

My name's Andrew Crow. I'm a senior experience designer with Adaptive Path, and like Peter was saying, that I've spent a lot of time recently with Zappos. In fact, I've spent about a year with them doing a bunch of different things, anywhere from some training and then working directly with their team. And in fact, some of 'em are here tonight. I see you. So I'm gonna try to avert my eyes from this side, and I'll talk to this group over here 'cause you're more comfortable.

Anyway, so I wanna talk to everybody here today about in-house design teams. And looking over the rosters or the attendee list for today's event, or this week's event, I noticed that there are a lot of people here who are on in-house design teams. Some of you are consultants; some of you are freelancers. But it stands to reason that there's a lot of people here from various organizations in which you are part of the design team that works in house.

And some of you brought along your bosses. Well, maybe not brought along; maybe they came with you, but that's cool. So I think there's some conversation that hopefully will come out of this discussion, this presentation, that might hopefully spark some ideas that you can take back to your companies a little bit later.

Before I go a little bit too much further, I wanna recognize something that I think we all understand, but it's very rarely said, and that is, in-house design teams are our heroes. I mean, if you think about it, these are the people that work day in and day out and build the Web applications and the e-commerce Web sites and all the different things that we use, the social networks, all the things that we're really fond of. These are the people that work tirelessly to build those things for us. They make them work the way they work. They make – the gentleman who was up here from Facebook earlier.

These are the people that really try to have a deep understanding of us, the end user, but also try to balance that with what the business is requiring of them. Right? The business needs for growth and expansion. So they're in this sort of dual position of wanting to solve problems for a wide variety of audiences, and I think that makes – to me, that makes them my hero because they continually hack at this to make it work as best they possibly can, given the resources that are available.

But like all heroes, they face challenges. Sometimes those challenges are political. I'm gonna talk about a few other challenges. Sometimes the challenges are a sort of unclear definition and things that they have to deal with on a daily basis.

For example, I've sat in many meetings where I've heard things like this: "The executives are telling us that we need to leverage the synergies that exist across multiple channels so that we can boil the blue ocean and accelerate an emergence of high-maturity behaviors, adding color to our advertising." That's bullshit.

*[Audience laughter]*

But I hear it all the time. I hear talk like that all the time, and it leads to a bunch of complications, not the which – one of which is that there's a lot of confusion around goals and mandates and priorities and things like that.

And from that, I think I've heard, both from being in house – I was in house for a while at Princess Cruises, where I led the Web team and the strategy and business development team, and also now working with Zappos for quite a while. I've heard three sort of emerging things that keep happening over and over again. And there's a lot of different challenges and problems that in-house design teams face, but I think these three sort of encapsulate at least the things that I'm hearing.

The first one is: "We don't have the resources to do the projects that our executives are asking us to do." Does that sound about right? Seeing some heads nodding. Seeing some tears already. Don't do that.

*[Audience laughter]*

So we know the resources to do the projects that our executives are asking us to do. And resources could be anything from manpower or people or time or priorities, support, things like that.

The second thing that I hear often is that "we don't have the skills necessary to do the kind of work we're asked to do." And that actually makes perfect sense, right? The design world and the technology world and the product world is moving at a really rapid pace. It's to the point where designers can't really keep up with the type of skills that are necessary, and if they do, they're making sacrifices on other things that they could be working on as well. So it's a reality, and there's ways that we can sort of live with that reality a little bit better.

And the third thing that I hear – and this is, sadly, one of the most common things – is that "you're gonna tell my boss" – as a consultant. They'll tell me as a consultant, "You're gonna tell my boss the same thing that we've been telling her for months, but for some reason she's gonna believe you." And at first, I thought that was really funny, and then I realized that's really sad, because it's true. It's unfortunately very true. For a lot of reasons, which I'll discuss in a few minutes, there are issues that lead up to executives or leadership trusting outside opinions more than they trust their own internal teams. And I think – and hopefully we'll address some of that today.

