

White Paper

# Designed to succeed—How design is playing a strategic role in today's software products?

# Abstract

“Good design is good business”—we heard this way back in the 1950s from Thomas Watson of IBM fame. Cut to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and good design seems to have become more critical than ever. Higher competition coupled with evolving needs of the customer have made design a strategic differentiator for software products.

This paper analyzes the new meaning that design has come to acquire in today's competitive business environment. By citing examples of some leading software products, this paper seeks to establish that design is no more an afterthought while building a product but is increasingly being used as a strategic differentiator.

# Introduction

In his book 'Don't make me think', Steve Krug talks about human computer interaction and web usability. The central idea in the book is that if a website makes a user stop and think about what he is doing, the design needs to be reconsidered. Though the book primarily focuses on e-commerce websites, a lot of what he says can be applied to other software applications too.

Users like software applications that are simple, intuitive and do not thwart their normal thinking process. They want their apps to be friendly, focused, functional, fun, and fast. They like apps where they can make connections—with ideas, insights, and people. They want apps which do not make them feel stupid. Good design delivers all this and more.

## Design as a differentiator

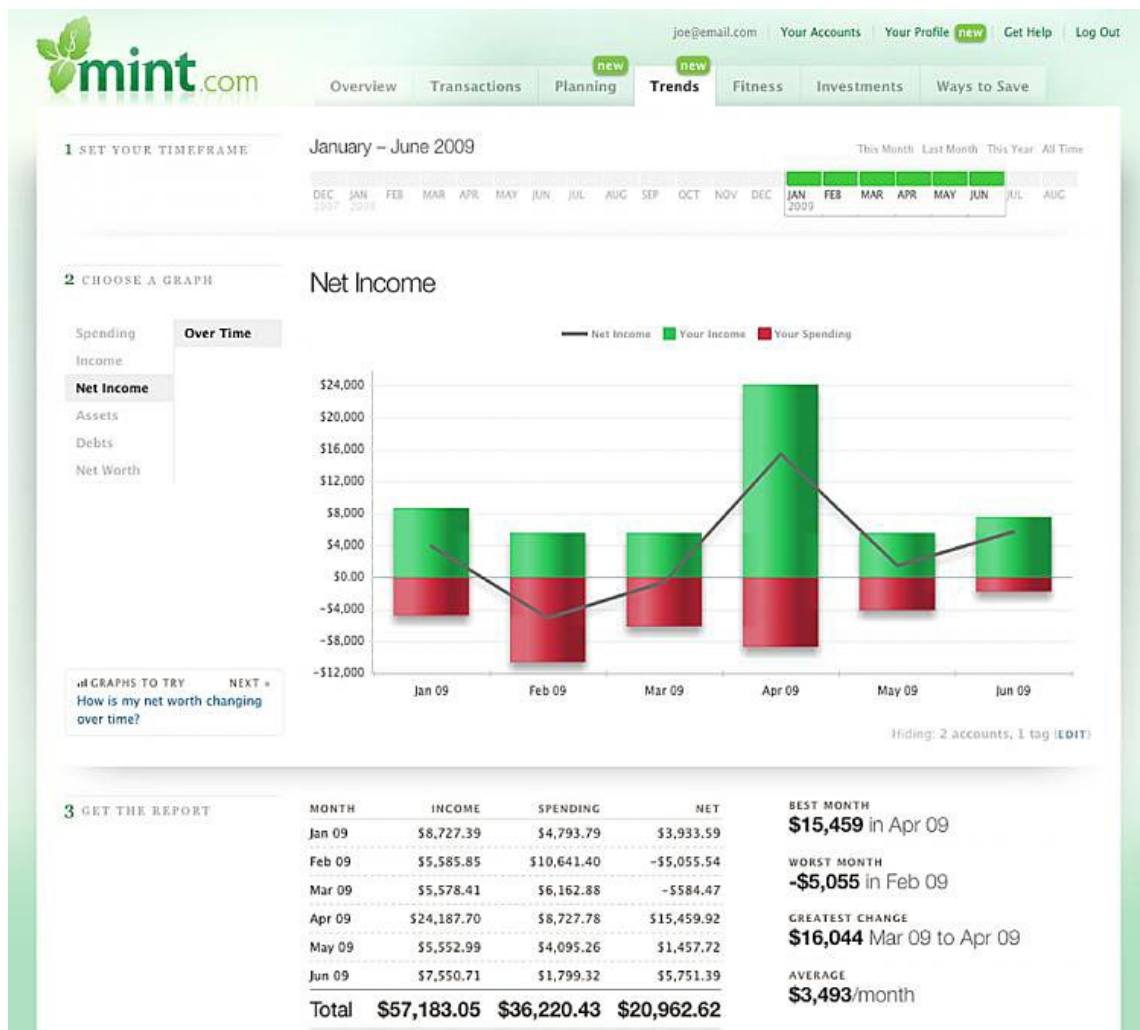
Many software products today are making a mark for themselves by creating a memorable experience for the user through design. We have apps like Mint which successfully built trust amongst its users on the basis of design to solutions like Wufoo which designed its user experience based on the principles of dating and marriage. Let us take a closer look at how these products distinguished themselves from the crowd on the basis of good design.



