The definitive guide to creative collaboration

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Executive Summary

Creativity is as important for business as productivity.
Scott Belsky, chief product officer at Adobe, said:

> **Creativity is a new productivity. In the age of AI and machine learning, just being more productive won't cut it. The future belongs to the creatives.**[1]

Creativity has become the biggest driver of value for business. It is a key differentiator. The creator economy is booming. More creative is being produced, by more people, for more purposes.

New tools are emerging to support creativity and creatives. Design apps, cameras, editing suites are all democratising content creation.

Collaboration is a fundamental part of creativity. Every piece of creative that is produced requires feedback at least once - and usually many times.

Creative collaboration (online proofing in old money - we explain why later), is software that supports creative teams with the vital process of getting creative content reviewed and approved.

About this guide

In this guide we will look at the direct correlation between successful creativity and collaboration. We will examine what is driving the explosion of demand for creative content and the challenges facing creative teams delivering that content. We explore the key components of creative collaboration software. We will cover the main indicators that your creative or marketing team is ready for a creative collaboration platform. Finally, we look at the results your team can expect from using creative collaboration to facilitate your creative process.

The goal of creative excellence

> " Nothing is more efficient than creative advertising. Creative advertising is more memorable, longer lasting, works with less media spending, and builds a fan community...faster.
>
> Stephan Vogel, Ogilvy & Mather Germany's Chief Creative Officer

Being part of a team that produces exceptional creative is why we do what we do. It's what motivates us. The satisfaction of doing great creative work, as part of a great creative team.

We instinctively appreciate great creative when we see it; the elegance of well designed products; the beauty of well crafted ads. Conversely, when we experience bad creative we feel it viscerally.

Creative excellence is more than a pleasing aesthetic. Creative excellence has a direct and significant impact on business performance.

MarTech

AdTech

Creative Tech

70%
of content's performance is driven by the creative
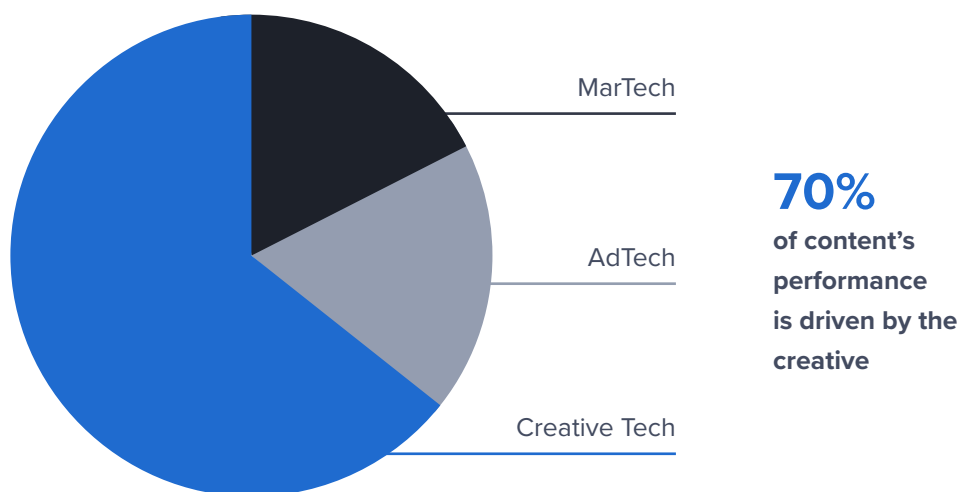
Google itself says that 70% of advertising effectiveness depends on the creative[1]. One of their senior creatives executives said that the biggest challenges facing creative storytellers is that clients can sometimes get too caught up in ensuring that ads are landing in the right place and at the right time at the right person, and not focused on what is contained in the ad itself.

Google

[1] Ross Jauncey, Head of Global Creative Programs at Google talking to Business World

The Design Council in the UK measured the performance of design-led business against their peers[2]. They found:

- High growth businesses were six times more likely than low growth businesses to see design as integral to their business
- Shares in publicly traded design-led businesses outperformed the stock market by 200%

McKinsey & Co studied the impact of design in 300 public companies across industries over a five-year period[3] . They used this research to create the McKinsey Design Index (MDI), which rated companies by how strong they were at design and how that correlated to financial performance. They found that design focused firms:

- Design focused firms delivered 32% higher revenue growth on average
- Design focused firms added 56% higher shareholder return on average

[2] The Value of Design Factfinder Report, The Design Council
[3] The business value of design, McKinsey & Co.

Creative excellence improves business performance

Creative excellence is the foundation of a strong brand. It expresses what a company stands for and differentiates it from its competitors. It also creates a memorable, meaningful, relatable and personal connection for the customer. This in turn improves engagement by the customer with the brand.

Creative excellence is the clearest expression of a message: collaboration to facilitate your creative process.

> **❝** Design is the message. It helps us communicate our strong point of difference. What you say is not as believable as what you show.[4]

Creative excellence authenticates a company. It speaks to the company's professionalism, competence and attention to detail.

Creative excellence improves a company's product or service. As Steve Jobs said, "It's not just what it looks like and feels like, design is how it works."

[4] Attributed to Stig Gustavson via Mint

Creativity and collaboration

Michael Schrage of MIT is one of the most innovative thinkers on the use of technology for creativity and collaboration. In his 1995 book No More Teams!: Mastering the Dynamics of Creative Collaboration he wrote:

> **For organizations that care about innovation, individual creativity isn't enough anymore - people need to be in creative, collaborative relationships.**

For "virtual" organizations, collaborative relationships are a must or the organization won't survive. The world's greatest collaborations—Picasso/ Braque, Watson/Crick, Wozniak/Jobs—relied on "shared spaces" where they could play with their ideas. Shared spaces, however you set them up, provide the neutral ground on which any and all ideas can be aired and considered. Developing a shared space for collaboration is about effectively using tools— from felt tips on napkins, to whiteboards, to specialized computer software— that can provide the shared space to keep all the good ideas, to cope with every objection, to handle conflicts as they come up, to make sure everyone gets their say and has it considered.[5]

[5] No more teams; mastering the dynamics of creative collaboration. M Schrage 1995

The late Vera John-Steiner of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS) at Stanford University and award winning author wrote:

> " Rodin's sculpture "The Thinker" dominates our collective imagination as the purest representation of human inquiry—the lone, stoic thinker. But while the Western belief in individualism romanticizes this perception of the solitary creative process, the reality is that scientific and artistic forms emerge from the joint thinking, passionate conversations, emotional connections and shared struggles common in meaningful relationships.[6]

[6] Creative Collaboration, Vera John-Steiner 2006

Creativity and collaboration go hand in hand

Creativity does not happen in a vacuum. Collaboration is a fundamental part of the creative process. Creative people may, at times, need time and space to develop ideas alone, but every creative project is ultimately a collaborative endeavour. A central pillar of creative collaboration is getting feedback on ideas. Getting the opinions of others, discussing those ideas and opinions, iterating and improving.