A little bit about Zappos, though. So like Peter said, I got to work with the Zappos UX team in Las Vegas, and – let me skip back to this slide – they are a small and brilliant team producing an online experience that reflects the core values that are important to that company.

And if anybody's familiar with Zappos, you'll know that there are core values that sort of permeate everything that they do. There's a few up here on the screen, but there's more than this. So things like delivering WOW through a service, embracing and driving

change, pursuing growth and learning, create fun and a little weirdness – believe me, if you've been to Zappos, there's a lot of weirdness – and, of course, doing more with less. And there's a few other things, but the important thing to know about the core values is how much they affect the product decisions and the sort of various channels that Zappos has.

So I got a chance to sit with the customer service team and to listen to how they talk to the customers that call in, either customers ordering a product or they're returning a product. And you'll hear how the tone of voice and the words that people use to work with the customer is very reflective of the core values. And you hear that also when people talk about how they select the merchandise that's gonna be sold, or how the online team decides to build a Web site and sorta craft that.

But I think what's interesting about the core values and how they relate to the Zappos UX team in particular is that it's very common for an in-house design team to have a set of brand values or attributes, or maybe it's a marketing campaign that they're asked to incorporate in their Web experience, their Web site. But Zappos has, I think, taken it to another level in which these core values are so integrated into the company culture that everything that they do has to reflect these values.

So imagine – it's one thing to say "Let's write copy that is friendly" if it's for a family site, or "Let's do graphics that are cool and edgy" if it's for a different type of brand. But the Zappos UX team has to embody these values in the very interactions that take place in the Web site. So things like simply just filling out a form to return a product has to basically emulate some of these values – delivering WOW and a pleasurable experience, and all these sorts of things that made for a lot of interesting challenges for the team. And they're a small team, which makes all the products – sorry, all the tasks that they have to do even more difficult.

So let's talk about some of those – the three things that I brought up earlier. So "We don't have the resources to do the projects that our executives are asking us to do." A lot of times, that boils down to having the right amount of people. Budgets are such that manpower plans – and by manpower, I mean resources or people – manpower plans are typically figured out well in advance, right? A lot of times they're planned out at least a half a year, sometimes a year in advance.

So saying that – so going to your boss and saying, "Hey, you've given us this long list of things that we need to do, but I don't have enough people." Their reaction is, "I can't hire anybody right now. It's not in the budget. We don't have time to do that."

So one of the things that I've noticed – there's a couple things that you can do to adjust – or to address manpower issues or resourcing issues. One is to have a stable of contractors, right? At Adaptive Path, we have a long list of contractors and people that we like to work with so that when we get stuck resourcing a particular project, we can call those people. So in-house design teams I think can copy that or emulate that, in that

if they have a list of local resources or even non-local resources that they could call, that is a very quick and easy way to staff up your team.

But more importantly, it's getting to know the project plan for a period of time, whether that's six months or a year or even two years, whatever that roadmap ends up being. The designers should be able to take part in that planning so that they can give honest and open feedback to the executive team, saying "You know what? You're asking us to do a lot of things, and this is all great, and we're happy to do this, but I don't have enough people," or "In six months I'm gonna need an extra resource or a different type of person on my team; we should start hiring that person now," or "Let's address the budget issue now," because by the time you need someone to augment your team, it's already too late, right? There's rarely an opportunity for hiring that quickly.

And I know Zappos is sort of facing this issue right now and that they're trying to staff up their team. So if anybody is enjoying working in Las Vegas, they're right back there if you wanna see them afterwards. I'm sure they'll be happy to talk to you about staffing up their great team.

Another challenge that comes to play when we talk about resourcing is time and realistic priorities. I think we all can basically agree that there's never enough time to do the work that we've been asked to do. There's always crazy deadlines: "We want this yesterday," that type of thing.