### Mint, an experiment in Emotional Design

An online application like Mint, which requires users to share their critical bank routing numbers and other financial details is often looked at with mistrust and fear. So when Mint was launched in 2006, it faced serious trust issues from prospective users. In its early days, even venture capitalists steered clear from it.

In an interview with Aarron Walter, author of *Designing for Emotion*, Jason Putorti, the then Head Designer of Mint, speaks about how he went about overcoming this trust factor and designing Mint around human emotions. According to Putorti, trust is more of an emotional response than a rational decision. He believed in the power of visual design to influence this emotional response in a positive way.



“Flat, function-driven design is boring. It works well in a product such as Flickr, where the content itself is the meaning and delivers the emotional feel. In this case, the job of the UI designer is to get out of the way. A financial management app is a different challenge, the information itself has to be presented in a useful way that also delights and excites the user.”

Jason Putorti, Head Designer, Mint.com

Bank websites were very utilitarian and boring. So was Quicken. Red was Quicken's color, so he chose green as Mint's color.

In an interview with FirstRound, Putorti further points out that simplicity and responsiveness were some of the organizing principles behind the design. Whereas most online web services at the time,

like Flickr, used a flat design aesthetic, Mint used more 3D designs, particularly to separate out important sections. This makes it tougher for users to make erroneous clicks.

The emotional experience of the design is crucial for both the designer and the user. Mint's designers spent countless hours airbrushing design elements and choosing the right color scheme to get the feel of the web app precisely right. The iconography for login screens emphasized the secure nature of the page, helping to convince users who might otherwise be skeptical of giving away their bank information.

In September 2009, exactly two years after launch, Mint.com was acquired by Intuit for a whopping \$170 million. As on November 2013, Mint.com has more than 10 million users who trust its product.



