



White paper

## **You can tell them by the arrows in their backs**

How to pioneer a new product design

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# You can tell them by the arrows in their backs

You can always tell the pioneers by the arrows in their backs. It's a lot easier to copy a product than it is to design it yourself for the first time. Pioneers make a lot of mistakes, but sometimes you just have to lead the way and break the trail. Does that mean you have to resign yourself to making all the mistakes without the benefit of improving upon a known design? No, consider these ideas for your design document. A design document has the ability let your product design evolve. You can "try out" your product in a virtual sense before it actually exists. A design document is almost purely graphical. The only words necessary are captions and brief descriptions. Don't weary your audience with excessive text. The document is all about the physical appearance, dimensions, and perceived usability of your product. The graphical nature makes the document easy to browse. As is the case with all design, making changes in the early design phase is many times cheaper than making them later during the development phase. Here are some ideas for creating a design document.

## 1) Start with mockups

Start the document with some very simple artist renditions of your product designs. Feel free to offer a few different design ideas. Don't actually build any of the designs yet. The mockups should be simple physical drawings or screenshots of the product. This stage represents a storyboard phase where you tell the story of how users will experience the product. It is the first entry point for new users. During this phase you should be looking for the brilliantly simple designs that don't make your customers think too much.

## 2) Mini focus group

Present the designs to some of the people you trust for good design input. Your designs may not be ready for product stakeholders or customers yet. Give this preliminary focus group some time to brainstorm and suggest other

ideas and improvements. Consider letting your design go cold for a week or two before pressing onward. This lets you “view it again for the first time” before taking the next steps. Aging a product can improve it dramatically.

### 3) Build a prototype

After your design has matured a bit, get more input from larger groups of stakeholders and customers. Make sure each design revision is presented to new people. This gives you fresh input. They’ll undoubtedly be asking for more, so this would be a good time to build one or more prototypes. A prototype lets people get their hands on the product and physically work with it. You can test physical dimensions, colors, textures, sounds, and arrangements of the interface. It engages mental processes that pictures cannot. The prototype will eventually become a large part of your design document.

### 4) Consolidate and contain

Encourage the stakeholders to sit down and decide upon the final design ideas. This may take place as a series of meetings with the intention of reaching final design buyoff. This is a critical juncture because you will soon be passing from the design stage to an architectural or development stage. It is important to contain and fix all mistakes within this phase so that they do not need attention in downstream development phases, where they will be more expensive to resolve. It is cheaper to fix a mockup screenshot than the actual product. Document all decisions with screenshots or photos of the prototype, and consolidate them into a final design folder. This strips away all the noise and presents a pure product design for development to work from. Development should be able to move forward with confidence, in almost a mechanical mode of implementation. They are free to build rather than think.

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