But oftentimes, time can be sort of mitigated by understanding the priorities of what you're being asked to do. So when we started with Zappos in January, working on the actual Web site, I sat down with them, and they handed me this long list. It was like one of those scrolls that just kept going. And they were like, "This is what we have to do in 2010." And I was impressed.

I was also petrified, because the problem was, is they were all very tactical issues that needed to be addressed. They were all very important things for the Web site and for the organization, but none of it was prioritized. None of it had any sense of grouping or understanding of what was important to both the business and the user.

So we sat down with them, and it took us a little while, and it was a little uncomfortable in the beginning. We sat down with them, and we looked at that list, and we tried to make sense of it. We tried to say, okay, first of all, what's first and foremost important for the end user? Right? What's important for our customers? What products and features and environments and experiences do they need?

And then we tried to match that with what was important to the business. What is the business need from this Web site? So grouping those two things together really started to paint a picture of what was important to do first, what was feasible to do first, what required extra resources, and things like that.

And we ended up with a roadmap, and we were able to go back to the executives and say, "Here's that long list that you asked us to do. Here's now a roadmap that makes a little more sense. And these features and things that we're gonna do in the first phase, we're gonna do those maybe in months 1 and 2, and then this next thing might take us a little while longer and we have to circle back with the developers to make sure that they're ready for that, those things of things." And so on.

So we ended up going from a very highly unprioritized list to now a roadmap in which we could all feel comfortable executing on. And that helped, then, everybody to understand how much time it would take to do those things. We could confidently say that this particular feature that we're gonna develop for the Web site now is gonna take six weeks, and therefore, everybody get off our backs, because we're working on it and you're gonna have it in six weeks. It was that type of feedback that we were able to give – a little more politely than that. But it allowed us to have better conversations with the executive and the product management teams.

Another resource – or another thing to pay attention, like I said earlier, is that design needs a seat at the table, I think, as early on as possible. It's important to have the designers be involved – just as designers wanna have developers involved in the beginning of a project, we wanna make sure that design has a seat at the table when it comes to project planning and resource management and understanding what's next, in terms of what's important to the executives.

That allows the designer to give honest and open feedback very early on. It allows the designer to say, "Everything that you're asking us to do is great. We're happy to do it. I'm gonna need this, this, and this. And more importantly, I'm gonna need you, my boss, to do this, this, and this for me in order for me to be effective." So being able to have those conversations smoothes out a lot of the problems that you'll experience, typically, further on in the project.

And speaking of asking your boss for support, executive support is also a crucial resource that, if you don't have, you'll falter just like as if you didn't have enough time and enough people. Executives, whether they verbally say it or not, they realize that their success is tied to your success as a designer, as a design team. Therefore, they often should act as if they are your sword and shield. Right? They're the people there that are carving out time – no pun intended – carving out time for you to do the work that you need to do. They're there to act as a shield to sorta deflect the problems that are coming their way, right? To keep you focused and not distracted on the project work that you're doing.

So looking at them as a sword-and-shield sort of position allows you to have a different relationship with them. It's no longer someone handing you work to do or asking you to execute on a vision. They become part of your team and become a partner, and I think that's important to look to as a resource.

The second big problem that I hear a lot from design teams is that "we don't have the skills necessary to do the kinda work that we're asked to do." This, I think, is inevitable

with any team. I think even at Adaptive Path we face this, where we're so busy with project work that we don't necessarily have time to develop new skills, although we've collectively come to the realization that we really need to restructure our hours such that we do have this time.

I remember personally when I joined an in-house design team, I spent so much of my time working on the actual projects and executing on a vision and doing all the things that were valuable to the company and valuable to our end users that I really didn't take much time to improve my skills as a designer. To be honest with you, my skill for Photoshop ended with, like, Photoshop 4 or 5. I had layers and I was happy, right? I mean, that's kinda what I – that's where I ended. Now, granted, I launched CS5 now, and there's a lot of new features, and they're all wonderful, but when do I have the time to sit and learn how to do some of these magical features that they've added?