Google Maps

## Google Maps for iOS, the blending of utility, usability and desirability

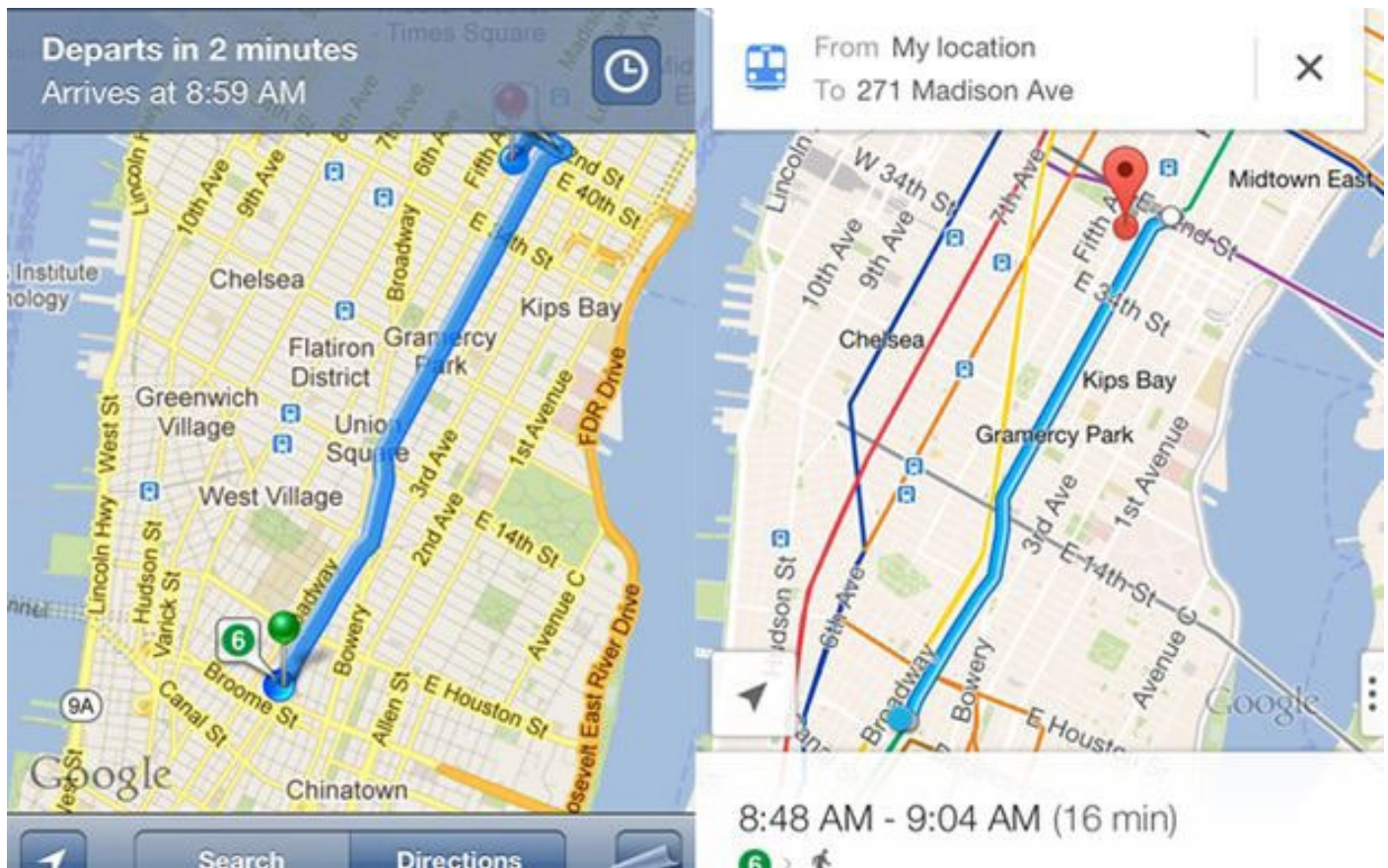
Apple as a company has long been known for its design excellence because *it just works*. So when in September 2012, they failed to deliver on its Apple Maps for iOS 6, it was an opportunity for Google to beat its archrival in their own game, design. Google took everything it had learned about app design and performance and baked it into its map app for iOS.

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“We took a step back, we had an opportunity to create a new experience from scratch.”

Daniel Graf, Director, Google Maps for Mobile

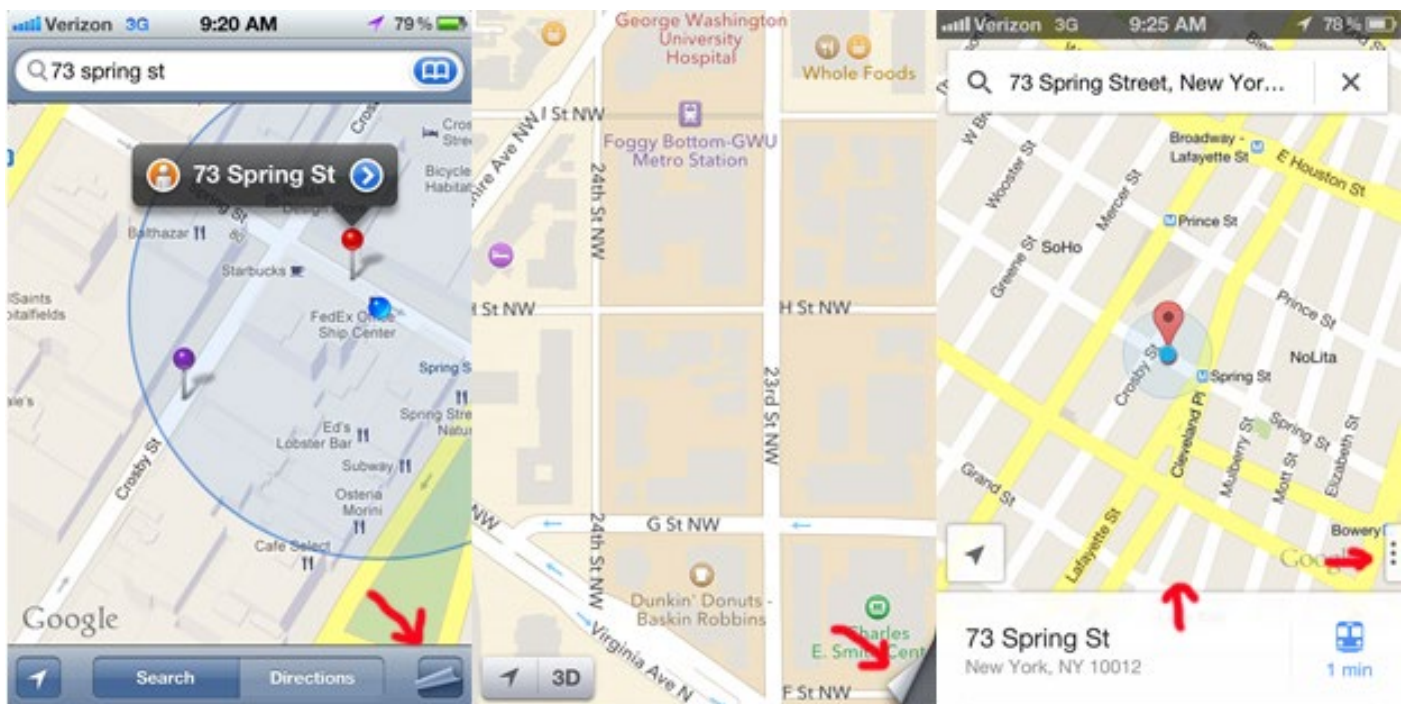
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As an article titled *How Google Taught Itself Good Design* published in FastCoDesign points out, when Google Maps for iOS was launched, no one was surprised by its accuracy or comprehensiveness because these were things people had come to expect of Google. What came as a surprise was Google Maps' instant visual appeal. The old Google Maps app which Apple built into earlier versions of the iPhone had a boring interface. Google's new app for iOS, was cleaner, less ostentatious, and immediately more approachable than Apple's own Maps app.