Our credo at Ziflow is that:

> **Getting feedback is a fundamental part of the creative process, and getting approval is the essential last step of a creative project.**

Creative collaboration in a marketing campaign

Let's now look more closely at creativity and collaboration in marketing campaigns. Marketing campaigns have a number of common stages. Feedback is needed at each stage.

Ideation

Ideation is the first step. During the ideation phase, the team will ask and answer key questions. Why is the campaign needed? Who are the people affected by the campaign? What is the expected behavior of those people during and after the campaign? The team will brainstorm the answers to those questions, do standalone work to develop ideas, iterate on those ideas, and zero in on the best ones. This ideation phase is highly collaborative, and highly creative. Visual content will be prepared to flesh out the final ideas, and those visuals will be tested by getting feedback from the creative team, other stakeholders, as well as the target audience.

Creation

Creation follows ideation. At this stage the creative team begins to produce the core visuals for the campaign. Creative components are sourced, photography, video footage, copy are all needed, and all require feedback. Creative options are produced and feedback received from all of the stakeholders. The feedback process is fundamental to the stage of the creative process. As the creative is refined, the team gets closer to the point of getting formal approval. Formal approval is a critical step before the campaign moves into full production.

Distribution

Distribution is the final step in the campaign. Distribution is the process of taking the finished individual assets and making them available to the different channels through which they will reach the audience. Assets may be made available to partners and other stakeholders who may localise the assets for specific markets. In these cases, the feedback process might be reversed, with amended assets being sent back to the creative team for approval.

Evolution

Once campaign assets are distributed, the project continues to evolve as performance is measured. The creative team needs access to feedback from all of the versions that were created so that they can fine-tune the campaign quickly.

Explosion of demand for creative content

Advertising and marketing has changed beyond recognition. Digital marketing has driven a huge increase in demand from businesses for creative content. Creative teams are being asked to be more creative, to produce more creative, and to produce creative faster.

Competition for attention

Businesses are desperate for their creative content to cut through. They are competing for attention in a world where the average person is seeing from 6,000 to 10,000 ads every day. Consumers engage with over 10 different pieces of content before making a purchase. B2B buyers consume on average 13 pieces of content before choosing a vendor.[7] Average screen time has increased from 46 minutes per day in 2011 to between 5 and 6 hours in 2021.[8]

Digital, visual, mobile

Creative has become more digital and more visual. When Tim Berners-Lee and his team established the World Wide Web project just 30 years ago there was no digital marketing. 30 years later global digital marketing spend is $389.29 billion - 46% of total global ad spend.[9] Video and mobile are grabbing greater market share. There are 5.22 billion mobile users. By 2022, 82% of all Internet traffic will be video.[10] 86% of businesses already use video as a marketing tool. 91% say that the pandemic has made video more important for their brand.[11]

More channels, more campaigns

New channels are continually launching and driving demand for more creative content. There are 3.78 billion social media users worldwide.[12] In 2020, TikTok saw its user base grow by 75% in just nine months. 44% of advertisers plan to increase their ad spend on TikTok in 2021.[13]

[7] Martech, February 2020
[8] Statista, 2021
[9] Digital around the world, Datareportal 2021
[10] The State of Online Video, Forbes 2020
[11] Wyzowl's State of Video Marketing Survey 2021
[12] Number of social network users worldwide from 2017 to 2025, Statista
[13] The Marketers Toolkit 2021, WARC

Short shelf life

Adding to the pressure to create more content is the fact that content has a brutally short shelf life. Studies show that 74% of articles published online have peak viewing on the day of publication, and this falls to 2% at the end of a single month. On Facebook, 75% of total impressions take place in the first two hours and 30 minutes.[14]

The shelf life of content is shrinking
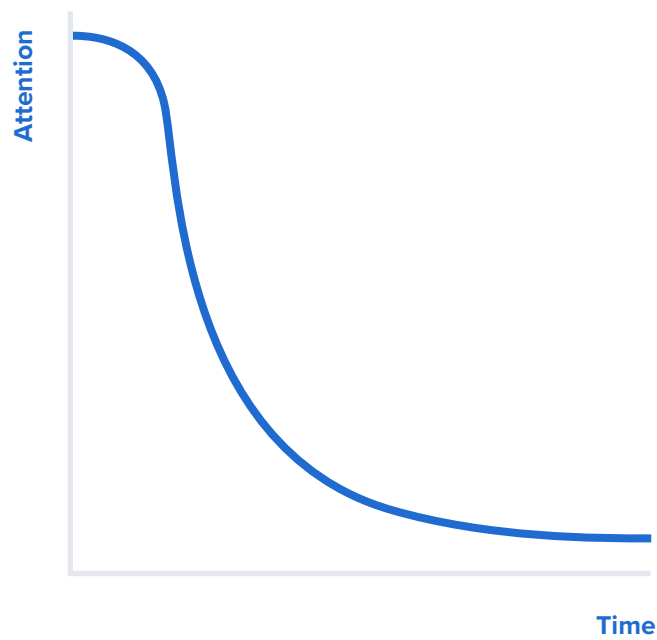
[14] The Shelf Life of Your Facebook Posts Is Shorter Than You Thought, Hubspot

New pressures on creative teams

With the rise in demand for creative content, creative teams are under extraordinary pressure managing their creative processes.

Production is more complex

Between the 1960s and the mid-1990s, there were relatively few marketing channels: TV, radio, press, billboards, direct-mail. Campaigns were less frequent and required fewer creative assets.

