

Whitepaper

The value of Design Systems for scalable growth



- When your sales team builds a micro-site and everything collapses
- When the effort for innovation in your system is too high and nothing gets done
- When your designers and developers don't talk to each other
- When your teams are too busy with bug tickets to work on user stories
- When users do not understand how the site works
- When your brand is inconsistent, everything sounds different and a great deal of potential is lost

Do some of these sound familiar to you? Then better keep on reading!



Abstract

The essence of our work here at Edenspiekermann is to shape and grow our clients' digital brand experiences.

Here are three leading questions we often come across:

1. How can we create a sustainable, user-friendly and coherent **brand presence** in the digital world?
2. How can we create **processes and standards** for strategic digital brand management to create a vivid brand experience?
3. How can we **document and define** a brand in a digital realm, both visually and in terms of content, so that it is easily accessible for different target groups (e.g. designers, marketers or content creators)?

This white-paper gives answers to these questions and aims to demonstrate **why design systems are the ideal means to guide brands through the challenges of the digital age.**

In a very hands-on fashion, we will look beyond the buzzword at what really matters about design systems, what they can do for your business, what you need to take care of to leverage their full potential and how to start building one today.

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Introduction

Design Systems are everywhere

Design Systems are everywhere, yet we seem to lack a common understanding of what they actually are and can be.

Many smart people have tried to come up with the perfect definition but there are still many different perspectives and opinions floating around – and with them alternative vocabulary: style guide, design language, design library, design system. Admittedly, probably there is simply no »one truth« to be found. **You say potato and I say potahto.**

However, for the sake of clarity, let's avoid getting caught up in jargon or getting lost in being scientifically correct down to the very last detail. Rather, let's take a step back and start here:

“A system is an interconnected group of elements coherently organized in a way that achieves something.”

————— Donella H. Meadows

This definition yields two excellent questions that should help us grasp both the substance and the value of design systems:

1. What are its elements and how are they organized? (Substance)
2. What does the system achieve? (Value)

Substance

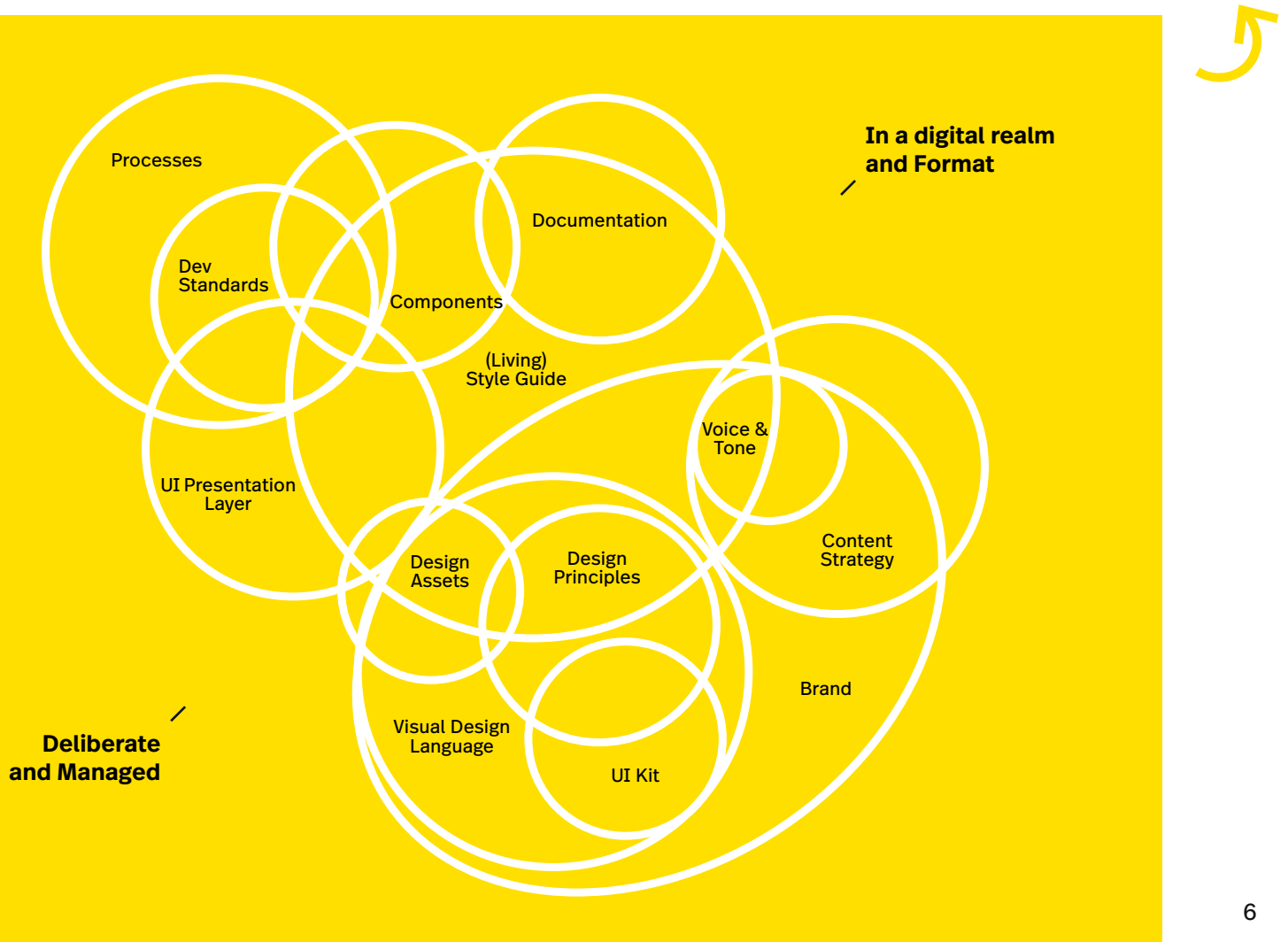
The Elements of a Design System

All experts agree that a digital design system is more than just a glorified PDF style guide. The question, however, is how much more and to what extent? Is the system a repository of templates and guidelines? A collection of front-end code snippets? What about the processes for creating templates, guidelines, components and so on? Is it about the tools used? What about governance?

Short answer: All of the above, and more.

Slightly longer answer: The scope and content of any design system heavily depends on the needs identified by the organization it is built for.

Anatomy of a Design System, as illustrated by [Nate Baldwin](#)



For us at Edenspiekermann, at its core, a design system is a documented, unified set of design/UX rules and patterns for scalable design.

A unified set of design/UX rules and patterns (from here on referred to only as “set”) can be very small or very big; it can be static or dynamic. As just mentioned before, this depends on needs, goals and the structure of the organization it is created for. It can also change significantly over time.

From our perspective, the set needs to fulfill two important criteria in order to be considered a proper design system:

- **It needs to be deliberate and managed** – otherwise you will end up with a random bunch of (design related) assets and information that is more confusing than helpful.
- **It needs to exist in a digital realm and format** – so that it is accessible for the biggest possible audience, uses the same medium as (most of) the products you and your team will create with it, and is easy to update, extend and change whenever needed.

Next, we should always be aware that ...

**“A design system is not for the product,
it’s for the people who build the product.”**

————— Liv Madsen

Both, the content and structure of a design system must be geared towards that purpose. Finding the correct information shouldn’t be a treasure hunt – **our highest goal is for the right choice to be the easiest choice.**

This is why our approach to creating and structuring design systems revolves around three essential user needs.

NEED 1

I want to ... understand my organization's purpose and character (Brand Core)

First and foremost, teams and stakeholders need to have a **common language** for talking about their organization's product(s) and **common principles** for building them. This is where your brand core comes into play; where you talk about purpose, positioning, personality and strategy.