The new design combined the best of both the old Google Maps and Apple Maps. The previous Google app had a cluttered, overwhelming look to it (image left). And although Apple Maps provided a cleaner interface, it lacked the comprehensiveness and accurateness of Google data. The new Google Maps not only had accurate data but a much cleaner UI (image right).





As an article titled *Why Google Maps for iOS Is Better Than the Old Google Maps App, Too* published on The Wire point out, the user interface did not work too intuitively on the old Google Maps. For example, getting from the map screen to the menu in old Google Maps involved clicking the little dog-ear icon in the corner of the screen (image left) and Apple used toggle for its app (image middle). The new Google app instead used swipe. Also, in place of the dog ear, there were three little dots (image right) for traffic, transit, and satellite views.

Google blended its globe-spanning, data-spinning cloud services with a simple, aesthetically designed interface, to become a nightmare for Apple. Within two days of its release, Google Maps for iOS became the most downloaded free app in the Apple App Store with more than 10 million downloads, with over 8,000 reviews and a five-star rating.



## Flipboard, taking design inspiration from legacy products

Founded in 2010, Flipboard is a digital magazine publishing application software for iOS, Android, Windows, Blackberry, Kindle Fire & NOOK. Through its partnerships with Facebook, Twitter, and Google+, and more than 800,000 publishing partners, it aims to bridge the gap between publishers and readers. Users can flip through the content it displays from its partners and presents in a magazine format.



In an article titled *How Old Magazines and Lamborghinis Inform Flipboard's Design Process and Approach* published on First Round, Didier Hilhorst, part of the product design team at Flipboard, talks about how Flipboard used the good old print magazine for design inspiration. Coupled with the new touch technology which allowed users to "flip" pages, they created an app which became Apple's iPad App of the Year in 2010 and one of Time Magazine's top 50 inventions of 2010.

