



# Wireframing for Teams

The benefits of wireframing,  
mockups and prototypes  
for Development Teams.



by Vince Heilman

# Executive Summary

This e-book was originally written in 2014 while I worked as a User Experience Designer for The Nielsen Company. It was written for Product Owners, Project Leads, Executives, and a non-designer audience wishing to learn more about the design process and how wireframes can help speed up and improve communication within development teams. The guide is also designed to be useful for design professionals, especially those who are not experienced with User Experience (UX), wireframes, mockups, or prototypes. Minor updates were added in 2019.

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## About Vince Heilman

Vince is a designer, developer, and usability expert. He has over fifteen years of experience building and improving online applications and websites for companies of all sizes, including Florida Blue Cross Blue Shield, AcuRite, The New York Times Company, The Nielsen Company, Lucent Technologies, and many more.

Vince is extremely creative, with a keen ability to understand business priorities and how digital marketing tools can be implemented to drive success. He has a proven ability to transform client concepts into measurable campaigns and applications by formulating a clear, concise message.

Vince has lead various development and design teams to launch a variety of high profile marketing projects, including the Dippity-Do.com sponsorship with ESPN's Summer X-Games. Other clients include Academic Financial Solutions, where his website and applications helped grow the company's online revenue by over 500% in 3 years. There is a long list of Companies that he has worked with including GuideWell, Florida Blue Cross Blue Shield, AcuRite, Primex Wireless, Lucent Technologies, AOL, White Rain, eAngler, Berkley, the State of Florida, The New York Times Company, The Nielsen Company and many others.

# What is a Wireframe?

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A wireframe is a skeletal framework of a web page or application program created for testing the purpose and arrangement of data on a screen.

There's a lot of confusion in the area of terminology and sometimes you'll hear mockups, prototypes and wireframes are thrown around interchangeably. This paper focuses on wireframes.

- **Wireframes** - Typically low fidelity visualizations of a design with a focus on content placement.
- **Mockup** – Medium to high fidelity visualization. Static content and no interaction.
- **Prototypes** (Wireframes + Interaction) – Low, medium, or high visualization. Focus on user interface and interaction.

	Wireframe	Mockup	Prototype
Fidelity - Low	●		
Fidelity - Medium		●	●
Fidelity - High		●	●
Static	●	●	
Interactive			●
Grayscale	●	●	
Color		●	●
Documentation	●	●	●
User Testing	●	●	●

# When to Wireframe

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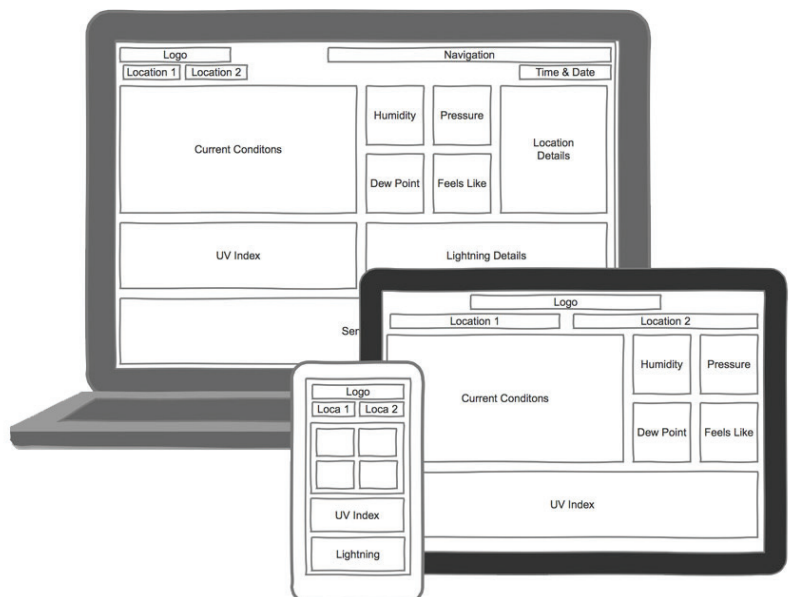
Before you jump in and start with the wireframes, you should have a solid grasp of whom you're designing for; who's your user?

Wireframing is an early stage of the development process, and its primary purpose is to focus on function, not fashion. It's a communication tool.

For many it will be their first introduction to the product. Don't let this scare you. Your focus is to provide the core functions and features, one page at a time.

Here are a few things we can test with wireframes:

- Look and feel
- Navigation
- Content structure
- Completion of core tasks
- Value proposition



# Benefits of Wireframing for Teams

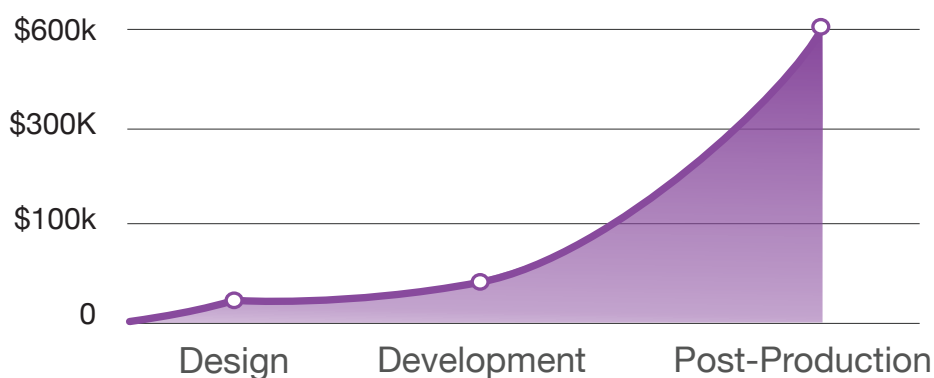
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One of the greatest benefits of wireframing is the savings of development costs in the future. Being able to edit and tweak design and content before developers are involved can be a substantial savings. Finding and fixing problems in the early stages is key to reducing development costs.

