

CHROMATIC

Design System Implementation Guide

**How to Get Cross-Functional Buy-In & Take an
Iterative Approach**



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Abstract

From facilitating consistent, error-free development to allowing companies to spin up new properties in a fraction of the time, design systems can be an incredibly impactful solution for organizations. But for all the ways they streamline digital publishing, design systems shouldn't be viewed as a one-and-done solution to resolve every organization's needs. They require valuable investment both up-front and over the life of the product to serve your clients and create a consistent, polished experience for their users.

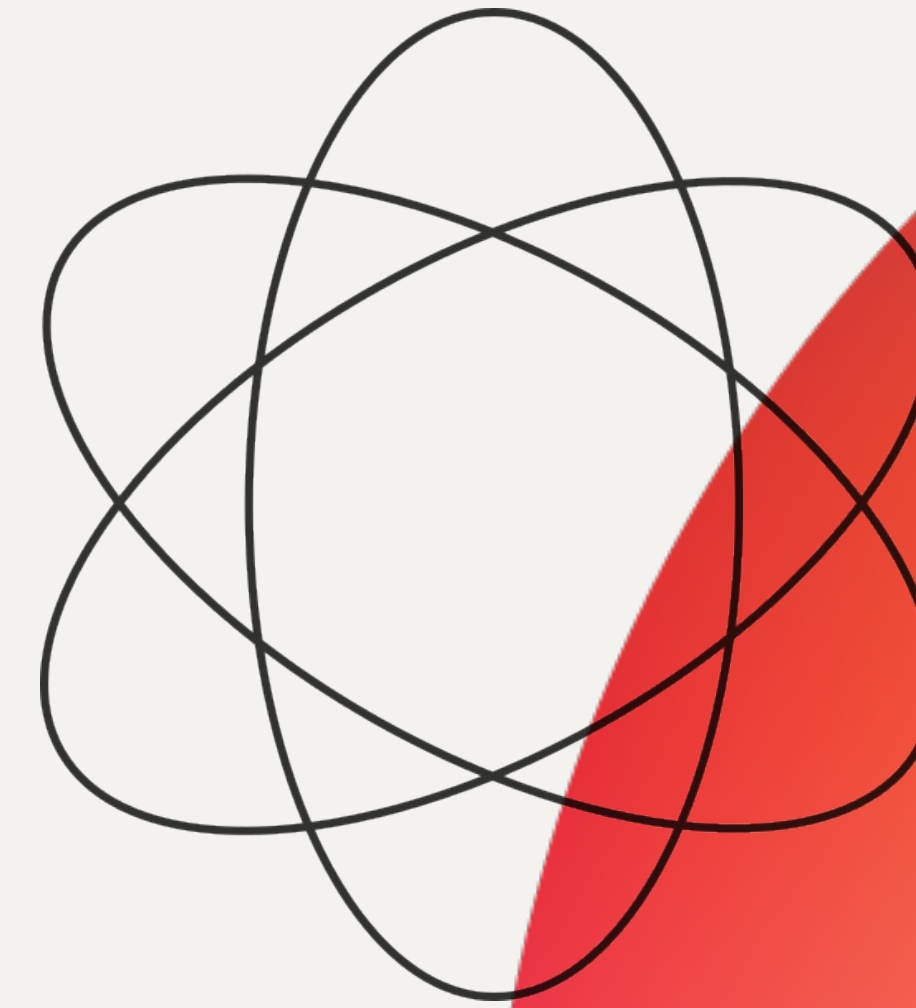
Fundamentally, design systems are only as strong as the support they receive from your client's internal organization. A design system will provide different value to different stakeholders, and by working with your clients to develop strategic buy-in, you can help them encourage steadily increasing adoption and ongoing governance for their system. With the right foundation, you can set your clients on a path toward a successful and sustainable implementation.

What steps can you take to ensure the next design system project your agency deploys makes a lasting difference for your client's business? In this eBook, you'll learn:

- ❖ How a design system addresses pain points in your client's organization.
- ❖ How to work with your clients to build organizational buy-in for a design system project.
- ❖ The three areas of every organization that are critical to setting a design system's priorities.
- ❖ Why an iterative approach to design system implementation builds confidence in its capabilities.
- ❖ How governance and ongoing internal investment deliver a sustainable design system.

