

5 steps to build a startup's first design system

Founders who don't build a brand image for their startups at early stages may end up confusing their clients: the company looks different across platforms, its merch colours don't match up with the colours on the website, and customers don't recognise the brand in its ads.

It's chaos. And every new visual becomes a pain in the designer's ass.

Statistics say it takes 5-7 brand impressions for a customer to remember a company, and 46% of clients will prefer familiar brands.

Besides, it's not hard to build a full-on brand strategy. Here's a 5-step tutorial that will work for everyone.

Step #1. Brand strategy session

A brand strategy session is a fundamental part of the process, and it's not a "this-meeting-could-be-an-email" case. Designers, brand managers, and top managers should sit together and talk.

If there's no in-house designer, a hired marketing agency representative or a

freelancer can fulfill her role.

A company should prepare for such a meeting: analyse competitors, its current client communication, and talk to its employees about how they see the company.

During the session itself, it's crucial to determine the company's positioning, brand nature, and tone of voice for client communication. Design should convey everything already put into the brand: its mission, values, goals, and style.

There's always a problem a design system fixes or an image it helps to reinforce. For instance, when Airbnb was developing its design concept, it refined its values first: Airbnb is not just about where one travels and stays, but about feeling safe and having a sense of belonging.

The company integrated the value of community and sharing experiences with people all over the world and came up with a motto: "Belong anywhere."

The Airbnb logo dubbed the "Bélo" is a combination of four different icons: people, places, love, and Airbnb. It's meant to represent "the universal symbol of belonging." The Airbnb design system aims to reinforce the company's values, its mission and goals.

A brand session must be documented and dictate the next stage.

Step #2. Design brief

The more info there's in a design brief, the better the result will be from designers.

A design brief can't have phrases like "depending on a designer's taste" or "just create something different from rivals."

Essential aspects of a design brief:

- Overview of the company: product, services, and countries

- Goal of design (or redesign if needed)

- Positioning in one sentence

- Target segments (who's the target audience?)

- Tone of voice (what's the brand mood and character)

Competitors' design overview

Design elements to develop (how and where will the company use the design, in which formats, and what pieces does it need first?)

Inspiration or references of desired design from the company's side

Key requirements for designers

Deadline and budget.

Step #3. Design concepts

A design concept is the soul of the product to be — it is a visual idea that serves as the basis for all further design elements. It should communicate the following:

The problem a product solves

The target customer

Benefits of the product/service.

When designers develop a concept, founders should evaluate how the logos, fonts, colours, and principles for building a design system match up with what they want to transmit. Feedback is crucial at this stage.

Step #4. Brand elements

Once a design concept is finalised, it's time to determine how it will look on merch, social networks, slide presentations, etc.

Each element must have a detailed use case: how to display the logo and what fonts and colours can and can't be used. The end concept, system, and materials will help any designer collaborating with the brand later to understand how to work with it.

Step #5. Brand book

A brand book is the end result. It has two parts: brand component (philosophical) and design component (practical).

The brand part describes the company's values, mission, style, mood, tone of voice, and the value it brings clients.

The design part has a guide on using design elements: logos, fonts, colours, corporate graphics, visual and photo language, communication design, and layout rules. Here's how Uber or Apple framed their design guides.

And, for reference, here are the brand books of TikTok and Slack.

If these two parts in a brand book match the startup's philosophy and convey what its founders want to convey, then it's ready. The next step: Keep building brand awareness.

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