narrative design

Images may be the first thing people ***see*** when they use your product, but words are the first thing they ***hear***. As a content strategist, I want my team's products to truly speak to people. The language on the screen is nothing less than the conversation we have with the people who use our products. But we can't do it alone. As content strategists, we need to leverage design skills to make our users ***feel*** something.

In its simplest form, the strategists' role in the creative process is threefold: collaborate with design partners, communicate with stakeholders and connect with the people who rely on our products every day. That's the conversation we're gonna have here this afternoon. We're gonna explore how can you use narrative design to tap into your creativity, get the stakeholder buy-in you need and help people fall in love with your products.

a world without content strategy
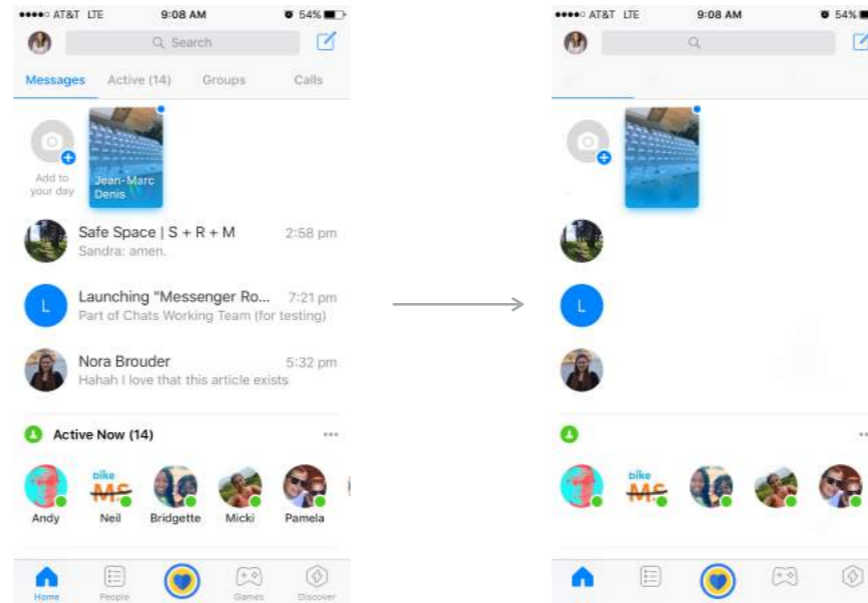
The most common question I get when folks find out I work on mobile-first content strategy (after 'what's content strategy again?") is "how much work there could possibly be for such a small space?" After I silently smile on the inside, I ask them to imagine their app *without* all that carefully crafted language.
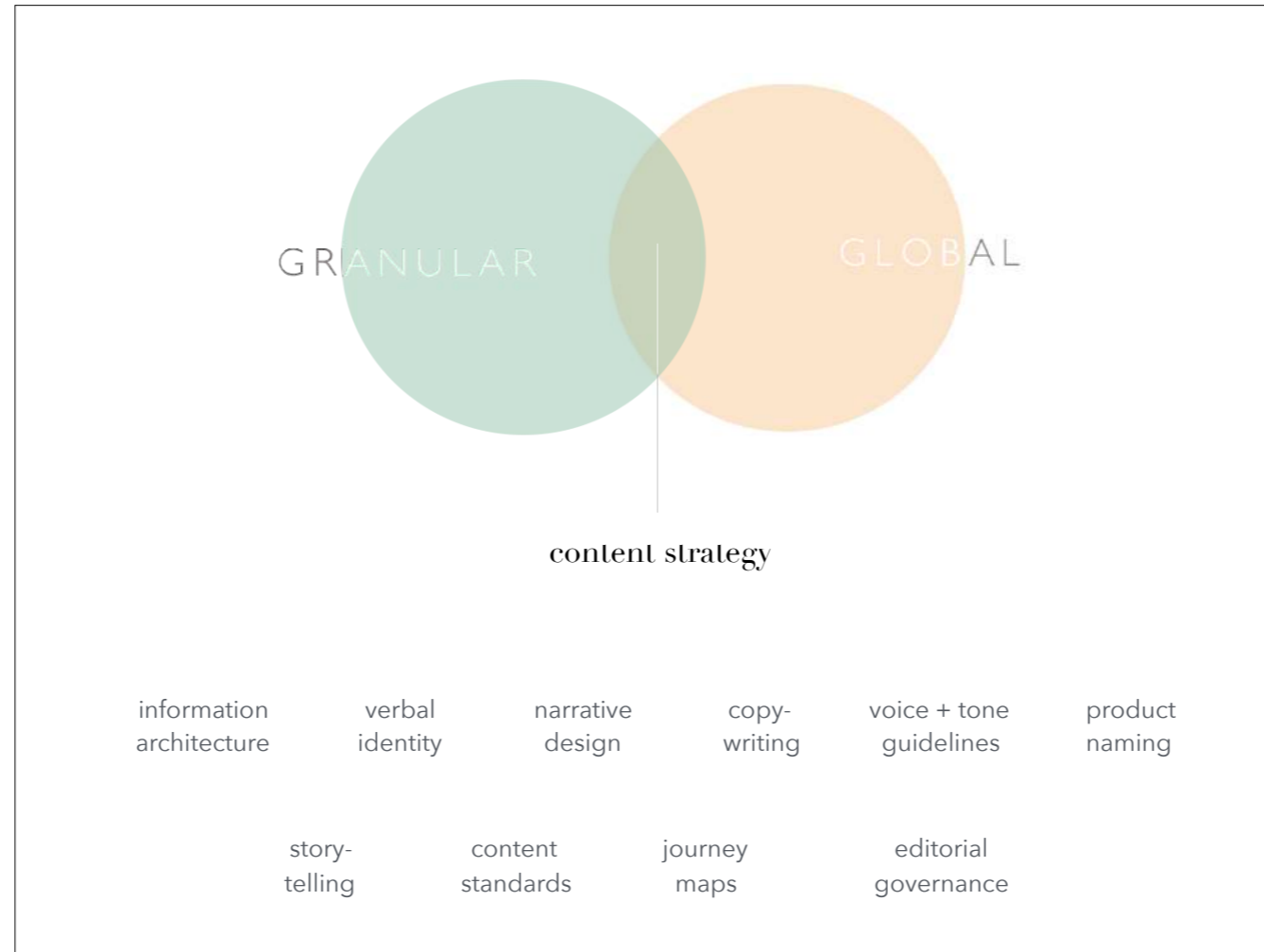
I want to show them a before and after of what their digital landscape would look like if it weren't for strategists and designers. If you were using Messenger, let's say, it would go from this **[CLICK]** to this. **[CLICK again]**

