation is becoming more refined through regional accents, different bond blocks ('safe' versus yield), variants with more or less active risk, and a broader range of ESG and impact preferences. The classic 60/40 mix also remains recognizable as a starting point, but requires further development now that correlations are changing and diversification is becoming scarcer. At the same time, he warns against overlooked risks and emphasizes that discipline in processes is at least as decisive as the choice of the right building blocks.

WHICH STRUCTURAL TRENDS IN YOUR OPINION ARE CHANGING THE WEALTH MANAGEMENT DOMAIN THE MOST?

We see a number of trends that are fundamentally changing wealth management. First, there is the rapidly growing need to view assets from a holistic approach.
This goes beyond just the investment portfolio: clients increasingly expect a complete picture of their entire financial situation, including assets held elsewhere at other banks. Taxation, estate planning, business assets, and philanthropy are increasingly incorporated into the advice.

We also see this reflected in changing customer expectations. 'Digital first' is truly becoming more and more a requirement for society as a whole, but certainly also within wealth management.
The personal relationship still plays a very important role in this and is highly appreciated by customers. However, it is important that the contact is perceived as relevant and personal.
We are also seeing this personalization increasingly reflected in the investments themselves. We are increasingly able to offer tailor-made solutions in a standardized manner, making it feel like a truly personal solution to the client. For example: clients can opt for active management of their equity portfolio while simultaneously opting for passive management of their bond portfolio. The underlying building blocks remain managed in a standardized way, but the combination feels like a genuine custom solution to the client.

At the same time, the investment universe itself is changing. Categories such as private markets and even crypto are becoming available to an ever-growing group of investors. And while sustainable investing remains an important component, we are seeing a more nuanced approach emerge, with more room for client wishes and less dogmatism. This reflects broader shifts in society. Moreover, the context differs by country. In the Netherlands, ABN AMRO has a broad footprint, ranging from retail to private banking. In countries like Belgium and France, we are more focused on wealth management in the strict sense.

Richard de Groot (ABN AMRO)

Since 2017, Richard de Groot has led the Global Investment Centre within ABN AMRO Bank, one of the largest wealth managers in Europe with approximately 240 billion euros in assets under management across the group, and bears ultimate responsibility for the investment policy of ABN AMRO clients.

He began his career in 1998 in asset management at ABN AMRO and moved to private banking in 2005, where he was responsible for the development of asset management/portfolio management within ABN AMRO MeesPierson. In his role, he regularly publishes investment updates and market commentary for ABN AMRO's private banking channels.

That context also colors what the holistic approach looks like in practice.

HOW DO CUSTOMER NEEDS AND BEHAVIOR CHANGE IN THIS NEW CONTEXT?

Clients are more informed than ever, but have less time to process information or prefer to spend less time on it. This creates a paradox: they desire both depth and simplicity, and both detail and overview. Reports are therefore structured in layers. Clients can choose how far to zoom in, but the advisor plays an indispensable role in interpreting performance and risks, especially during periods of market turmoil.
Consider moments when events occur in the world that affect clients, such as geopolitical tensions or market shocks. In such situations, it is precisely the advisor who proactively reaches out: how do we view the situation, what are we doing regarding your portfolio, and what does it mean for you? Scenario analyses are a powerful tool in this regard to make risks tangible and understandable, even during the initial inventory meeting.

> CLIENTS WANT DEPTH AND SIMPLICITY.
> IN THIS PERSPECTIVE, THE ADVISOR IS THE TRANSLATOR OF COMPLEXITY INTO UNDERSTANDABLE AND TRUSTED ADVICE.

We observe a wide variety of client preferences in this regard, ranging from private individuals who view investing purely as a means to an end to clients operating at a virtually institutional level. Moreover, client behavior is not directly dependent on the size of their assets. Entrepreneurs are generally more critical and demanding, simply because they are used to being in the driver's seat themselves. Moreover, large fortunes are regularly managed through family offices or external advisors, where in-depth discussions are the norm. ABN AMRO has a separate family office department for this purpose, which adds value in the areas of estate planning and wealth transfer to future generations, without determining the investment policy itself.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) will further reinforce these trends.
With the help of AI, it becomes easier to conduct in-depth analyses and subsequently discuss them with the advisor.
However, we are still fully in an experimental phase.
Customers are starting to use AI to perform portfolio analyses and ask targeted questions, but it is still limited.

HOW DO YOU TRANSLATE THESE BROAD TRENDS INTO PORTFOLIO STRUCTURE?