## Wireframing Benefits:

- Easy to share and modify
- Start discussions
- Quick to produce
- Early problem solving
- Determine programming requirements
- Provide reference material for design documentation
- Reduce costs by finding bugs or glitches prior to code development
- Test usability prior to code development

**Costs through different stages of development.**



# Wireframes Then and Now

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Prior to having UX on the team, Product Leaders would work with Development team members, Business Analysts, and Subject Matter Experts to create Functional Specification Documents (FSDs) that would detail the processes and pages within an application or web page. These documents would be data heavy and could leave interaction and design elements open to interpretation by developers, which led to future issues.

Using wireframes and HTML prototypes, we can now provide a link that is updatable and shareable within teams. These pages and images can be included within FSDs and shared to developers to minimize interpretation.

Hopefully, the future will allow us to create a living document as a dynamic FSD. A document that is online and always up to date, has interactive links, images and pages that will clearly communicate the applications needs.

*Note: This was originally written in 2013, and the dynamic FSD I was thinking of is now commonly referred to as a Design System.*



# Tips for Wireframing

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- Have a clear objective. Don't try to do too much on one page. Keep to the task at hand. Sometimes it makes sense to move features to other pages, or new pages. Keep track of these changes, but address them later.
- Keep it simple. Resist the urges to add color, gradients, fonts and textures. Keep it simple and focused to the task at hand.
- Size. Keep font sizes the same where possible. Typography decisions will come later in the design process.
- Affordance. Keep common interactions consistent with expected behaviors.
- Get Feedback. Early and often.
- Accept critique. Don't get attached to a layout or screen. Push to try new ideas. Save, Save, Save - Remember to save your versions.
- Get everyone involved. Keep the initial Wireframing sessions small and focused, but once the ideas are shareable, allow other teams to respond to the designs and do their own discovery for what will be coming their way.
- Remember the user. Before leaving a wireframe, play the user role and try to feel their experience.
- Keep notes. Wireframing tools will have documentation areas to keep notes for documentation and interaction. Use them.
- Don't over do it. Wireframes are a communication tool and a means to an end. Once they tell the story they need to, move on.

# Who Uses Wireframes

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- Project Managers will compare the wireframes against the Functional Specification Documents (FSDs).
- Developers will refer to wireframes for functionality and user interactions.
- Designers will build off the skeletal layouts and create high fidelity versions of the pages with color, typography, images and more.
- Users, or clients, will be testing the wireframes data, flow and interaction.

# Who to Involve

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Wireframing is not an individual effort. It takes a team to build an effective, well planned layout. Try to keep the team as small as possible without neglecting important decision makers. You'll want to have one representative from each of these teams;

- Business Analyst
- Development
- Product Leadership
- Subject Matter Expert
- User Experience

# Tools for Wireframing

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There are a large variety of wireframing tools available. Choices range from simple to advanced, static or interactive, online or desktop, and free or paid versions.

- **Axure** (<http://www.axure.com>) - Axure is one of the leading wireframing tools, and also known as a Rapid Prototyping tool. Can quickly produce simple wireframes, or complex interactive prototypes with documentation, notes and more.
- **Balsamiq** (<http://balsamiq.com>) - Very popular tool for wireframing and prototypes. Online and desktop versions. No free version, but it has interactive, prototyping features.
- **Adobe XD** (<https://www.adobe.com/products/xd.html>) - Adobe XD is a free vector-based user experience design tool for web apps and mobile apps, by Adobe Inc. It is available for macOS and Windows, although there are versions for iOS and Android to help preview the result of work directly on mobile devices.
- **Figma** (<http://www.figma.com>) - Figma is a browser-based UI and UX design application, with excellent design, prototyping, and code-generation tools. It's one of the leading interface design tools, with robust features which support teams working on every phase of the design process.

# Running a Successful Wireframing Session

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Wireframing can be mentally exhausting, so stay away from any all day sessions. Three hours should be more than enough to try some ideas, get feedback, and a good grasp of the content and interaction needed. The designer can work on the layout and interaction outside of the meeting and share at a later time.

The session should start with an overview of what you'd like to accomplish in this session. Then, review the concept and goal(s) of the page you're working on. If this is an update of a previous product, or page, you should show or discuss the history of this page and explain why changes are needed. If you have a large group of 8 or more, you can split up into 2 groups and each group can take a few minutes to list out every feature and screen element they want to include. You can then bring these ideas back to the whole group and review. The rest of the session will be for organizing the content and data required.

## Additional Tips

- 1: Know the end goal. Make sure you know what you're building.
- 2: Focus on the journey and flow, not design.
- 3: Find inspiration in existing sources



*In a team whiteboarding or wireframing session, focus on the journey and flow, not design.*

**- Vince Heilman**

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## Conclusion

Wireframing should be done early in the development phase or any time new changes are being added to a product that will need to modify the existing layout. Getting these concepts in front of Product Leadership, Development team, and others will help speed the approval process to move the project forward. These efforts can help save time by reducing QA testing, development changes, and future amends.

If you have any questions about wireframing or want to share your wireframing stories, you can reach me at [vince@vinces.net](mailto:vince@vinces.net).

# Vince Heilman

## Usability, Design, and Experience Professional.

I work with projects of all sizes. Everything from content and media creation, websites, e-commerce, mobile apps, or marketing campaigns from concept to completion.

Specialties: User Experience Design. Improving the process through experience and analytics. User Experience, Customer Experience, Customer Journey, Email Marketing, Content Creation, Brand Management, Social Media, SEO/SEM/PPC, Analytics, and more.

**Vince Heilman**

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**This is not the end.**

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