a world without content strategy
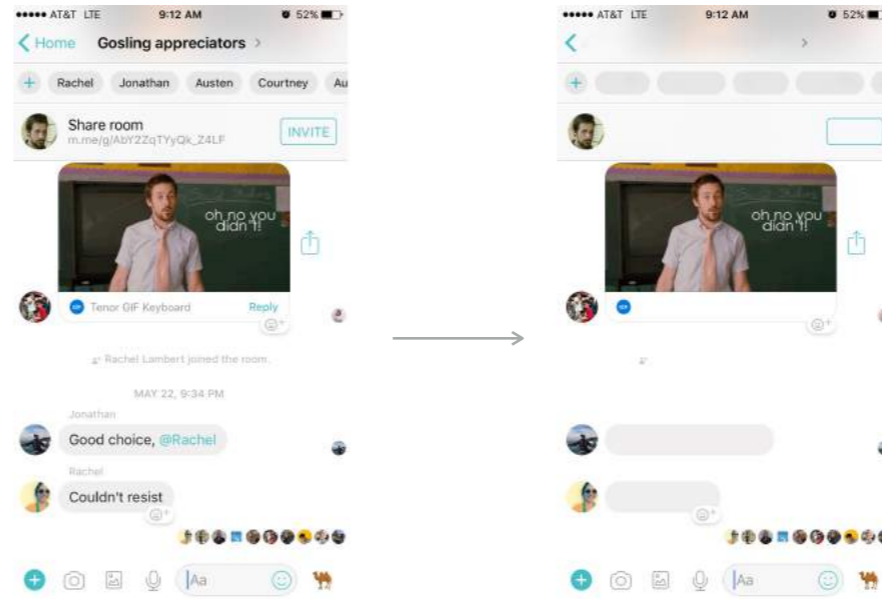
And from that **[CLICK]** to that.

As you can see, the smaller the space, the bigger the impact. Without thoughtfully crafted words, our digital landscape would be a very bleak experience....which is why I'm passionate about lowering the expression barrier. That means every day I try to answer the same question in a different way: How can we make it easier for our users to be **truly heard** by the people they care about?

