BIZCOMMUNITY

How to work together and survive

By Greg Wolejko

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Back in the early nineties when the domain name registration race kicked off and corporates battled to create relatively simple brochure sites, relationships between creative agencies and developers grew and certain routines and working practices evolved.

These relationships have advanced – a little – along the way as a typical corporate web presence has become more complex and demanding and, of course, the full-service agencies have established their own way.

However, in 2016, the fact still remains that designers and developers often struggle to coexist and managing this relationship remains a pain point for clients. So, when it comes to specialist shops working together, does the perfect coalition exist?

The need for change

The original union would typically be a pyramid set-up. Clients would sit at the top, talking independently to their creative and development teams. This model nurtured little in the way of relationship between designers and developers and designers generally led the pack – what they created, developers integrated.

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Adding to the complexity, design in this scenario might be handled by various agencies, often without clear sight of the bigger picture. The upshot was that no one was tasked with spotting commonalities – or the lack of commonalities. Whilst design might take the lead more comfortably in a single-site scenario, it is only one piece of the puzzle in more composite situations.

What's driving change?

These days, a typical corporate web presence evolves and grows almost daily as technology allows us to do things that we once only dreamed of. But it's not just technology driving the change, organisations need solutions on a global scale that also allow their local markets to operate with the just right amount of independence. These are three common themes that we believe all point to the need for a new way of working:

1. Multi-brand, multi-channel, multi-territory – the need to create and build at scale.
2. The customer journey – the need to create a consistent experience throughout the engagement lifecycle.
3. Uniformity of solution and design across different streams.

To summarise, the question that tends to remain unresolved is, ‘what is the best way to manage multiple agencies when implementing quality customer experiences at scale?’

Moving towards atomic design

In moving towards a future model for success, a paradigm shift is required in the design world. Creatives must think less about page-by-page design and engage more in atomic design.

This methodology provides a common visual language for building platforms that enables different creative agencies to tackle individual brands whilst maintaining an inherent consistency. How does it work? Put very simply, atoms are the basic building blocks, which can be built up into molecules that become functional; together these then form organisms that are repeatable components. From there, templates are created where a page starts to take its form. If atoms are consistent, everything built around them will carry that uniformity.

Brad Frost fabulously describes this in more detail in his blog post. The fundamental difference is that instead of designing pages, creatives are going to have to think about designing around individual components that will work together.

This is going to require a huge mindset shift for designers who, by the very nature of their training and, as an artefact of the days of brochureware sites, don’t think in atomic chunks.

The ideal setup

For the atomic methodology to work successfully, we must start to work differently with designers and creative agencies.

We like to start collaborating much earlier in the process. In the best-case scenario, the driver in the design process would be the UX and UI developers. Ideally, they would create multiple atoms in the initial phase and then manage the design process as wireframes are converted into visual designs. In this scenario, developers are creating the structure and get to assess designs against criteria, such as the cost and time of integration, the consistency of the platform, adherence to brand identity, mobile strategy compliance and so on at a much earlier stage.

When designs are then presented to clients, both designers and developers are happy that they are both on strategy creatively and workable technically. This model would potentially save huge amounts of time in both the creative and development process, eliminating costly rounds of creative development that are ultimately unsuited for the platform. In the multi-agency scenario, when creatives are designing to pre-ordained templates, the margin for inconsistency is massively reduced.

Collaboration is the key to success – a process in which creative and technical development happily coexist. We're ready for it – are you?

ABOUT GREG WOLEJKO

Greg Wolejko is Head of Cognifide's UI Practice. With almost 15 years' experience in software development, the last 10 focusing solely on front-end technologies, he leads all of Cognifide's UI work, spanning multiple locations with almost 40 people working on delivering the best experiences clients and their customers...

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