This foundation is immensely valuable because it gives people a clear context for their work and embeds the organization's overarching purpose (aka: the "Why") in their thinking. That makes them much more receptive and open to the "How" and empowers them to make their very own decisions within the spirit of the brand.



Marketing Manager



Product Designer

NEED 2

I want to ... correctly apply the brand values in my field of work (Basic Elements and Guidelines)

Next, we must ensure that the people in our company understand what these principles mean to them in practice and how they can put them into action in their daily work. This is the decisive point at which abstract concepts are transformed into very concrete, real products and experiences.

This is best achieved by combining a high-level summary of the desired **look and feel** with application- and context-specific templates and guidelines and checklists.

The former should at least cover visual language elements (typography, colors, illustration styles ...) but also touch on content (voice and tone, copy-writing guidelines) as well as foundational UI/UX principles (e.g. interaction and animation patterns). The latter can become extensive very quickly because it has the potential to address an unlimited number of use cases: from designing business cards to setting up signage systems – from creating mobile apps to producing video ads.

NEED 3

I want to ... build digital products quickly and coherently across devices (Reusable Components, Pattern Libraries)

For obvious reasons, the old Facebook mantra “move fast and break things” has recently somewhat fallen from grace. However, when it comes to building and running digital products and services everyone loves moving fast **without** breaking things.

A great way to achieve both speed and stability is to avoid double work and build on top of previous achievements. The best way to build upon previous achievements is to establish a common library of components that make up your product – think of basic building blocks, just like Lego pieces. When these components are combined and used in repeated ways, patterns form – both actively and organically out of the design process. These patterns can be documented into a common and reusable UI/UX library (aka: a pattern library). A pattern library can be made in many ways.

Yet it can be incredibly powerful when the components it is made of extend beyond a style-guide-level “this-is-a-picture-of-how-the-navigation-looks.” Instead, try to keep the components as close as possible to the products you’ll build with them. Aim for an automated setup made up of production-level code components that are directly ingrained into your teams’ design and development processes. This is so important because out of sync = instantly useless and in-sync = always useful. Also aim for ease-of-use. Since this part of your design system will act as a workspace, and point of reference (single source of truth), your developers and designers will reference it very frequently. This vision may seem a little intimidating at the moment, but it is totally OK to start small and grow your library over time as new patterns are discovered.

Lastly: Users do not encounter brands through a single point of contact (e.g. a website) but rather through a vast array of platforms and digital touch points. A well structured and coherent approach with pattern libraries will also play into that, as patterns are re-used rather than re-designed across different contexts and offerings.



Front-end Developer



Basing our work on pattern libraries does not mean that we're looking for total uniformity. Different situations and goals require different measures (compare a marketing micro-site to a complex web-app, for example). In fact, we use the safety provided by connecting principles and building blocks to gain the necessary freedom to shape the character of each individual experience without leaving the overall brand picture.

You might have noticed that the definitions above do not imply any specific kind of presentation or technical implementation. This is simply due to the fact that there is no one size fits all solution. Which kind of setup works best for you depends on many factors – such as:

- Who the the system is built for
- How your organization's technical infrastructure is set up
- What kind of products and services the organization provides
- On which platforms it provides them

Examples

At Edenspiekermann we have encountered a lot of different situations in our projects. Here are some interesting real-world examples:

Red Bull TV Playbook

UX/UI Playbook

- For a consistent streaming and product experience on over a dozen platforms
- Contains specifications for appearance, interactions, behavior, animations
- Prototypes for mobile, 10-foot (Smart TV) and wearables were designed, programmed, tested and adapted in parallel
- Developers all over the world worked with it (for web, mobile apps and platforms like Xbox, PlayStation or Apple TV)