The fragmentation of technology and platforms means that companies that could once advertise to a mass market through a handful of commercials now need thousands of pieces of content. Managing the production of that content at this new scale is so much more complex.[15]

Internet campaigns are shorter and more frequent
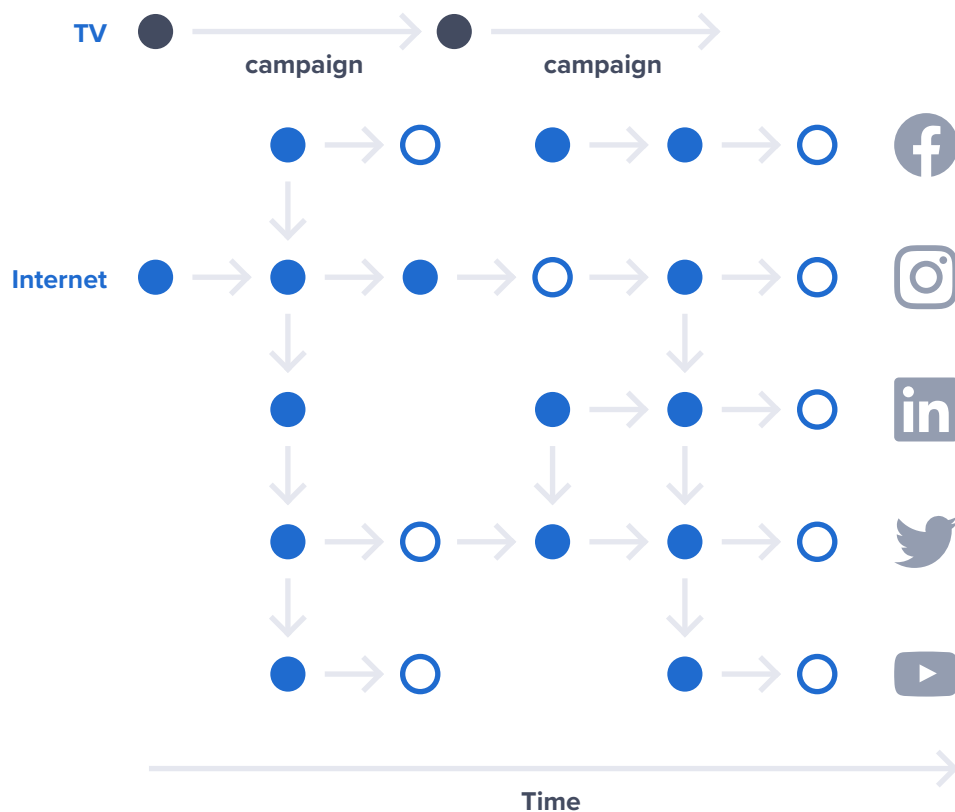
[15] History of Marketing Channels, mission.org

More reviewers to manage

Not only have campaigns become more complex, but creative review and approval processes have become more convoluted. There are more stakeholders involved in the review and approval of creative content. The creative-client axis has always been a given, but now add brand, motion, SEO, legal, compliance, and more. The number of people that need to review and approve creative content has multiplied exponentially.

More compliance

Creative teams want to produce exceptional creative that attracts customers, delivers sales, and builds brands. However, marketing compliance requires creative content to meet specific legal and regulatory rules, as well as internal brand standards. Failure to do the former can result in financial loss, customer loss and reputation loss. Failure to do the latter can result in brand dilution and less impactful marketing. Creative and marketing teams need to ensure that what they produce is properly reviewed and approved by the right people in the right sequence. They also need to maintain a system of record showing exactly who reviewed and approved what, and when.

Remote working

The move toward remote working was already underway pre-pandemic, but has been massively accelerated in 2020 and 2021. 80% of agency staff are now working remotely all of the time, with a further 18% working remotely some of the time.[16] The acceleration of remote working and/or distributed teams may have given creative teams more space and time to do their work without interruption, but it has put pressure on effective collaboration. The challenge within a creative team is maintaining creativity without having water cooler moments—those unplanned interactions which can often spark some of the most creative ideas.

[16] 2021 In-House Creative Industry Report, Cella

New tools for creators

Adobe has dominated the graphics software market by successfully creating an ecosystem of tools for creators. However, Adobe's dominance is being challenged. Companies such as Figma, Sketch, InVision, and Canva have launched tools for creators and are creating new markets as well as taking market share in existing markets. These tools are benefitting from changing market dynamics and the move to browser-first software.

vs.

Adobe's annual report in 2020 acknowledges these new competitors:

Applications and tools for experience and interface design and prototyping are still emerging and evolving as adoption of these tools by designers, design teams and larger organizations grows. Competitors to Adobe XD include Figma, Invision and Sketch. Partnerships and integrations between these companies and third parties create an increasingly competitive landscape in this space.

The issue for creative teams is that each new creative tool in their arsenal creates a new process and potential environment for feedback, further complicating how they manage their review processes.

Now let's look at the evolution of technology to help creative teams get feedback.

Evolution from online proofing to creative collaboration

Creative collaboration platforms have evolved from earlier technologies such as online proofing and soft proofing. Creative campaigns are shorter, so collaboration needs to take place earlier and continue throughout the life of the campaign. The concept of "final sign-off" has been replaced by constant collaboration.

Hard-copy proofs

The concept of proofing originally comes from print production. Press time was expensive and print errors were costly to correct. Customers were given hardcopy proofs called contract proofs. These gave them an opportunity to catch errors and also served as an agreement between customer and printer that the content and color were as intended. Between the 1940s and early 2000s, various technologies were created to reduce the cost of producing contract proofs. Dupont Cromalin, Fuji Finalproof and Kodak Approval are all examples of different technologies that served that same purpose—checking for accuracy before print production.

Soft proofing tools

In the early 2000s soft proofing emerged as a screen-based alternative to hardcopy contract proofs. Soft proofing was designed to be a low-cost, more accurate alternative to hardcopy proofing. However, soft proofing was never widely adopted because of the expensive investment required in hardware and software. Screen calibration was vital for color accuracy and it was hard to create the specific physical environment needed to replicate print colors accurately on screen.

Online proofing apps

As spend on digital marketing increased, and spend on print marketing fell, a new category of software emerged called online proofing. It was based on soft proofing, but designed to include the new types of creative asset. Production managers working in digital marketing needed tools to take digital content from their design team and route that content for review and approval. The processes were still very similar to those in soft proofing. Reviewers would see assets for review and approval towards the end of the creative process. PDF still dominated, but other categories of digital assets were growing fast.

Creative collaboration platforms

In the last decade (2011-2021) there has been a further step change in the way that creative is produced and in the tools that support collaboration on that creative. Shorter campaigns and shorter asset shelf life mean creatives need to collaborate with reviewers much throughout the life cycle of a campaign. Whereas previously reviewers would get to see a creative asset much closer to the point of production, these days they are involved from the very beginning. Creative collaboration platforms have evolved to support these changes.