Design systems are proving to be incredibly valuable solutions in today's digital landscape. Whether your client is managing multiple digital products across distributed teams, looking to launch products in a fraction of the time, seeking a consistent onboarding experience for new team members, or establishing consistency across their users' experience, it's no wonder design systems have become the solution of choice for large companies looking to level up their digital production lifecycle.

Unfortunately, for all the potential upside design systems have to offer your clients, most design systems face a number of challenges the moment they're launched. But by making a plan with your clients to spread buy-in across their organization, you'll avoid many of the pitfalls that cause design systems to fail.



Why a design system?

As design systems have grown more popular, so has a level of uncertainty about their definition. Component libraries, style guides, and pattern libraries are all terms associated with design systems, and sometimes they're used interchangeably. What do we mean when talking about design systems?

Ultimately, the terminology behind a design system is less important than the problems it solves. A design system is a centralized resource that gathers all the elements that can be used on your clients' digital products, as well as the guidelines for how they should be used, under one umbrella. These components are designed, built, and tested extensively, so users can implement them with confidence. Oftentimes design system components are even platform agnostic, meaning they can be used by branches of an organization that may even use differing technology.

Clients are generally able to turn out new sites in a fraction of the time when using components from a design system, with higher confidence in the performance of the final product.

With a design system, everyone in your client's organization can access the tested, accessible, and performant components they need to create a new digital product. And executive stakeholders can rest assured knowing their new tools are consistent with their design standards and creating a consistent user experience across their platforms.

5 Elements of a successful design system implementation

But creating an effective design system is not as simple as building the system and letting it stagnate. For a design system to have a sustainable future, it must be adopted across an organization by all teams creating digital products. These teams should have guidance on how to use the system, how to contribute back to it, how to evolve it over time, and how to ensure it is being properly implemented.

To extend the lifespan and increase the effectiveness of the next design system you roll out, you should factor in the following details.

Summary of following chapters:

1. Make Sure Your Client Knows the Value of a Well- Executed Design System
2. Use an Iterative Approach to Creating a Design System
3. A Successful Design System Hinges on Support Across Content, Design, and Engineering
4. Underscore the Broad Reach of a Design System's Documentation Capabilities
5. Collaborate with Stakeholders to Establish Support and Governance Plans



Make Sure Your Client Knows the Value of a Well-Executed Design System

Both in terms of time and budget, a design system can be a demanding investment. For all the technological changes that are associated with rolling out a design system, you have to effectively manage the many organizational shifts they require as well. Change is always a challenge to implement, and it works best when the parties involved are aware of and bought into the value behind the change.

Design systems consistently help organizations in the following ways:

Encourage Greater Collaboration

Design systems encourage a production process that involves a project manager, designer, and developer working together. And when a project manager, designer, and developer work side-by-side on a digital product, the result is a better thought-out and produced product or feature that takes less time and energy than divided-team departments working separately. This is plainly due to the fact that turn-over of ideas and tasks can occur synchronously and rapidly, doing away with the multi-layered chain of command found in divided department production.

Trifecta teams can even occur side-by-side, with several trifectas working on several individual features, patterns, or upgrades simultaneously. As a result, your client's designers are able to outline every variation of a content item within the brand ecosystem. Rather than outlining design guidelines that only satisfy the best-case scenario, your design system team can incorporate how a component looks with an image, without a title, or other variables throughout the user experience.

Design Systems are Platform-Agnostic

If your client is responsible for multiple websites under a larger parent organization, their design system will be available to every property. Whether a subsidiary website for a university or media company has been built using Drupal, WordPress, or a proprietary CMS, the whole organization will gain access to the components and standards outlined in a well-built design system.

Design Systems Solve Pain Points in Existing Workflows

Your client will likely have a number of challenges in their existing process for standing up a new digital property. A design system serves as a single source of truth where the production team can pull the components and guidance to build and launch new properties, eliminating many of the questions and variance that exists in digital workflows.

Opposition Can Be an Asset

We're all human, and humans come to the table with their own biases. It's possible that not everyone in your client's org will be on board with a design system solution at the start. But these voices are valuable to the long-term success of the system.