In our portfolio construction, too, we seek a combination of depth and simplicity. There are ever-increasing possibilities, but we work for clients, and it is essential that they understand what we do and why. That is a conscious choice that the to-
co-determines the accessibility of our offer.

The foundation of our portfolios has remained recognizable: equity risk is and remains the primary source of return. However, we are increasingly differentiating our offerings. In terms of regional diversification, alongside portfolios based on an All Country World Index (including emerging markets), we also have portfolios with a clear European tilt. Clients can choose what best aligns with their personal preference.

Within bonds, we distinguish a 'safe' block, consisting of investment-grade government bonds, corporate bonds, and covered bonds, and a 'yield block' aimed at generating additional returns through high-yield and emerging market debt, for which we pursue an active duration policy.

We also offer clients a choice regarding the amount of active risk. Index investing is gaining interest, including among wealth management clients. Therefore, we also have portfolios that are predominantly passively managed. For US equities, we are increasingly opting for passive management. The high market concentration in the US makes it particularly difficult for active managers to add value. Should that concentration decrease in the future, that assessment may change again.
We are not dogmatic about this. For emerging markets and bonds, particularly investment-grade corporate bonds and high-yield, we specifically deploy active managers, where selection can really make the difference.

Finally, we offer a broad range when it comes to ESG preferences. All our portfolios are SFDR Article 8 compliant, but we differentiate based on the extent to which ESG plays a prominent role. And we see a growing group of clients who consciously choose impact investing.

IS THE TRADITIONAL 60/40 WALLET STILL DIFFICULTURAL?

That is a valid question, but I think it is more prevalent in our industry than among our clients. In general, a 60/40 portfolio still offers significant benefits, and it also helps how intuitively this is understood by clients. Many clients prefer asset classes they are familiar with and that are liquid.

In our medium risk profile, we specifically apply an allocation of approximately 55% equities, 35% bonds, and 10% liquidity: a practical translation of the 60/40 framework to current market conditions. Nevertheless, as an asset manager, we explicitly look for opportunities for improvement, with this framework serving as our starting point.

For example, during times of negative interest rates, we were partially invested in hedge funds that offered a better chance of higher returns as an alternative to bonds. And for quite some time, we have maintained an allocation to gold as additional diversification, offered via an ETC (Exchange Traded Commodity), not via physical storage. The rationale behind gold is broader than just diversification: also

Rising government debt worldwide is a reason. The moment those debts become a real concern in the market, investors are inclined to diversify further away from (debt in) the dollar. Gold benefits structurally from this. Moreover, central banks have been net buyers of gold for years, providing a sustained tailwind. We do offer crypto to clients, but for the time being, we do not include it in asset management portfolios.

WHICH UNDEREXPOSED (STRUCTURAL) RISKS DESERVE MORE ATTENTION?

The first thing I think of is the changing correlations. The correlation between stocks and bonds is a foundation of the 60/40-portfolio, and that correlation has generally been higher than historically usual in recent years. As a result, bonds offer less diversification benefit than in the past. It is

It is wise to also look at other options that offer diversification, such as gold, commodities, or alternative strategies.

> ALTERNATIVES LIKE GOLD ARE NO LUXURY ANYMORE, BUT A SERIOUS ONE ADDITION TO THE PORTFOLIO

Secondly, I would mention liquidity risk. Professional investors generally understand this risk well, but for wealth management clients, the situation may be different. It has been quite some time since we truly experienced a liquidity shortage. Therefore, it is of great importance to discuss illiquidity clearly—think of private markets—and to verify whether clients know what they are agreeing to. ABN AMRO

explores the possibilities of investing in private equity, private credit, and infrastructure, with a preference for evergreen structures with limited liquidity. When taking steps in asset management portfolios, it is logical to start with a combination of private equity, private credit, and infrastructure. These are the most logical first steps. In doing so, we take a conservative starting point: even though there is some liquidity in evergreen structures, we assume that it may dry up under certain market conditions. Close-end funds are offered on an individual basis. For asset management portfolios, we are deliberately cautious.

Thirdly, I would mention the increased concentration risk. In some portfolios, the weight of specific companies has increased significantly in recent years, driven by the explosive growth of the tech sector. Moreover, the returns of these companies are partially correlated. More attention should be paid to this, including in conversations with clients.

HOW DO YOU PREVENT BEHAVIORAL RISKS FROM DISRUPTING THE PORTFOLIO?