Making collaboration easy is important—reviewers need to be able to work from desktops, tablets and mobile devices. Quality of feedback is important. Speed of feedback is important. There is less time for assets to go through multiple revisions when time is at a premium. Accuracy of feedback is important, especially with the growth of compliance in marketing. All of this means that creative collaboration needs structure without getting in the way of creativity and speed. As a result, workflow has started to become a key component in creative collaboration.

Let's talk about email

Email is not the solution

Many creative teams use email as the default for managing feedback. The problem that creative teams face is that email is easy to send, but everything that follows becomes hard to manage.

Email is easy because it is ubiquitous. Everyone has an inbox. It is extremely easy to send an email to reviewers. Save as, attach, send. Email can be used to send a huge variety of creative assets as attachments, including links to assets stored online.

Email IS the problem

The problem with email is that feedback is inaccurate and collaboration is limited. Trying to use email to describe a change in color on an image, or a change to a frame or sequence in a video, or even text changes, is chaotic. Marking up an attachment such as a PDF or office document improves accuracy, but still requires huge effort to consolidate and reconcile feedback from multiple reviewers. Receiving feedback by email from one or more reviewers results in a barrage of CC'd messages and reviewers not being aware of what other reviewers are saying or easily being able to discuss feedback together.

Creative collaboration versus collaborative creation

It is useful to distinguish between apps that help a creative team get feedback on their content and those that help a group of people create content together. We use the terms creative collaboration and collaborative creation to help make that distinction.

Collaborative creation tools let a group of people simultaneously create content. tools such as **Google Docs, Figma and InVision** are great examples of these. Their core value proposition is to create. Multiple people can access the content at the same time and work together on that content. For UX design teams working closely together, these apps work incredibly well.

Compare this to creative collaboration platforms where the creator maintains creative control over the content and shares that content for feedback.

What creatives and reviewers want

Creative teams and their reviewers have the common goal of delivering exceptional creative. They also have many common requirements from a creative collaboration platform. In an ideal world, they want:

- Everything to be centralized and easy to find

- To use a common set of tools no matter which type of asset they are collaborating on

- Easy ways to provide feedback and collaborate on that feedback

- To be able to compare different versions of the same asset

- To reduce the time that they spend working on each asset

What creatives want

Creative teams want to produce amazing work with the fewest possible revisions. They want to go from "version 1" to "version approved" in the fastest possible time, and they want "version approved" to be exceptional.

Creative teams want to be creative. They want a simple way to ask for and get feedback no matter what type of creative project they are working on. They want to retain control of the creative asset, and not have reviewers making unwanted changes. They want to keep track of who has reviewed what, and when.
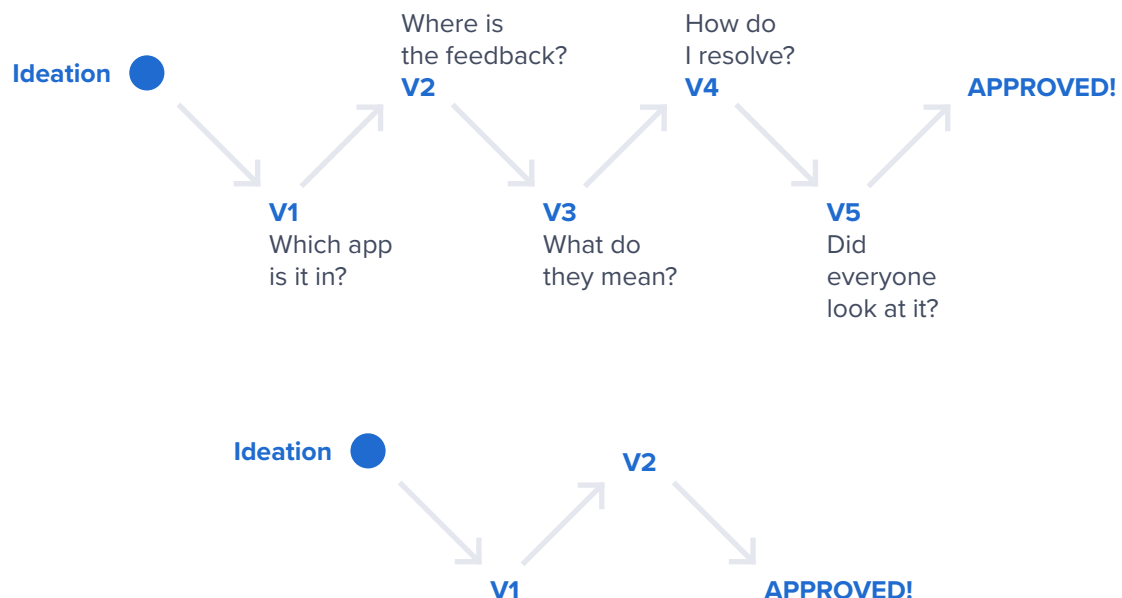
What reviewers want

What reviewers want is a simple way to provide feedback and approval on all the assets they are being asked to look at, in one place. What reviewers don't want is to switch between different feedback tools depending on the type of project or asset.

What reviewers also want is less email. The average employee receives over 120 emails per day. The more tools being used to ask for feedback, the more emails get sent. Email overload remains a challenge. Anything that can reduce inbox overload is a win for creative teams and their collaborators.

In the case of compliance

Finally, we need to consider compliance. We cover compliance in more detail elsewhere, but for businesses where compliance is a crucial part of creative approval, having a single platform to track and record approvals is mission critical. Compliance needs a single system of record for all creative feedback and approvals, no matter which tool was used to produce the asset.

Core components of a creative collaboration platform

The core components of a creative collaboration platform are:

- Sharing creative assets online so everything easy to access

- Centralizing feedback on each asset on one place

- Reviewing any type of creative asset on a single platform

- Commenting tools to help reviewers give accurate feedback

- Discussion tools to help creatives work with reviewers to clarify feedback

- Versioning tools to keep track of revisions of each asset through to the final approved version

- Approval tools to get formal sign-off of each assetthe asset

All feedback centralized in one place

Feedback scattered in emails, documents, web-based folders, PDFs, collaboration apps, project management tools - you know the drill, it is an absolute time sink trying to keep track of who commented on what, when and where.