Helios Pattern Library and Brand Platform

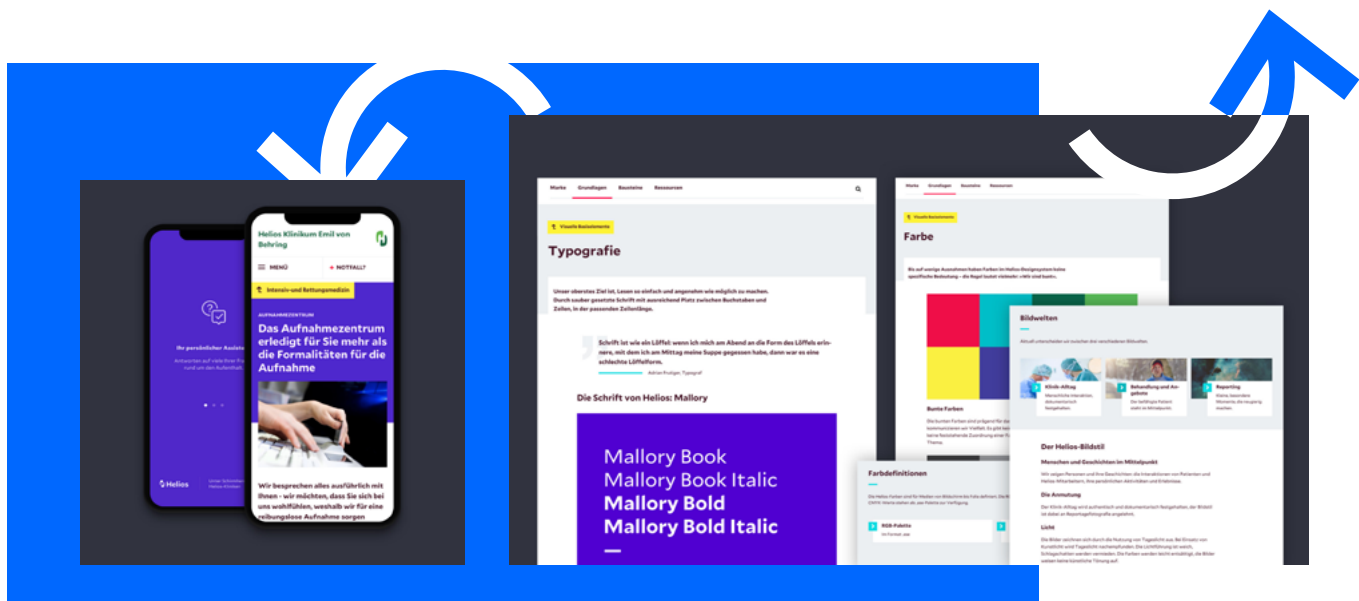
A two-part architecture: a pattern library for production-grade front-end code and a brand platform for brand documentation, guidelines, and non-web templates.

1. Helios component library

- Modular design system for the entire group of more than 120 clinics and 72,000 employees
- Over 1,500 components, variants and sample pages (built on Fractal)
- More than 60,000 new content pages created and operated across 300 websites using the front-end components of our design system
- More than 120 clinic locations were relaunched in the course of a year
- Numerous other internal and external projects are now being created on this basis

2. Helios brand portal

- Brand portal offers easy access for different user groups (e.g. marketing, communications, management)
- Introduction to brand strategy basics
- Principles for the handling of text and basic visual elements
- Building blocks for the application of design in digital and print media (manuals, checklists, templates, logos etc. for download)