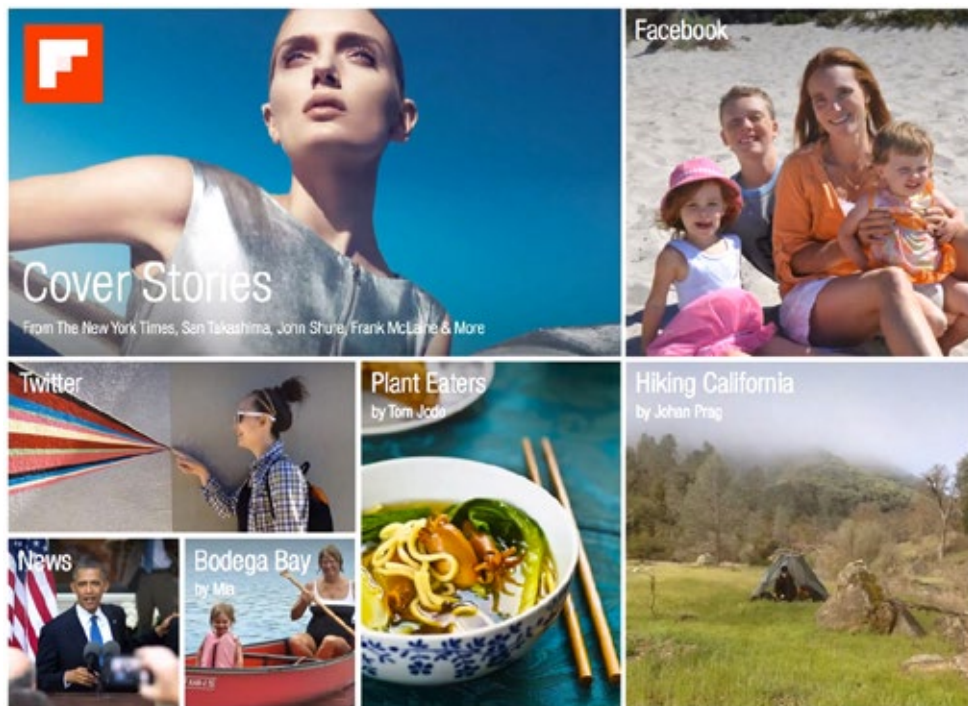


Newspapers and magazines are beautifully laid out, and are still very much an amazing form of design. But like so many physical products, they do not always translate well to the digital realm. The browser, complicated menus, and obtrusive ads weaken the look and feel. As a result, when you compare the magazine to its website counterpart, it is a completely different experience.

The iPad disrupted this. Suddenly you could touch content. At Flipboard, this meant that the company could finally design in such a way that it could take the beauty of print and combine it with some of the functionality that the digital world allows.

“When you pick up a magazine, there's no manual. It has no buttons, no sign-up flow, no Facebook Connect. Flipboard takes a cue from that. When you open the app, the first and only thing to do is flip.”

Didier Hilhorst, Designer, Flipboard



Flipboard works by minimizing friction and encouraging readers to focus only on the content. Being able to take inspiration from legacy products and creating a fun element around it is a key ingredient in the product development process. While some discount these small details, the best designers recognize how critical they are to a product experience that creates an emotional connection.

In December 2013, Flipboard closed a \$100 million Series C funding round which put the valuation of the company at \$800 million.



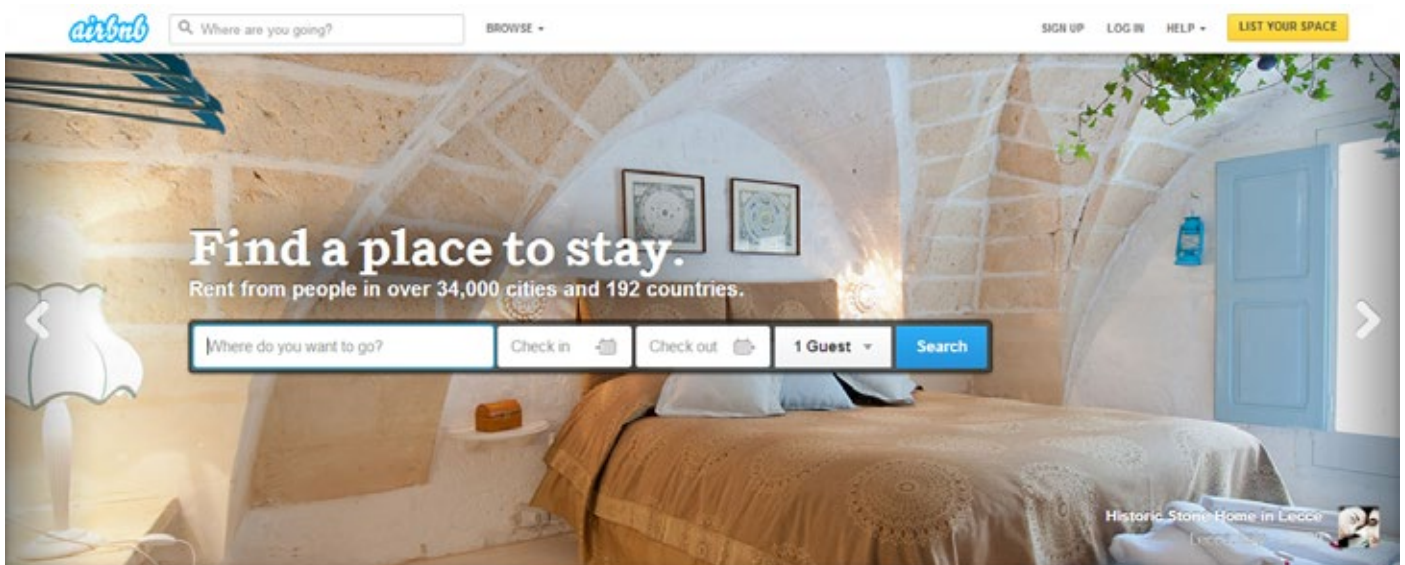
## Airbnb, the leap of faith into design-thinking