The basic premise of a creative collaboration platform is that feedback on all creative assets is centralized in one place. This not only benefits the creative team, but also the reviewers. Both can easily find assets that they are working on, or have worked on previously. Nothing is lost.

Single platform to review any creative asset

PDFs as email attachments, movies uploaded to Dropbox, images in a Google Drive folder, web banners in Hubspot. From a reviewer's perspective there is nothing worse than having 10 different ways to review 10 different types of creative assets.

A creative collaboration platform makes it easy to share creative assets of any type, and receive feedback using the same set of markup and annotation tools. This makes life easy for reviewers and means that feedback happens quickly, consistently and to a high standard.

Tools for accurate feedback

Trying to decipher feedback in an email about a color change on an image, or a slight adjustment to the position of a logo, or changes across a few frames of a movie is almost impossible without a huge amount of back-and-forth.

Giving reviewers a simple set of commenting and annotation tools to provide accurate feedback on any type of creative asset is a key component of any creative collaboration platform. Annotation tools should include text, drawing, and attachments.

Tools for collaborative discussion

One-to-one feedback is relatively easy to manage. However, the moment that feedback is requested from multiple people, things get exponentially more difficult. Firstly, different reviewers provide feedback in different ways, some by email, some with attachments on PDFs, and so on. Secondly, feedback can be contradictory. How do you reconcile reviewer A asking for one change and reviewer B asking for something different? Thirdly, how do you engage in fast discussion on these different points so that your project isn't slowed down?

A creative collaboration platform will provide the collaboration tools to let creative teams and their reviewers collaborate quickly and easily. Discussion threads, mentions, tags and to-do tasks help teams work effectively together to speed up review and reduce time lag.

Tools for managing versions

A weak process for collecting feedback can create ripple effects throughout the delivery process. One of these ripple effects is version sprawl—the churning out of new versions for feedback that wasn't supported or challenged (or in most cases, even seen by other team members). Pretty soon, every project has a version numbered in double digits.

Creative collaboration improves the quality of feedback to reduce versions. It then tracks feedback across versions to ensure that feedback is actioned. It can also incorporate comparison tools to view versions side by side, and even automatically compare versions at frame and pixel level to spot inadvertent changes.

Tools for managing approval

The essential final step of many creative projects is getting formal approval or sign off. Tools to track approval are critically important, especially in an environment where client approval is needed, or there is a compliance requirement.

A creative collaboration platform will provide formal approval tools, so that creative teams have certainty that the projects they have been working on have been given the green light.

Security, reliability and resilience

Security is a critical component for any creative collaboration platform. Creative content is highly confidential, especially before campaign launch. A creative collaboration platform quickly becomes mission critical for a creative team, so reliability is vital. It should also be fast. Creative teams don't have time to wait for data to be uploaded, or for creative assets to appear on the screen.

A creative collaboration platform should provide high levels of security, and should be properly certified by an independent auditor from one of the top-tier security certification bodies.

Advanced components of a creative collaboration platform

The core components of a creative collaboration platform provide the basic functionality needed to support feedback and approval. These more advanced components are a force multiplier.

The advanced components of a creative collaboration platform are:

- Workflow to support feedback and collaboration by ensuring that processes are managed in a consistent way

- Automation to reduce the amount of time spent by creative teams carrying out repetitive campaign and project management tasks

- Integration so that feedback and approval activity can be fed into creative tools, project management apps and asset management platforms

- Reporting and metrics provide insight into how well the creative collaboration process is performing and helps improve process and creative results

- Organizational controls to ensure that account set up is secure, and reflect the trusted relationships within marketing between brands, departments of brands and agencies.

Workflow

Implementing a creative collaboration platform improves feedback and collaboration. However, human nature being what it is, ad hoc processes can still be messy at best, and chaotic at worst.

A creative collaboration platform should therefore provide strong workflow capability to standardize feedback and approval processes. Workflow helps manage review and approval in a consistent way. Workflow templates ensure that best practices can be baked into how review and approval is managed, every time.

Automation

Automation of any business process removes human effort and frees people to pursue higher value, and more creative activity. Nobody working in a creative team wants to be bogged down with mundane tasks. Manually tracking down feedback, chasing reviews, reconciling comments and pursuing approvals wastes time and resources.

A creative collaboration platform will automate mundane, manual tasks and help creative team members focus on being more productive and more creative.

Integrations

Creative teams use a wide range of tools, apps and platforms to create, manage and distribute creative assets.

A creative collaboration platform needs to exist comfortably alongside each of these technologies. In fact, a creative collaboration platform should arguably sit in the middle of these technologies acting as a bridge between them. It should be able to pull creative content from creative tools, and push feedback into those tools. It should be able to map to people, projects and tasks in project management systems and update those as activity takes place in the review and approval process. It should be able to pull assets from file storage systems for review and push assets into file storage systems when they have been approved.

Reporting and metrics

Being able to measure the performance of the creative review and approval process is particularly important when campaign life cycles are short and volumes are high.

A creative collaboration platform will be able to measure and report on key metrics such as creative life cycle steps and version count. Measuring how long it takes a team to produce a first draft, how long it takes reviewers to engage with a new review request, how long it takes to complete review of each version, how many versions are required to get to a final approval, are all important in order to be able to improve overall creative production processes.

Organizational control

Creative campaigns are complex, and creative organizations and relationships are equally complex. Creative teams need to manage multiple clients and multiple projects. Agencies need to be able to create and manage accounts for multiple clients. Reviewers need to be able to review creative content from multiple creative teams.

A creative collaboration platform should be able to handle sophisticated organizational structures such as agency/client accounts, multi-account sign-in, consolidated reviewer dashboards. All of this needs to happen with enterprise-level security as standard.

Best-of-breed vs best-suite

Work management platforms and project management apps often include feedback and approval functionality in their suite of functionality.

The promise of best-suite software has always been to support all core business functions in a single application suite. This gives the customer one company to work with, simple licensing and the perception of reduced risk. In some cases best-suite vendors have cobbled together systems from products that came through merger and acquisition. The reality is that the different components in a software suite often don't work well together, or only provide basic functionality in some areas. They can be complex and difficult to implement. They struggle to keep pace with innovation in individual product areas. "Shadow IT" can evolve as people look for solutions that the suite doesn't provide.