And I think that's important to recognize that in-house design teams face those same challenges and that they are filling their entire eight-hour work day, sometimes longer, with executing on something, but rarely do they have the opportunity to get better.

So how do we address this? Well, clearly, training, right? Training comes first to mind. Training and maybe potentially hiring new skills, of course, would take care of that issue. But I think finding time, as a design team leader, as an executive, finding time to allow your team to get better at what they do will only yield in better results and a higher-quality product. So it's kind of a very obvious thing, but it's rarely pointed out that design teams don't have that opportunity to engage in training and sort of getting better at what they do.

Providing that opportunity. Providing that opportunity to attend conferences like this or read books. Providing an education budget is also one way to sort of combat this. I'll just move on.

The other thing that I hear a lot, of course, is this: "You're gonna tell my boss the same thing that we've been telling you, and for some reason she'll believe you." And this is, of course, unfortunately very true. Oftentimes when I sit down with a client team, the first thing that I'll say is, "Look, I'm not here to show you up. I'm not here to say that I'm better than you. I'm not here to do any of those things. I'm actually here to take everything that's important to you and somehow make that work. So if I have to be the mouthpiece for your organization or your group to your boss, I'll do that. If there's something that you want – that you're having trouble articulating, let's talk about how we can do that together so that we can continue to build up an understanding that your team is actually more important in the organization than some consultant that was brought in."

And of course, this leads directly to credibility. And it's an unfortunate thing in that, for some reason, third parties tend to have a little bit more respect and credibility than the people that are in a in-house design team. And that's a harsh reality, but I don't think it's true at all. I think the people that were hired on to execute on a particular product or service are the ones – like I said in the very beginning, they're the heroes. They're the

people that know the product and service the best. They're the people that know the landscape better than anyone else. So sorta this reality of credibility I don't think is one that should continue to exist.

But it's important to point out where credibility comes from. And the way I look at it is that credibility comes from trust, which is based on positive experiences that stem from opportunities to show value. And if I could reverse that, deconstruct that a little bit, showing – coming up with opportunities to show value for your team within an organization, opportunities to show value for design and user experience, begin to build positive experiences that people have with your group. And that leads to trust and ultimately to credibility.

At Zappos, we were sorta dealing with this in the very beginning, in which the organization, although built on these amazing core values, didn't necessarily have a good understanding of what design was and what user experience was. They didn't really appreciate the level of effort that this team was putting into making the company a success.

So we started with a couple of things. I think the very first week, what we did is we ended up putting a whiteboard or a – I forget if it was corkboard or whiteboard – on a wall. And we started listing down all the different requests that were coming in. You know, the merchandising needed this, or the customer service department needed this, or some other group within the organization needed this. We would list those, and we'd put them up.

And the goal was that when those people walked by, 'cause a lot of people actually – if you've ever been to the Zappos office, people are constantly walking by. In fact, there are parades of people on tours. But as people would walk by, they would see that "Oh, the user experience team has heard what I've been asking for, so all those endless e-mails that I think are just going into some spam filter somewhere, they're actually hearing me and recognizing that I have a legitimate issue." So that builds – going back to this. We've shown our value by creating a positive experience. People are starting to have positive experiences with your group because they feel heard.

The other thing that we did was – one other thing that I suggested, and I'm not sure if it's actually happened yet is – and Laura, who's here from Adaptive Path, had suggested this a while ago, which is find something in your office or your organization or something that doesn't quite have the best user experience, and then fix it. So if trash can's in the wrong place, or if there's not enough supplies in a certain meeting room, fix that and then put a little note – and this is gonna sound corny – put a little note that says, "This experience was brought to you by the Zappos user experience team" or whatever your organization is.

It sounds so silly, but if people see that often, they'll start to think that your user experience team is not just focused on the Web site. You guys don't do just Web pages. You guys are starting to think about experiences that go beyond what's on the site.

You're starting to think about how you can improve people's lives through positive experiences. And that starts to trigger some different ways of thinking about your team. Now people may come to you and say, "You know what? I've got this problem, and I think that maybe you guys, because you think a certain way, might be able to solve this."