GRANULAR   GLOBAL

content strategy

| information architecture | verbal identity | narrative design | copy-writing | voice + tone guidelines | product naming |
| story-telling | content standards | journey maps | editorial governance |

Part of the answer lies in content strategy.

Now, content strategy can be paradoxical. Our discipline lives at the sweet spot between global product challenges and granular copy considerations. There are a **bunch** of different skill sets at that intersection of macro perspective and micro details: everything from IA work, taxonomies, shaping the brand voice, modulating tone, empathizing with users screen by screen, creating instructional text, crafting UI copy, naming new features and plenty more. Here's what that means at a high level...

GLOBAL

facilitating conversations ——— product vision

creating solutions ———— product challenges
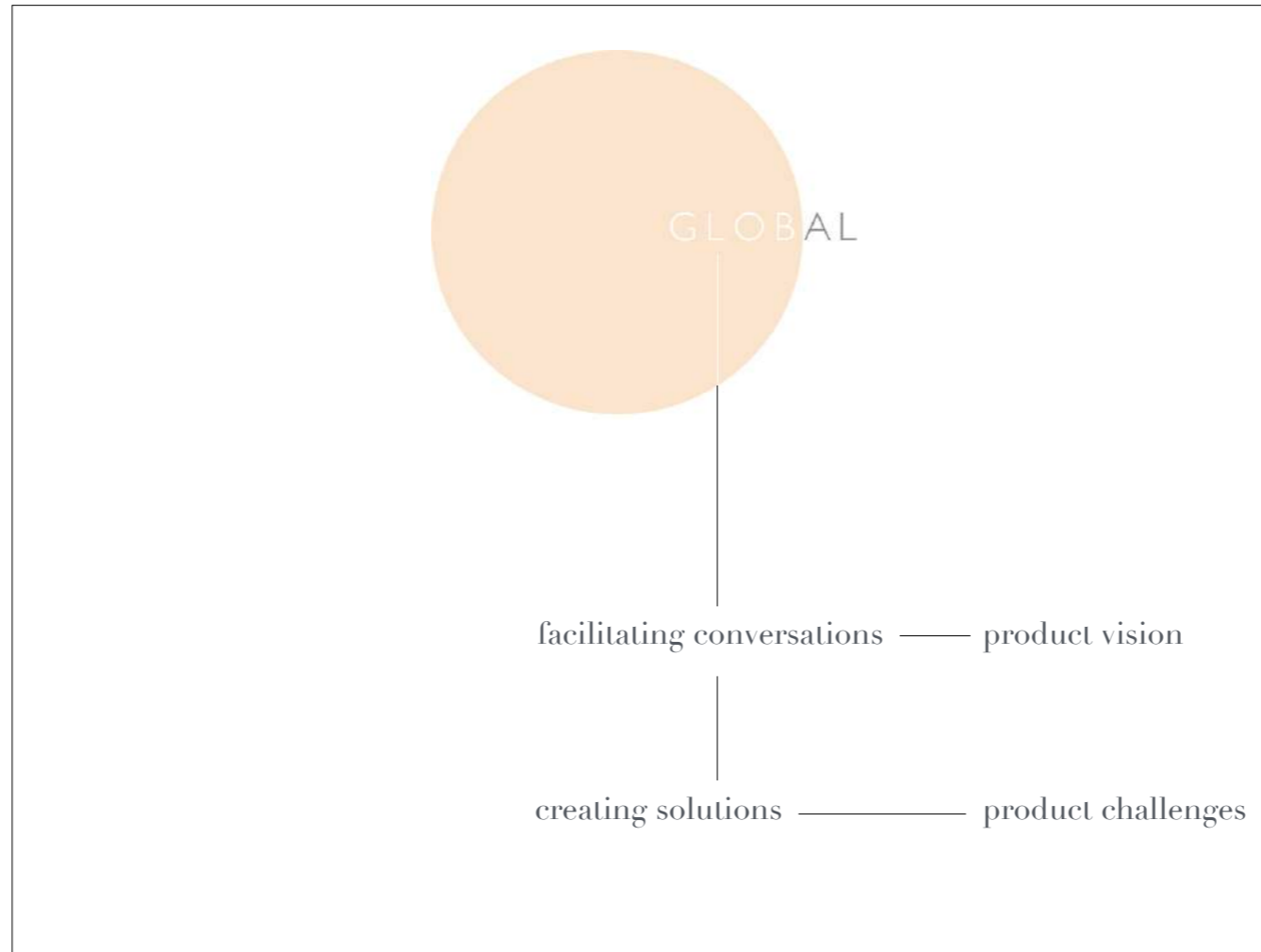
The global piece of content strategy is about facilitating conversations around our team's vision. Sometimes that's as simple as collision detection: are we all on the same page around the content's primary goal on this screen or do the engineers and designers actually have subtly competing interests that we need to address before I start to envision the user conversation?