Conversely, best-of-breed vendors focus on providing deep functionality in specific product areas, ongoing innovation (not to be underestimated), shorter implementation times and closer alignment with the strategy and vision of the customer. The downside of the best-of-breed approach is that integration can be a challenge, multiple licensing agreements need to be managed, and the look and feel of different vendors can vary.

There is no right answer, but with creative and marketing evolving at such a rapid pace, innovation and agility from best-of-breed vendors with a strong ability to integrate would appear to be a good option.

Best-suite vs best-of-breed
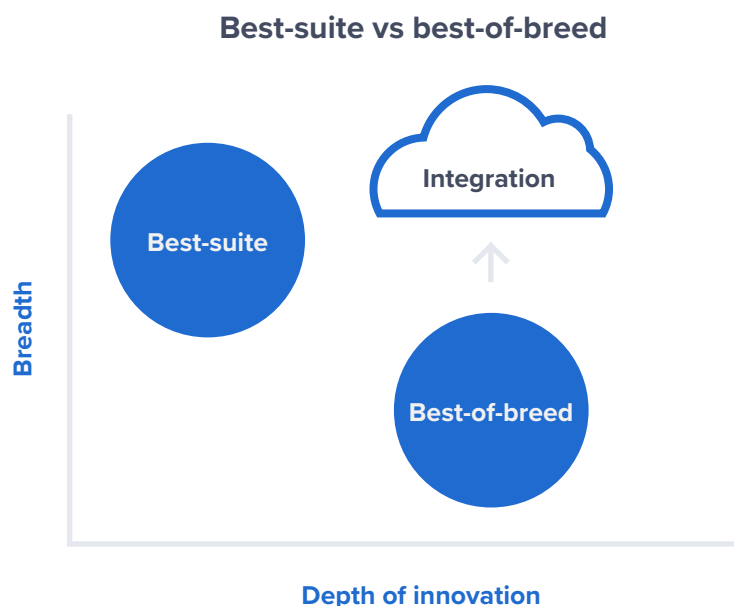
The business case for creative collaboration

Survey results

We conduct an annual survey of creative teams, exploring how they work, the tools they use, the challenges they face, and how their processes are evolving. We also ask about the results they get from the technology that they use.

In our 2020 annual survey, creative teams who have implemented a creative collaboration platform said that they deliver creative projects 56% faster. They reduce the number of revisions by an average of 30%. And they reduce the effort they spend managing the review and approval process by 59%.

59%	**30%**	**56%**
Reduction in time spent managing review and approval of creative content	**Fewer versions before final approval**	**Less time to get creative projects completed**

Conversely, 53% of creative teams said that they do not have a consistent process of any type for managing review and approval of creative content. Of those, 79% said that they encounter regular issues getting feedback on their creative projects. 55% said that vague, or non-actionable, feedback was a challenge.

Let's look specifically at how creative teams can get back more time to focus on delivery exceptional creative:

Less time on administrative work

Creative teams spend too much time organising and sharing creative assets for feedback, then collating and consolidating comments. The more methods that teams have for getting feedback, the more disjointed that feedback becomes. The more disjointed the feedback, the more time spent managing that feedback.

A creative collaboration platform saves time by centralizing all creative assets in one place and consolidating all feedback on those assets. Creative teams spend less time collating feedback from different reviewers as reviewers leave feedback in the same place. Fewer emails are sent benefitting creative teams and reviewers.

Less time chasing

After a creative team has shared a creative asset for feedback, the next headache is making sure that everybody who needs to respond has done so. Some reviewers are very quick with their feedback, but others take their time, if they respond at all. In our survey, 24% of our customers said that it is often more senior reviewers who most frequently hold up the feedback process.

A creative collaboration platform saves time by centralizing all creative assets in one place and consolidating all feedback on those assets. Creative team members responsible for project administration save an average of 4 hours per week collating feedback from different reviewers as reviewers leave feedback in the same place. Fewer emails are sent benefitting creative teams and reviewers. Creative team members each save a further 2 hours per week by automating how information and files are shared between creative design, project management, fast storage, chat and other apps.

6
hours
per week

**SAVED FOR EACH TEAM MEMBER
BY REDUCING ADMIN AND CHASING**

More accurate feedback

Using text to describe a change in color on an image, or a change to a frame or sequence in a video, or even text changes in a document leads to confusion and time wasted with follow-up questions. Marking up an attachment such as a PDF or office document improves accuracy, but still requires huge effort to consolidate and reconcile feedback from multiple reviewers.

A creative collaboration platform gives reviewers simple, powerful mark-up and annotation tools. These work on all types of creative assets. These tools make it easy for reviewers to provide accurate feedback. This saves reviewers' time communicating feedback, and then saves creatives' time understanding the feedback they receive. Creatives and reviewers each save over 3 hours each week on feedback activities, including searching, reconciling, giving and clarifying feedback.

3
hours
per week

SAVED FOR EACH CREATIVE AND REVIEWER BY GETTING MORE ACCURATE FEEDBACK

Faster discussion and decisions

"Collaboration" is a term that can be overused and under-appreciated. The dictionary definition of collaboration is the action of working with someone to produce something. Collaboration at work involves a group of people sharing their ideas and skills in order to achieve a common goal. In our case, the common goal is to deliver amazing creative work. Discussion is a fundamental part of collaboration, and collaboration will not be successful without good discussion.

A creative collaboration platform will provide a team with powerful discussion tools so that they can quickly and easily exchange ideas and make decisions as a result of those discussions. In most creative projects, time is critical, and collaborative discussion accelerates the flow of ideas and decision-making.

Fewer versions

Every creative team has experienced projects where the number of versions needed to get final approval on an asset can run into double figures: 10 versions, 15 versions, and even more.

A creative collaboration platform will significantly reduce the number of versions needed to get to final approval on a creative asset. Clear feedback and better discussion both contribute to reducing the number of versions needed. Reducing the number of versions saves time spent on each project and helps get projects delivered faster.

V1	**V2**	**V3**	**V4**	**V5**	**APPROVED**
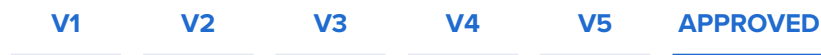
Number of versions without a creative collaboration platform

V1	**V2**	**V3**	**APPROVED**	**56%** fastest approval

Number of versions with a creative collaboration platform

Fewer errors and less rework

Missed feedback or errors in production can force rework of jobs that the team thought were completed. The cost of that rework is often unrecoverable and/or unbillable.