These conversations can help outline the pain points of existing processes. When you learn what these team members are frustrated by or dubious about, you learn more about how to design your system to improve current workflows.

Incorporating these voices early into the process also helps increase their buy-in and investment into the project. Once these team members understand the value and are on-board, they can serve as impactful ambassadors to increase buy-in across the rest of your client's team.

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Use an iterative approach to creating a design system

Once you've established the biggest pain points that a design system will resolve, those can form your first priorities for Phase 1 of your design system build. While it's tempting to want to cram every desired feature into the first iteration, a design system can make a real difference well before it fulfills every need in your client's organization. Rather than thinking of a design system as this beautiful, shiny endpoint to strive for in the future, you can apply an iterative approach that targets areas with the greatest need first.

The following steps can help you plan a phased approach to the design system build that allows you to show value (and thereby increase buy-in) quickly, even before the full system is complete.

Build Consensus Among Stakeholders for the Implementation Schedule

Set the expectation from the beginning of the project that the design system will be something that grows and evolves over time, even after your agency's engagement with your client. Make sure this is a consistent message during your engagement with your client.

Along with this messaging, work with your client to schedule a working session that includes all critical stakeholders, some early adopters, and design system allies. The goal of this working session will be to come out with a prioritized list of components and guidelines to be included in the design system. The most impactful, foundational, and/or critical components should be at the top of the list, with early adopter needs prioritized. Then you can work with your team to form an iterative plan for the design system build with consensus on the way the build will progress.

Establish Patterns of Success to Encourage Investment

An iterative approach doesn't just allow the design system to grow in a more manageable way; it allows your client's investment to expand in stages as well. Design systems are high-effort, high-impact solutions, but breaking the big effort into smaller phases with defined goals allows you to reach success sooner and more frequently. Instead of seeing a design system as a cumbersome new technology, your client's teams begin to anticipate how it will make their work easier once their department becomes part of the rollout. Then the system can provide iterative value to invested stakeholders while reaching realistic, incremental success markers.

Get Better, Faster

An iterative approach to a design system build and its adoption also allows you to pause to take a pulse on the effectiveness of the system more frequently. As we've stated, design systems should be regularly improved upon based on feedback you receive from its adopters. With a phased approach, you get feedback sooner from early adopters and can improve the system as you go along, instead of waiting for the full build and full adoption to start to make improvements.

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A Successful Design System Hinges on Support Across Content, Design, and Engineering

Effective deployment of a design system requires building consensus across three areas of an organization:

- ❖ **Content:** Brand, marketing, and product teams with a stake in how the organization is represented to the public should each be represented.
- ❖ **Design:** In-house teams responsible for the digital products' user experience will speak to the appearance and functionality of each component.
- ❖ **Engineering:** Developers who translate a site's visual and functional requirements into proven components ensure each part of the design system works correctly and meets performance and accessibility requirements.

While these departments may have competing priorities, each of their voices is important to determining what lives in the design system and how the system can craft a unified experience for your client's end users. It is critical to get their buy-in from the beginning and to treat representatives from these teams as stakeholders over the lifecycle of the product. Establishing a plan for asynchronous communication between content, design, and engineering teams provides another means of securing the health of a design system.



Underscore the Broad Reach of a Design System's Documentation Capabilities

Some clients may use terms such as “design system” and “pattern library” interchangeably, which may factor into applying too much emphasis on cataloging every site component from the start. However, as a design system is first taking root in an organization, its documentation functionality can deliver far-reaching benefits to the organization.

As you take an iterative approach to implementing a design system, its style guide capabilities can provide a means for it to gain traction in your client's organization. For example, [IBM's Design Language portal](#) is a high-level design system that doesn't include any component library functionality. But it still provides a vital resource by cataloging all the valuable details

for the company about color usage, typography, logo assets, and brand guidelines. Plus, it also collects needed policies about tone of voice, animation usage, and illustrations that wouldn't necessarily have such a centralized and highly visible home without a design system.