It is important to distinguish between the choices our clients make and the choices our portfolio management team makes. Towards clients, we have an obligation to clearly explain how financial markets work and how they can avoid certain pitfalls.

For instance, we believe that timing markets is particularly difficult and can potentially cost a lot of return. Our advice is therefore often: stick to the strategy established at the outset. We substantiate this with concrete analyses, for example by showing how much return it costs if you miss the best stock market days due to market timing.

> STICK TO THE STRATEGY THAT ATT
> START DATE HAS BEEN DETERMINED

However, behavioral risks also play a role in our own investment teams. This is where a sound process helps: clear agreements regarding rebalancing and 'sell discipline'. These agreements must be made before a specific market situation arises, so that they can actually do their job when it matters.

Furthermore, quantitative models play a fixed role in our investment process. We use various models and have agreements on how to handle their signals, with sufficient flexibility, but also so that we cannot simply disregard them.

HOW DOES INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION WITHIN THE INVESTMENT CENTRE ENSURE CONSISTENT QUALITY AND LOCAL RELEVANCE?

The Investment Centre operates from four countries: Germany, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. The key to our collaboration is that we organize responsibility globally as much as possible, where the employee's location is irrelevant. Portfolio managers in Amsterdam make investment decisions for clients in all four countries, and vice versa. Only in this way can you create a situation where everyone collaborates optimally and no one builds a local silo.

That is not always easy. It also requires explicit attention in our HR policy to the willingness to cooperate internationally. We have established a central risk management and performance measurement function: portfolios are closely monitored in all countries, and any allocation differences are actively discussed.

Portfolios are kept as consistent as possible. We only deviate locally in the event of fiscal or statutory restrictions. Our approach is pragmatic: working as consistently as possible, but taking into account what is locally necessary in the client's best interest.

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We try to ensure that tax considerations influence the investment policy as little as possible, but make restrictions or tailor-made solutions where necessary.

The biggest differences lie in the tax field. For example, in a number of countries you have to deal with a capital gains tax, whereas this is virtually non-existent in the Netherlands.
In the Netherlands, the challenges surrounding Box 3 are dominant for many clients. For instance, due to Box 3, we sometimes hold cash instead of a money market fund, which is very common in France. The FGR structure (Fonds voor Gemene Rekening) also offers Dutch investors tax advantages that do not exist elsewhere. Taxation is in principle the responsibility of the client themselves, but Box 3 is so broad and structural that we actively incorporate it into our investment policy.

Local roots, as part of the international team, also ensure relevance to clients. They can speak with a dedicated specialist in their own country and language—someone who truly helps shape policy. Clients appreciate that.

HOW DO INVESTORS' INVESTMENT PORTFOLIOS AND RISK ATTENTION DIFFER BY COUNTRY – AND WHAT DOES THAT MEAN FOR THE MANAGEMENT AND INVESTMENT APPROACH?

We see no major differences when it comes to risk attitude.
We use the same risk profiles in all countries. Where we do see differences, however, is in local customer preferences. In France, many customers still have a strong 'home bias' or at least a Eurozone bias, whereas in the Netherlands, global indices are seen as the natural starting point. In Germany, there is a strong preference not to invest in funds but in individual investments.
to invest in asset securities. This preference has a historical cause: in the past, relatively many products with high costs were sold in Germany, often active funds, which appealed to customers and advisors has created a natural resistance.
In the Netherlands, we have traditionally been one of the cheapest markets in terms of management fees, which sets a different perspective on that discussion. Education plays an important role here: what are the pros and cons, and how do they influence performance?

WE ARE PROUD THAT WE ARE A REAL INTERNATIONAL TEAM HAVE DOWN-SET WITH SHARED PORTFOLIOS, A SHARED CULTURE AND ONE INVESTMENT BELIEF ABOUT FOUR TO LAND

For us, this means that we create central policy, but then translate it into various model portfolios.
We have portfolios with a Euro tilt as well as portfolios with a global basis. However, I want to emphasize that the differences are relatively limited. For the most part, we can construct the portfolios in a consistent and harmonized manner. That is precisely the strength of our international model.

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When asked about the future of the sector and what he is most proud of, Richard de Groot does not hesitate. 'AI will have a huge impact, both on the investment engine and on the way we serve clients. The world in five to ten years will be fundamentally different. But what already makes me most proud is that we have built a truly international team: collaborating across four countries, with harmonized portfolios and a shared culture. That is not something to be taken for granted, and we have succeeded.'