Collaborative feedback cuts down on errors; review workflow with clear approval roles ensure assets are released properly. Creative teams save over one hour each week on revisions and rework as a result of missed feedback or production errors.

1 hour per week

SAVED FOR EACH TEAM MEMBER BY REDUCING ERRORS AND REWORK

Reduced pressure to keep hiring

Inefficient review and approval processes often mean that extra project managers and creatives are needed in a team. Hiring is an expensive and risky process. It is a distraction from day-to-day creative activity. Onboarding new team members is also time-consuming and expensive.

A creative collaboration platform can improve efficiency in the existing team and remove the need to hire additional team members. In our annual survey, we found that creative teams save additional headcount by on average two team members, simply by improving efficiency for the existing team.

Accurate project billing

Many creative teams have a charging structure based on a fixed fee for production of an asset, which includes X number of revisions. They can charge additional fees per revision over the fixed number included in the fee. Clients may dispute additional fees by claiming that the creative team was at fault.

A creative collaboration platform provides an accurate count of the number of versions that were produced for the client. It will also allow the creative team to exclude internal versions from that count. It will also accurately show who made change requests on which version of which asset. This supports the creative team in charging for additional versions created as a result of client requests.

Happier clients

Sometimes, creative teams can shield clients (internal and external) from internal process inefficiencies. However, inefficiency can often lead to missed deadlines, and creative work that does not meet what was described in the initial pitch or project scope. This in turn can lead to disappointed clients.

A creative collaboration platform will help maintain great client relationships by delivering client projects on time, and ensuring that what is delivered is accurate.

Happier team

The lack of time management controls, lack of client satisfaction, and lack of integrated tools also contribute to the overall pressure on a creative team. Without proper processes for review and approval creative team members end up spending most of their time on project administration, unnecessary versions and rework. This can lead to staff turnover if team members don't have the time to focus on being creative.

A creative collaboration platform gives creative team members more time to focus on being creative, by reducing the time they spend on more mundane work. This improves team morale and team creativity.

The creative case
for creative collaboration

We did think about writing some paragraphs here making the creative case for creative collaboration, but far wiser minds than ours have spoken far more eloquently than we ever could on that subject.

Ed Catmul, Co-Founder Pixar Animations

66 Do not confuse the process with the goal. Making the process easier, better, faster, and cheaper is something we should continually work on — but is not the goal. Making something great is the goal.

66 Truly candid feedback is the only way to ensure excellence. When giving notes, be sure to include: *what is wrong, what is missing, what isn't clear, what does not make sense.* A good note is specific. A good note does not make demands. Most of all, a good note inspires.

Charles Darwin

66 It is the long history of humankind (and animal kind, too) that those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed.

Janet Sernack

66 Creativity and innovation are most successful when played as team sports, what really matters is the level of trust that exists between the people on the team. As well as their willingness and ability to be courageous, confident, compassionate, connected and curious when operating in the team space.[17]

George Bernard Shaw

66 If you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange these apples then you and I will still each have one apple. But if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange these ideas, then each of us will have two ideas.

[17] www.imaginenation.com.au/creativity-as-a-collaborative-process

Evaluating your creative collaboration platform

You may have reached the conclusion that you need to explore introducing a creative collaboration platform for your team. Deciding whether a solution meets your team's needs can be time-consuming. In this chapter we help you evaluate which capabilities your creative collaboration should have to meet your needs.

The following questions are designed to help you quickly focus on the capabilities that are a priority for you.

1. What is your current creative review and approval process?

You will need to make sure that the solution you choose will work with your existing workflow and give you the flexibility to enhance and improve your workflow over time.

Make sure to talk with everyone in your team, including your reviewers. Get their input so that you can justify implementing a solution. Involving stakeholders early also helps with user adoption when you launch.

If there has been a change in your business, or event that has exposed the need for a better way to manage feedback, then you can use that to make the case. Have you won a new client? Has there been a problem with a previous project? Are there new compliance rules that you need to work with?

Questions to ask:

- Which groups, teams, team members are part of your creative review and approval process?

- How many people from those teams are involved?

- Is your process sequential or parallel or both? If sequential, what is the sequence?

- What specific problems are you experiencing with your current process?

- What has pushed you to consider introducing a creative collaboration platform now?

2. What type and quantity of creative does your team produce?

All marketing teams produce a range of creative content. You should think about the different types of content that you produce to ensure that your creative collaboration platform provides the appropriate review tools and workflow capability. Marketing has become more digital, but there are still huge volumes of traditional physical output that need to be managed.

Most marketing teams experience changes in workload. Does the solution you choose have the flexibility to handle fluctuations in volumes, storage, and reviewers.

Questions to ask:

- What is the full range of creative you are reviewing? List your creative content types: static content, webpages, video, podcasts, web banners, newsletters, packaging.

- What is the maximum file size of your creative assets, and can your platform handle those file sizes?

- If you create documents, many pages are there in a typical document? How easy is page navigation on large documents?

- If you create detailed creative assets, what are the zoom capabilities of the platform?

- What is your average monthly volume of creative assets?

- If you produce a high volume of creative assets, can you upload those in bulk, possibly from cloud storage?

- Does your workload vary month to month?

- Does the creative collaboration platform integrate with your creative tools?

- What are the upload speeds of the creative collaboration platform?

- How quickly does content load in your platform's viewer?

- How many versions do you currently produce on average for each type of creative asset?

- Does your creative collaboration platform give you easy versioning and does this include version comparison tools?

3. How do you share creative content for feedback?

Your creative team wants the easiest way to share creative assets for review. Sharing needs to be intuitive, but still secure, especially if you have external reviewers. Do your reviewers need usernames and passwords, or can they access assets through a simple email link?

Make sure that your creative collaboration platform gives you the right levels of security and access control. Make sure that the solution can be properly branded for each group of reviewers.

Questions to ask:

- How many reviewers typically review each asset?

- Do you get feedback from internal or external reviewers?

- Do your external reviewers need to have logins and passwords?

- Do you want your creative collaboration platform to be branded with your logo, or with your client logo?

- Does the creative review process start outside your organization, and do you need intake forms to start the process?

4. How do you want reviewers to provide feedback?

If you are reviewing static content, then you will probably need a solution that has sophisticated drawing tools. If your content is mostly text, then text markup tools are important. Do you need feedback on webpages, motion, video or digital advertising?

Do you need the ability to attach files to comments? If you have lots of people taking part in the review process, you will need a solution that has powerful collaboration features.