In 2009, Airbnb, an online marketplace for spare rooms and other unconventional lodging, was on the verge of shutting down. The company's revenue remained stuck at \$200 per week. One day in a typical do-or-die situation, they began rethinking their product and realized what was wrong with it. Customers listing properties were using their camera phones or using the images from classified sites. As such, the photos were of low quality.

“*It actually wasn't a surprise that people weren't booking rooms because you couldn't even really see what it is that you were paying for.*”

Gebbia, Co-Founder, Airbnb

So the three-man founding team grabbed the next flight to New York, rented a camera and upgraded all the amateur photos to beautiful images. There was no data to back this decision originally. A week later, the results were in—improving the pictures doubled the weekly revenue to \$400 per week.



Airbnb now employs design thinking throughout all its processes. As Gebbia, Co-Founder of Airbnb puts it in an interview for FastCompany: “Design used to be an afterthought. Startups wouldn’t hire designers for months or a year after funding. Now, startups as varied as Square, Flipboard, and Instagram count design as crucial to their success. You no longer have to be a hacker to start a company,”

One aspect of Airbnb’s design thinking is highlighted in its onboarding process. An article titled *How Design Thinking Transformed Airbnb from a Failing Startup to a Billion Dollar Business* published on FirstRound highlights that the company encourages new employees to think of new features on their first day at the company. It believes that great ideas can come from anywhere. This approach yields results in unexpected ways. One Airbnb designer was assigned what seemed like the small task of reevaluating the “star” function. In the original Airbnb product, users could ‘star’ properties to add them to a wish list—a basic feature. Gebbia recounts the story:

“Our new designer comes back and says I have it. I go what do you mean you have it? You only spent the day on it. He goes, well, I think the stars are the kinds of things you see in utility-driven experiences. He explained our service is so aspirational. Why don’t we tap into that? He goes I’m going to change that to a heart. I go, wow, okay. It’s interesting, and we can ship it so we did. When we ship it, we put code in it so we can track it and see how behavior changed.”



The simple change from a star to a heart increased engagement by over 30%. Today, Airbnb has hosted over 9,000,000 guests, with rentals in over 34,000 cities and 192 countries.



## MailChimp, collaboration by design

MailChimp is one of the most popular online email marketing solutions used by marketers worldwide to manage contacts, send emails and track results. When MailChimp began work on redesigning its user interface in early 2013, it studied user workflows and realized that collaboration is a huge part of the email design process for many of its users and MailChimp did not facilitate much of this collaboration in its app. Users needed to collaborate on a host of issues for an email campaign—for design, to send tests, gather feedback, for exchanging comments, and so on.

Coincidentally, around the same time MailChimp was also drawing out plans for a new, more unified design studio for the team. So the user's needs for collaboration met the team's need for a collaborative workplace and the New MailChimp was born.

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“*Design is a byproduct of many things: training, experience, objectives, audience, and more. It's also influenced by where we work and those we encounter. We're susceptible to influence—it's how we continue to grow, how our rough experiments gain shape, and how our talents mature.*”

Aaron Walter, Director of UX, MailChimp

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As Aaron Walter, Director of UX at MailChimp, points out in his article *New MailChimp: Collaboration by Design* “Because collaboration was the central motivation for creating the new studio, we carefully considered the seating chart.”