This happened to me personally with Princess. We were redesigning the way that the check-in process works for people to get on board the ship. And people would have a ticket, the paper ticket. They would go down to the docks, wait in this really long line, and they would get on board.

And what we ended up doing is we ended up looking at the types of people that came in and the situations that they came in with, the different luggages, the different types of class – of ticket, and things like that. And we essentially proposed a complete reorganization of the sort of on-board experience, and it shifted the way people got on board the ship, and I think there was some percentage of increase in efficiency.

But the point is, is that that started having a lot of people come to my group, which essentially was the Web and strategy group. They started coming to us and asking us about, like, "Well, what do you think about how this might work on board?" or "What do you think about how this might work when we mail something out to our users?" And that was definitely beyond the call of our organization – our in-house design team's duty, but it made sense to people, and it showed value, and it eventually led to a certain level of credibility.

So those are sorta three things, and I'm happy to talk in a lot more detail with people afterwards, but I think there's a couple of opportunities here that go beyond sort of just solving problems that everybody's used to. Those opportunities are things like knowing your audience. In-house design teams know your audience better than anyone else does. Yes, you might hire people out to do a little bit of research every once in a while, but essentially, when you're on an in-house design team, you know your audience best.

The fortunate thing about that is you also know your business best, so you can match those two needs up a lot easier than someone from the outside. And the value of that is being able to lead your industry in certain areas. For example, Zappos is known as a leader in customer service. Why? Because Tony talks about it all the time – Tony their CEO.

He talks about customer service so much that people now look to him as a leader in customer service. So other organizations that have nothing to do with shoes or clothing or anything else look to Zappos as a leader in customer service, and they study and they watch the way the business decisions and the design decisions that have been made by Zappos.

So knowing your audience, knowing what's important to them, knowing how to serve them best can translate into a bunch of opportunities for your team and your organization that don't necessarily readily present themselves.

This idea of building complete experiences is also an opportunity for in-house design teams as well. Complete experiences for me are a little bit more than sort of what you've been charged to do. So for example, if your team is in charge of developing a Web site, there's a lot of other channels out there within your organization, especially an e-commerce situation, that you can be affecting, right? This whole concept of WebPlus 1. You've got this Web, and then you've got these sort of Plus 1 or 2 or all these other channels.

So at Zappos, we talked about what complete experiences could we possibly start affecting. And one of the things that I'd love to see us – to see the team do – and I say "us" because I feel like I'm still part of the team. One of the things that I really wanted to do is build a great online experience, but start to expand out into how people unbox their products. When you get a white Zappos box, it's like Christmas, right? You open it up. There's gonna be shiny shoes or something that you've just purchased. It's really sort of a – that white box has become iconic with this sort of emotional reaction.

But what about that unboxing experience could be tied back to the Web site? Could the receipt or the shipping label that's stuck to the box – could that look a little bit more like the experience that you had online? Or could some of the language that's used in that be a little more reflective of the customer service types of things that people have been talking about?

So there's ways to build more complete experiences because you know your product and services so well, and I think that's an opportunity for in-house design teams to sorta branch out.

So to sort of sum this up a little bit – I've got this long, pithy statement here, and it basically says continually look for ways to showcase value by taking projects outside of your space, cross-training others in other disciplines, having discussions with your other departments within your company to talk to them about the value that you could bring and help them, and defining the intended experience of your brand. Define what people want – define the way that you want people to interact with your company or your brand.

I think those are – that sort of summarizes the opportunities and some of the problems that I think a lot of in-house design teams face, because essentially, in-house designers, if you remember, they're our heroes, and you have the opportunity every day to go to work and be that hero. And probably one of the most important things about heroes is that they look good in spandex.

*[Audience laughter]*

I had to work in spandex somehow. So anyways, thank you very much, everyone. I appreciate it.

*[End of Audio]*