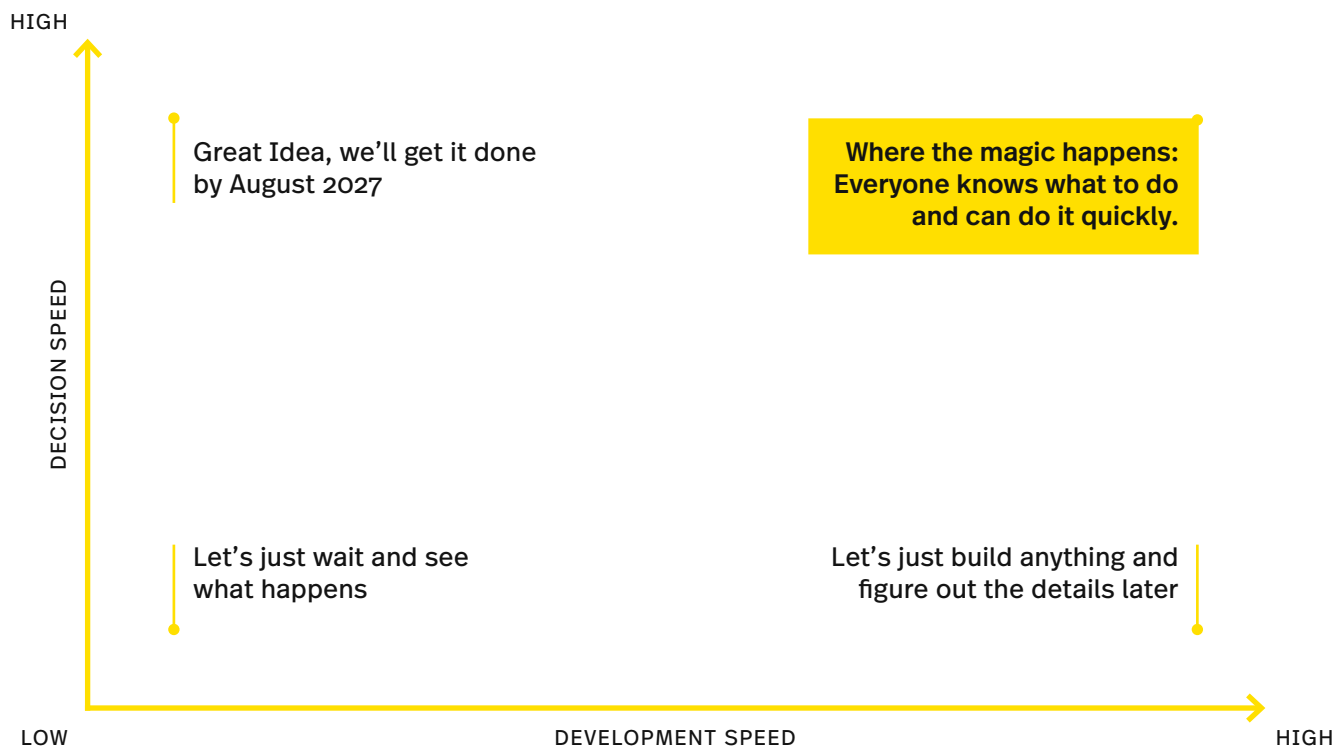


Value

What does a Design System achieve?

Now that we understand the value and benefit of certain parts of a design system, there is an impressively simple and strong overarching principle we should also look at.

A well set-up and actively used design system puts you and your teams in the unique position, that both doing things as well as deciding how to do them becomes incredibly fast and easy.



High development speed:

You don't have to do everything over and over again

With reusable modular components your team can build, test and iterate quickly – no matter whether it is about improving on an existing project, prototyping experimental ideas, internationalization or shipping entirely new products. Also, having a design system and a strong pattern library in place makes it much easier for you and your team to take full advantage of lean and agile principles, which foster constant learning, reduce risk, prevent costly failures and therefore will ultimately add to your bottom line.

High decision speed:

Shared context, goals and language give your team clarity

By providing a clear vision and implementation framework (guidelines, templates...) you remove a lot of uncertainty from the process. Without the need for lengthy alignment processes, people in the organization can focus their efforts and conversations around user needs and business goals. This obviously leads to better products and will, again, add to your bottom line.