Other times, it's more complex and the answers are harder to come by. That's because content strategists are positioned as the cross-functional partner who brings all the voices to the table (policy, legal, privacy, eng and so on) it means asking tough questions like: What challenges will this project solve for people around the world? How will it impact our suite of features? How does this live within our existing ecosystem of products?
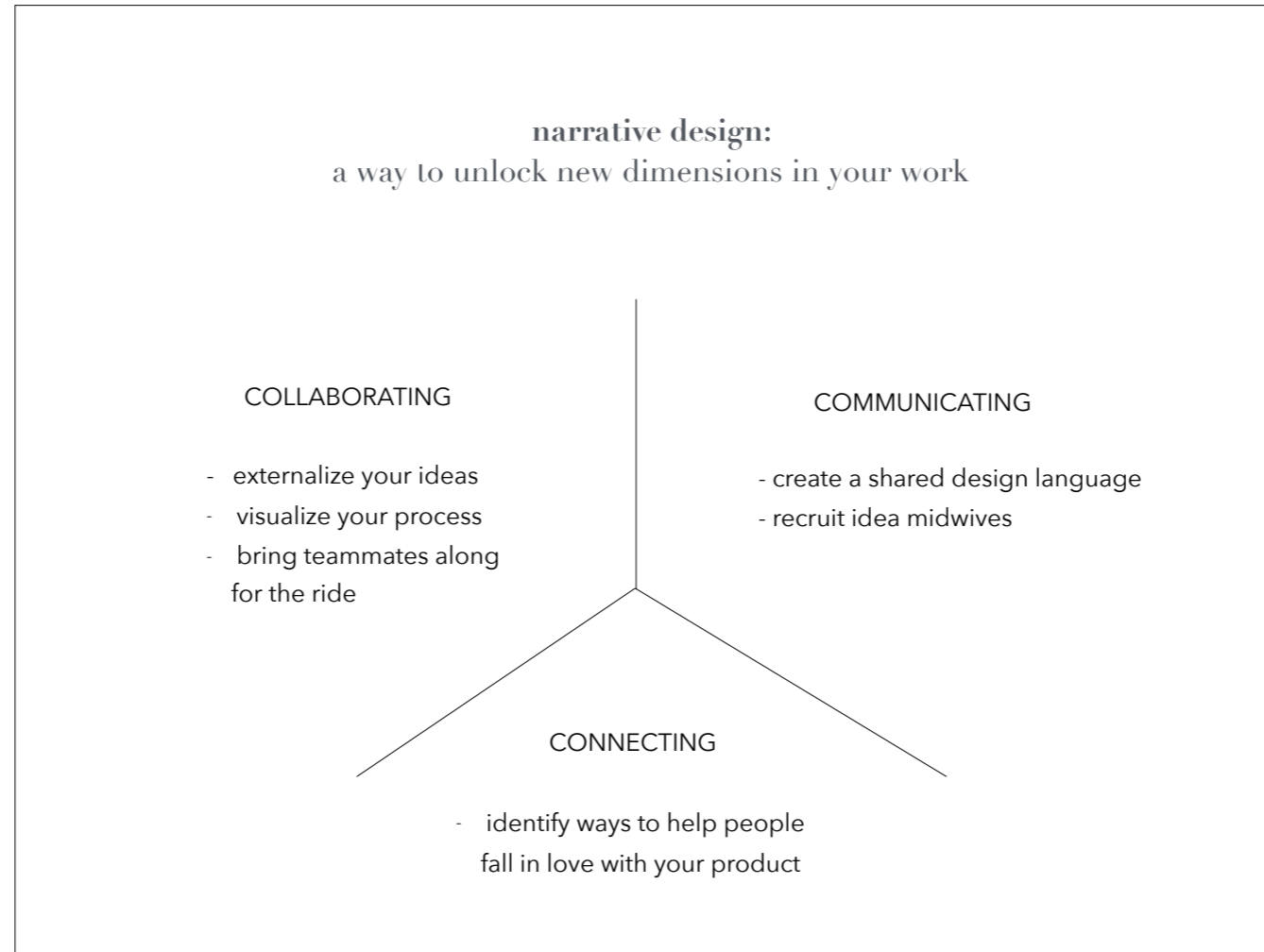
And finally, I partner with our Product Marketing Managers to refine how this new feature will live out in the world and what kind of product positioning we're aiming for in the marketplace. All of those considerations are influenced by our naming strategy, the voice and tone we use and how we translate our content across the world.