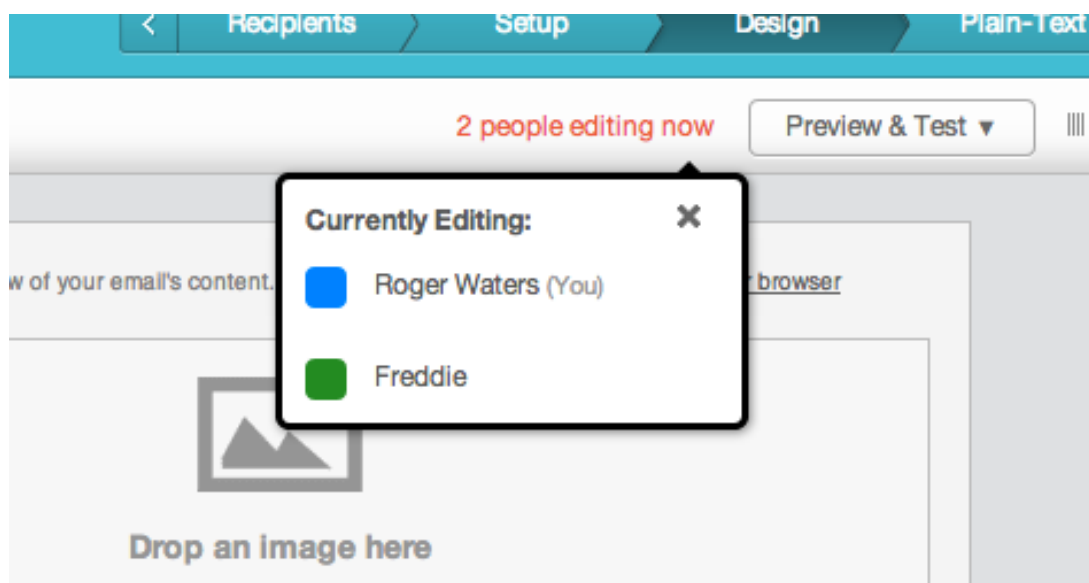
Rather than segregating the teams, they mixed people up. So analytics people sat next to design researchers, UX front-end developers sat next to marketing, and designers sat next to writers. To facilitate further intermingling of teams, they left desks open throughout the studio to let people move closer to the people they needed to collaborate with on their current project, or just to get a change of scenery. Couches and standing tables in various parts of the studio let people work in different places rather than remaining tethered to a desk. In the design studio, they had a common space where people could have lunch or just catch up over a cup of coffee. They also installed polygal walls (corrugated plastic that lets light through and works just like a whiteboard surface) in the studio where people could share ideas and workflows.



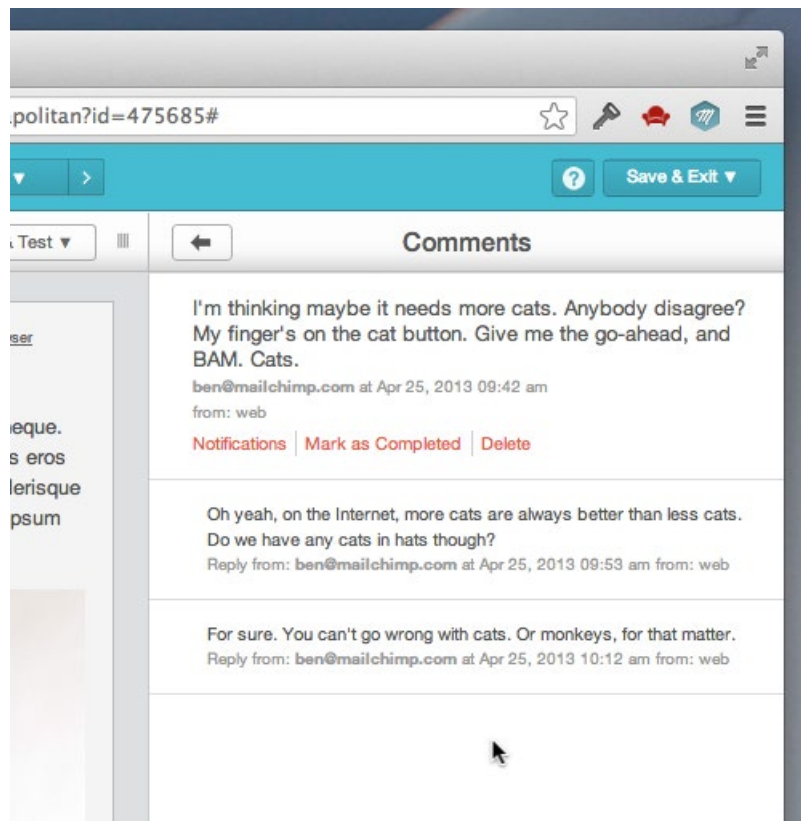


The new design studio changed the way they work. Writers talked to interaction designers, photographers talked to design researchers. Research, words, pixels, and code blended effortlessly in the open, collaborative environment.