This clearly proves that a systemic approach to design can hold great advantages for both your organization and your customers/users. Remember the aforementioned challenges? With a well-implemented design system things look quite differently:

- The team has a common vision to drive the brand and its services forward as a whole.
- People have a shared vocabulary that facilitates collaboration across departments and trades.
- There are hardly any friction losses in internal operations because ambiguities and coordination processes can be minimized.
- Everyone knows where to find what they need to build what they want. Having a single source of truth makes on-boarding of new employees and partners easy and efficient.
- It is easy to design and develop fast, coherent, scalable and well-performing solutions. This saves time and money and facilitates Agile processes, experimentation and the development of entirely new business models.
- Users experience the brand coherently across all departments, products and platforms. This helps a lot with keeping your brand and services top of mind.

Making it happen

Lay the groundwork

Quality, efficiency, internal collaboration and a coherent user experience.
Win win. Happy users, happy team, happy business. But we're not done yet.
We still have a little bit of homework left to do to make this become reality.

Design systems are powerful tools, but in turn also place significant demands on your company. To illustrate what kind of demands we are talking about, here is a checklist of the most crucial success factors.

☐ **Do you have a clear picture of what you want to achieve with the design system?**

For that you should look beyond your current project or department. Rather talk to stakeholders (i.e. potential design system clients) across the organization to identify common pain points and frustrations. This project is going to be a lot of work, so you'll need good reasons to do it.

☐ **Do you have a way of making the desired achievement measurable?**

This is very hard, but also very helpful – both for staying on track and for convincing people. You will not be able to come up with actual ROI numbers, you might however want to look at KPIs such as internal adoption rate, development velocity or even the number of bug-related support tickets.

☐ **Has management (C level) committed itself to both the overall vision and the concrete measures?**

A strong mandate is essential to get the resources necessary for long-term operation and to be able to work towards a common goal across departments. It really helps rally people behind your idea and foster collaboration.



☐ **Are you approaching the initiative with a proper strategy and roadmap?**

As with any project, we must ensure that we proceed in a structured manner and always keep an eye on the big picture. What are our priorities? Where do we start? How do we manage rollout and adaptation of the system across different teams and departments? Which internal communication measures should we take to spread the idea and the necessary mindset?

☐ **Are sufficient resources (time, people) allocated for the initiative?**

Many design systems start out as being attached to internal projects or initiatives (e.g. a relaunch of the technical infrastructure) and are at least partially implemented by existing teams. However, the necessary effort for building a new design system is often underestimated. This is especially dangerous in the early stages because far-reaching architectural decisions have to be made here.

☐ **Is everything on track for continuous design operations?**

Design systems can only realize their advantages (and justify the invested effort) if they become a self-evident part of all relevant processes and projects within the organization. In contrast to e.g. a website relaunch, they are therefore not one-off projects, but living products. They require constant care and attention in order to respond to changing requirements in the same way as the organization and its products do. In addition to the actual operation and content maintenance (e.g. front-end and design for new components), accountable ownership, governance structures and workflows must also be created. This is hardly possible without a dedicated team.



Start here

If you were able to tick most of the boxes above, congratulations!
This is exceptional.

If not, don't worry. This is totally normal. Maybe your organization is not quite ready yet or maybe a big bang design system project simply isn't the right fit for your challenges. From our experience, it is often the best approach to start small, learn and iterate towards the most fitting solution.

Our recommendation: Start with your brand.

Validate the core brand message and values, tone of voice, basic design principles and elements and document everything in an accessible digital format. The benefit: with a project of manageable complexity, you can create a strategic foundation that is universally valid and useful for everyone. More importantly, this is a major step towards establishing the idea of a single source of truth in the minds of your colleagues.

Next, the most important thing is that these somewhat abstract foundations are used as quickly as possible to solve concrete problems. Only then will you be able to build the necessary momentum to create a comprehensive and living system.

Calling in external experts is helpful here. They can not only support the actual work process, but also bring internal structures back into motion much more easily by taking an unbiased view from outside and not being tied up in internal politics.





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