GRANULAR

calibrating ——— voice + tone

crafting ——— language
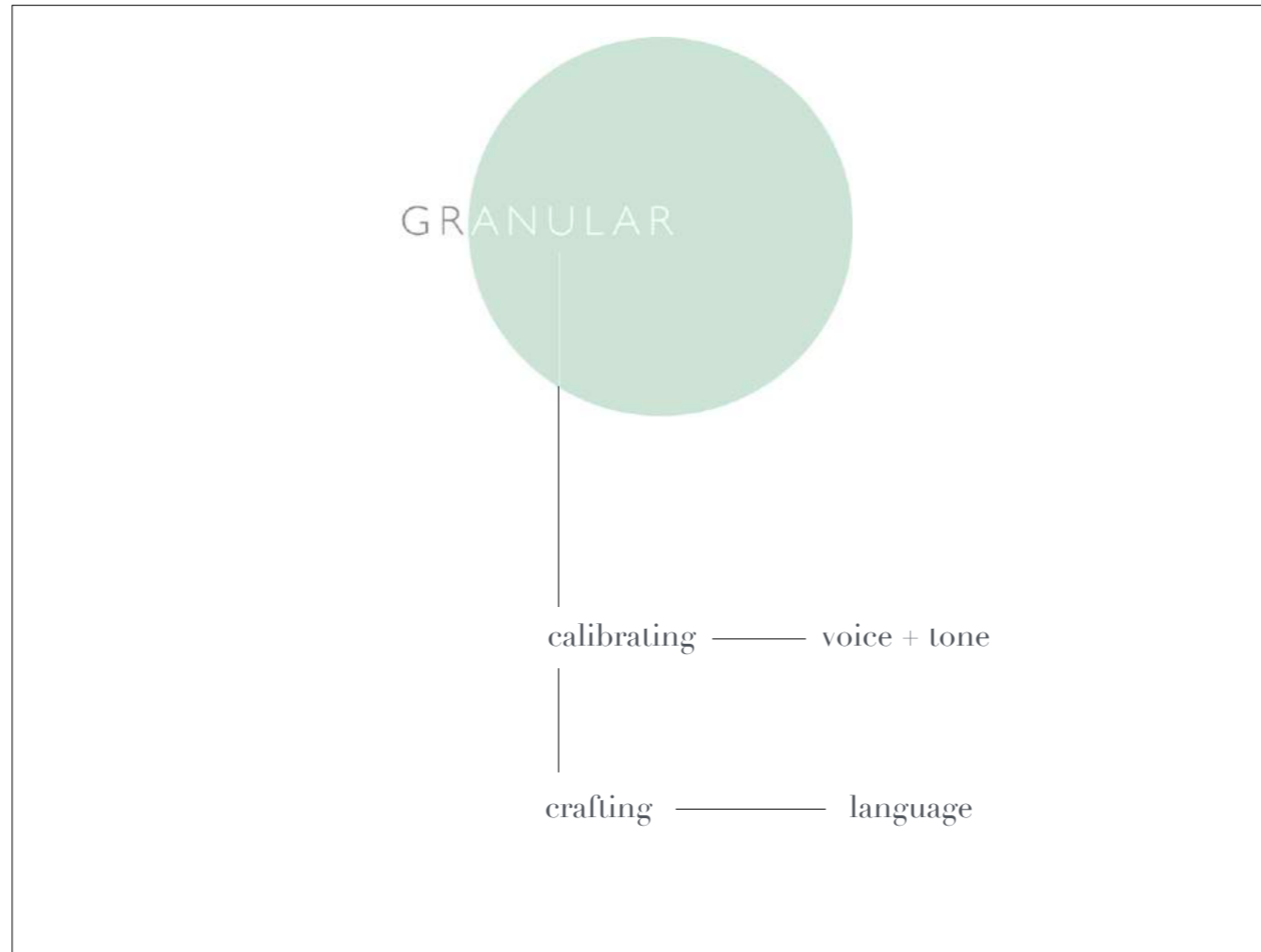
The other half of my role is about drilling down and getting really granular with what we want to say **directly to** the people who use our products. In much the same way that global content strategy demands that we facilitate conversations among our teammates, the granular side of things is about crafting a **user** conversation with the right language...at the right time In short, we're stewards of the product voice.