Building a well-organized and effective documentation resource offers an olive branch to the departments in your client's organization while demonstrating a design system's potential. The more useful a design system becomes to your client's organization, the more users it's bound to attract to further encourage investment in its ongoing growth and support.



Collaborate with Stakeholders to Establish Support and Governance Plans

Design systems require regular upkeep and iteration to remain current. And, it's important that, once the system has been created, the organization can make sure it's being implemented appropriately across its platforms.

Following a four-point plan to establish support and governance plans will further secure the health of a design system.

Oversee Documentation Processes

At one level, the design system provides internal documentation that displays the building blocks of your client's website and how to use them. But your client should also establish a process for outside documentation that outlines the team members who need to be invested in the system and at what stage they should be involved. Then, you need to ensure the teams collaborate to set up a support plan that will protect the design system after implementation.

Establish a Product Owner Within the Organization

The Product Owner will be the primary stakeholder responsible for owning, managing, and championing the design system. This should be someone who has the capacity to weigh in and participate in the ongoing maintenance and growth of the design system. This person will be responsible for triangulating and prioritizing feature requests, bug fixes, and new documentation, and their voice carries the most weight when competing priorities arise. With multiple stakeholders and invested teams across your client's organization, a Product Owner will be the one responsible for directing how the system grows over time.

Set Up a Design System Maintenance Team

Build a team with members across teams and departments responsible for maintaining and growing the system over time. A varied team ensures the design system remains a shared responsibility across the organization. This team should be available to answer questions about design system components and implementation, and should be responsible for implementing system updates and improvements.

If your client doesn't have the capacity to build this team within their org, consider offering support like this as a maintenance plan to your client after the initial build is complete.

Organize a Design System Communications Infrastructure

It is important that adopters of your system have ways to ask questions, share success stories, and contribute requests or suggestions back to the product. We recommend having a dedicated Slack channel to field questions and allow teams to chat with the maintenance team about their concerns. We also recommend scheduling office hours at regular intervals that interested parties can attend to learn more about components, implementation, growth plans, and ongoing maintenance of the system. An effective communication plan also ensures the design system can be sustainably implemented and that teams are not left on their own with questions or concerns when using the system.

Set Regular Reviews for Organization Platforms

The maintenance team should regularly review the organization's digital platforms to make sure design system components are being appropriately used. If any teams or platforms are not appropriately using the design system components, this can help to surface improvements that are necessary within the system or push-back that is critical to break down.

These audits also help the maintenance team understand the efficacy of the system by seeing the components in action, and will help expose necessary improvements even before they're requested by design system adopters.

The way these plans and teams look will differ from organization to organization. Work with your clients to understand their goals for the system, their intended roll out plan, their adoption goals, and their success metrics to help them customize their support and governance plans to their specific needs.

Key takeaways for a successful design system implementation

Clarify the Benefits of a Design System While Dispelling Negative Associations

Defining the capabilities of the design system while addressing misconceptions will build support for its use. Make sure the team is aligned on the “why” for this solution and how the system will benefit them and the organization’s goals over time.

Apply an Iterative Approach to Build Support for the Design System

First deploy the design system to resolve your client’s greatest pain points, then move on to address subsequent areas of need. Ongoing improvements will build internal support for the design system while also being less impactful to your client’s budget.

Maintain Alignment Between Content, Design, and Engineering Teams

The departments that will benefit most from a design system form an aligned trinity to set and maintain the priorities of your client’s design system.

Establish Plans for Ongoing Governance and Support

A successful design system requires ongoing investment from your client’s stakeholder teams. Setting up a Product Owner, a maintenance team, and plans for communication, maintenance, and support allows the design system to function as a shared responsibility across the entire organization.

A Design System Should Never Be Considered “Complete”

The digital landscape is always in motion, and the context and content of your client’s components may evolve beyond their initial requirements. With continuous maintenance, a design system remains relevant and valuable, continuing to build adoption and buy-in.

A design system serves as an impactful solution for companies to create new digital properties quickly and consistently within a fast-moving marketplace. If you're staring down the prospect of a complicated system build with a client who needs assurances about the return on their investment, **we should talk**. Our firm ensures systems like these are deployed successfully in a way that's effective, sustainable, and, most importantly, built to serve its users.

Thank you



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