Questions to ask:

- Do you need drawing and markup tools?

- Do you need text highlighting and commenting tools?

- Do you need to be able to attach files to comments?

- Do you need measurement tools for accurate markup?

- Can you label comments to make them easy to manage?

- Can comments be made private, so only available to people in your organization?

- Can you resolve comments to show that action has been taken on that comment?

- Can you copy comments from version to version?

- Can you compare versions side to side to make sure that earlier comments have been actioned?

- Can you filter comments to only show what needs to be worked on?

- Can you filter to unread comments only?

- Can you view color separations in documents for print?

- Can you compare text between versions of an asset?

5. Does your review and approval process require reviewers to make a formal decision?

Make sure that your solution gives you the ability to flexibility to define your organization's decision making process.

Do you need decision-makers to confirm their identity when making a decision? If so, make sure your solution supports electronic signatures.

Questions to ask:

▪ Does your review and approval workflow require every reviewer to make a decision, or just some of them?

▪ Does your solution let you skip a stage that was approved on a previous version?

▪ Do you have deadlines for decisions?

▪ Do you manually send reminders and would you automate reminders, including before/on/after a deadline?

▪ Can you lock stages?

▪ Is there a primary or final decision maker in your approval process?

▪ Do you have different types of decisions in your process and does your solution let you customise or hide decision labels?

▪ Do you need decision-makers to specify a reason for their decision?

▪ Does your process require a decision-maker to confirm their identity when they make a decision?

▪ Will all of your decision makers be users, or will you need to authenticate decisions by reviewers who are not users?

▪ Does your compliance process require you to have electronic signatures?

6. Which security standards and service levels do you need?

Security is a priority for most organisations. You will need to ensure that your creative collaboration platform supports your security requirements. You should establish whether your vendor has their own security certification, or relies on the security certification of their hosting provider. These are very different levels of security. Ask your vendor to give you details about how your data is stored and transmitted. Ask them how they support secure user authentication.

You should also establish whether your vendor regularly updates their security. Ask them about the frequency of their product releases, as this is a good way to establish whether they have the capability to maintain high levels of security.

Ask them whether they publish statistics on uptime, performance and security breaches.

Think about the service and support levels that you need. Does your organisation operate in multiple regions, or globally? Do you require dedicated account management? What are the working hours of your team?

Questions to ask:

- What security does the platform provide for data in transit and at rest?

- Where is data stored and with which provider?

- How often is the platform updated?

- What are the platform's current service level statistics?

- Do you require users to have unique usernames and passwords, or do you support single sign-on? If the latter, with which vendor or methodologies?

- What are the working hours of your users and in which time zones?

- Does the platform provide the type and level of account management that you need?

- Does the platform publish customer satisfaction ratings?

7. Do you need to integrate your platform with other tools and apps?

Your review and approval workflow will be part of a broader project management and creative production process. It is likely that you will want to connect your creative collaboration platform with other tools and apps. It is therefore important to make sure that your creative collaboration platform can integrate easily. They should offer a full API, and ideally low-code or no-code tools so that you can easily connect with your existing tools and apps. You should ask whether they have pre-built integrations with the tools that are most popular with creative teams.

Questions to ask:

- Which existing applications, tools or workflows do you need to integrate to your creative collaboration platform?

- Have you identified which file and data will need to be moved between systems? Is there an API?

- Are there pre-built integrations, and with which apps?

- Is there a toolkit for building integrations?

- Do you have manual processes such as file conversion that you would like to automate?

8. How is your organization structured?

You will need to think about how your organization and workflow is structured. Your review and approval process may involve other organizations. If you are an agency, you may work with multiple clients. If you are a brand, you may work with multiple agencies. Your creative team may work on multiple accounts. You may have different levels of confidentiality for different types of work

Inter-company relationships in marketing are complex. Creative teams work with multiple organisations across multiple projects. Make sure that your collaboration platform can handle those relationships without compromising security.

Questions to ask:

- Will you need to provide logins for users in different organizations?

- What is the relationship between those organizations?

- Does your creative team work on projects for multiple organizations?

- Do you need to review creative work from different organizations?

9. What tracking and reporting capabilities do you need?

You will need to think about the tracking, KPI, and reporting capabilities that you need.

Creative collaboration metrics are very different from other creative campaign metrics. You may want to have granular tracking of individual reviews and projects. You may want to see some information in the form of a dashboard, and be able to export other information into reports. Your creative team may want their own dashboards and reports, so make sure that the platform has the capability to deliver personalised dashboards and reports. Make sure that capabilities such as custom fields and custom views are supported.

Questions to ask:

- Do you need a dashboard? What information would you like to see on it?
- Which reports do you need, and can the platform provide those to you?
- Do you need to report to other people, and can those reports be easily generated?
- Do you need to export data into spreadsheets or third-party reporting tools, and can the platform support that process?
- What level of email notifications do you and your team need, and can these be customized?
- Do you need custom fields

10. Are there compliance and regulatory requirements?

You will need to make sure that your creative collaboration platform meets your brand and regulatory compliance requirements. It should be able to track and record every step in the review and approval process in case of future audits. It will need to be able to archive your creative assets so that they can be easily accessed in the future.

Questions to ask:

- Is your review and approval process subject to brand and/or regulatory compliance?
- Which specific regulatory rules do you need to follow?
- What type of information might you need to produce in the event of a future audit?
- Do you need to keep track of creative asset approvals?

Conclusion

We hope we have shown the importance of creativity for modern business. We hope that we have shown how fundamental collaboration and feedback are to the creative process. We also hope that we have shown how a creative collaboration platform can help deliver exceptional creative and deliver it quickly. Finally, we hope that we have been able to give you some ideas about how to evaluate a creative collaboration platform for your own creative team.

We develop our thinking continually, and regularly update our blog with ideas and information. If you have any feedback for us, please do contact Mat directly at mat.atkinson@ziflow.com

Thank you again for taking the time to read this guide. If you are ready to see what a creative collaboration platform can do for your team, go to Ziflow.com and sign up for a free account.

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Ziflow is the leading creative collaboration platform. It empowers agencies and brands to deliver exceptional creative work by streamlining feedback on any creative asset from concept to completion. Customers include Showtime, McCann Worldgroup, AWS, Weber, Specialized and Dupont. Ziflow was founded in 2016 and serves thousands of customers across the world. Ziflow has team members in the US, UK, Poland and South Africa.

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