Designing the new workspace helped them understand the value of collaboration, and it shed some light on things that were missing from their app. It started conversations that would not have happened with the old studio layout, which led to design and copy improvements throughout the new app. After talking to their customers, researching the way they work, and reconsidering their own workflow, they came up with several collaboration tools in the app.



The new MailChimp added features that shows edits in real time, so you do not have to wait for your co-workers or clients to sign out in order to make changes.



The new feedback options make it easy to exchange comments and get approval before sending a campaign, and you can resolve comments as you go.

A collaborative workplace helped MailChimp understand the needs of the user better and thereby facilitate more collaboration in its app.



## Wufoo, support-driven design dating

Wufoo is an Internet application that helps create content forms, design online surveys, power event registration, and process simple online orders. When you design a form with Wufoo, it automatically builds the database, backend and scripts needed to make collecting and understanding your data easy, fast and fun.

In 2006, when Wufoo was launched, its founders sought to create a software that people had a relationship with. They were fanatical about creating meaningful relationships. They approached new users as if they were dating them and existing users as if they were married to them. They looked at research on what creates successful marriage and then tried to apply these principles to their design strategy.



As Kevin Hale, Co-Founder of Wufoo, puts it in one of his podcasts “[so] if you’re on a first date and you find out that your date starts picking their nose in the beginning of dinner, there will be no second date. But if you’ve been married to someone for years and they start digging for gold, you don’t immediately divorce them right away. There is something different once the relationship is already established.”

When it comes to new users, first impressions matter. The homepage, landing pages, plans & pricing,

login, and support are the typical first impressions. However, Wufoo also focusses on things like the account creation process, the first email, the login link, the first support interaction, and other specific pieces of the customer experience.

For retaining existing users, Wufoo turned to the top marriage researcher, Dr. John Gottman. Gottman conducted many studies where he would bring couples into a lab and film them arguing about some little disagreement they had. One of his major findings is that the fact whether a couple splits up or not is based on how people fight, specifically how people argue.

“Everybody fights, even the successful couples. Everyone fights about the same stuff, which translates directly to a web business: money (how much you charge), kids (does the tool impact your customers’ customers in a bad way), sex (performance issues on your website, how long you’re up and how fast), jealousy (competition) and in-laws (your partners, if Amazon S3 goes down you have issues).”

To solve these marital issues, Wufoo looked at its conversion funnel. A typical conversion funnel is full of customer support issues: users cannot find out how to accomplish something, they do not know how to upgrade to paid from trial, they have problems signing up, they cannot remember their email address, etc. To solve this, Kevin and the other founders of Wufoo sought to create a support-driven design process.

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“*In most companies engineers and designers are divorced from the consequences of their actions. When they create, engineer, design, they don’t follow the product all the way through to the end. Support driven design helps Wufoo with that. We add responsibility, accountability and a bit humility on to everyone who works on something which needs to be created for our site.*”

Kevin Hale, Co-Founder, Wufoo

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In support-driven design, the design and engineering teams are actually the people who solve customer queries too. Since they know where the products lacks and what needs to be improved, they are ultimately the ones who can give the best support too.

Wufoo also has a “Since you’ve been gone” view in their application. Each time a user logged in they’d see a timeline of what features had recently been added. To be included in this list they required developers to have finished the documentation. So if a developer wanted their feature in front of every user, they wrote the docs.



Wufoo also sent out handwritten thank you notes to its users, sometimes crafted out of construction paper and decorated with stickers, to make them feel special.

This support-driven customer-focused design has helped Wufoo establish an emotional connection with the user and scale their growth. In 2011, Wufoo was acquired by SurveyMonkey for \$35 million.

## Final Thoughts

Good design has become critical to business success in today's competitive scenario. No longer is design a prerogative of the classes but it has been democratized, there is a mass expectation that software products will be designed well, they will be intuitive, easy to use and have an aesthetic appeal. Design experiences are shaping the way users see your product and advocate their use. More and more software products are realizing the value of good design and using it as a differentiator. Paul Graham, co-founder of Y-combinator, sums it up when he says, "You can win through design rather than technology."



# About FusionCharts

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