Getting that right means paying close attention to the contextual cues we gather from research, testing and our ongoing experiment pipeline. From there, I create user journey maps that show the connective tissue between each stage of using our product.

Calibrating our tone to be contextually responsive is another huge component of content strategy. A product's voice is its verbal identity so **that** remains constant. What changes is the context in which that voice has to communicate. For example, in digital spaces involving payments and exchanging money, a different tone of voice is needed: users want something very straightforward, reassuring and far less casual than they might in other digital spaces. That responsive change in voice is what we think of as tone.

narrative design:
a way to unlock new dimensions in your work

COLLABORATING

- externalize your ideas
- visualize your process
- bring teammates along
  for the ride

COMMUNICATING

- create a shared design language
- recruit idea midwives

CONNECTING

- identify ways to help people
  fall in love with your product

So now that you know more about *what* we do as content strategists, let's explore *how* we do it through narrative design:

Narrative Design accomplishes 3 things.

COLLABORATING with design partners to externalize your ideas, visualize your process, bring people along for the ride
COMMUNICATING with stakeholders to create a shared design language, recruit what I like to call idea midwives
CONNECTING with users to identify ways to help people fall in love with your product

so let's dive in to **[CLICK] collaboration**!

narrative design | collaboration

the fantasy

FLOWMARKET · EST 2004 · COPENHAGEN

CREATIVITY

NET WEIGHT 45G e 1.5OZ

THE STUFF THAT TRULY MATTERS

Sometimes I catch myself fantasizing that creative inspiration would arrive in packs of 12, neatly stacked, right on time and ready to consume. Of course, that's rarely the case.

Instead, as we all know, the creative process can be...more...like...this...

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Driving an unreliable car through unrelenting fog. The process is messy, it's convoluted, sometimes it's even kinda scary. It takes us on detours that seem pointless at the time and can throw out a maddening amount of red herrings along the way. In that messiness is where we can find the opportunity for narrative design.

The most fertile ideas, the ones that grow deep roots and spread across communities are never just uprooted from your mind and replanted into someone else's. The most powerful ideas...start as a seed and grow organically in your audience before putting down roots in their minds.

So how do you plant those seeds?

You start by resisting the allure of the ta-da moment. The ta-da moment is the big reveal. It's the moment after weeks of hoarding your ideas, rather than sharing them, when you show everyone at the big meeting that shiny, beautiful solution you created. The ta-da moment is **seductive, ego-driven and it's a trap.**

The trap lies in the temptation to waltz into rooms and be the hero. To join a team and deliver ready-made answers to whatever's been plaguing them. Just imagine: your whole team's been struggling with a big, meaty issue for weeks now. Privately, you've sweated out a new solution, carefully shaping its contours and smoothing out the rough edges until it's polished to perfection. Your slide deck could win an Oscar for art direction. This is it! Your big ta-da moment!

And it falls flat. Your team feels alienated. Your PM seems more interested in poking holes in your ideas than supporting them. No one seems invested in adopting your vision. So how did we get here after such a promising beginning?

**resisting the
ta-da moment**

- You deny your team ownership over the process

- You deny yourself valuable feedback and insights

- You deny the product the chance to be its best

Our first red flag shoulda been that you started off by hoarding your ideas rather than sharing them. The ta-da moment is ego-driven and it stems from wanting to be needed by others. Wanting to be of service. And that's a good thing. But remember, anything that casts you as the hero of your own story should be viewed with great suspicion and make you ask yourself if you're in ta-da territory.

When you don't share your process, when you don't bring your stakeholders along for the journey, you rob yourself of the chance to create real buy-in with the people that matter most. Here's what's at stake: **[CLICK]**

- You deny your team the opportunity to feel real ownership over the process of finding a solution.
- You deny yourself valuable feedback and insights throughout the creative process.
- You deny the product the chance to become the best it could be for the people who will ultimately be using it.

And don't feel bad. The ta-da moment beckons to all of us. We'd all love a shortcut. But the messy truth is that great ideas and impactful teams are forged in that swamp of uncertainty. Going through it together as creative partners is part of the process. And here's an example of how narrative design will help you get there.
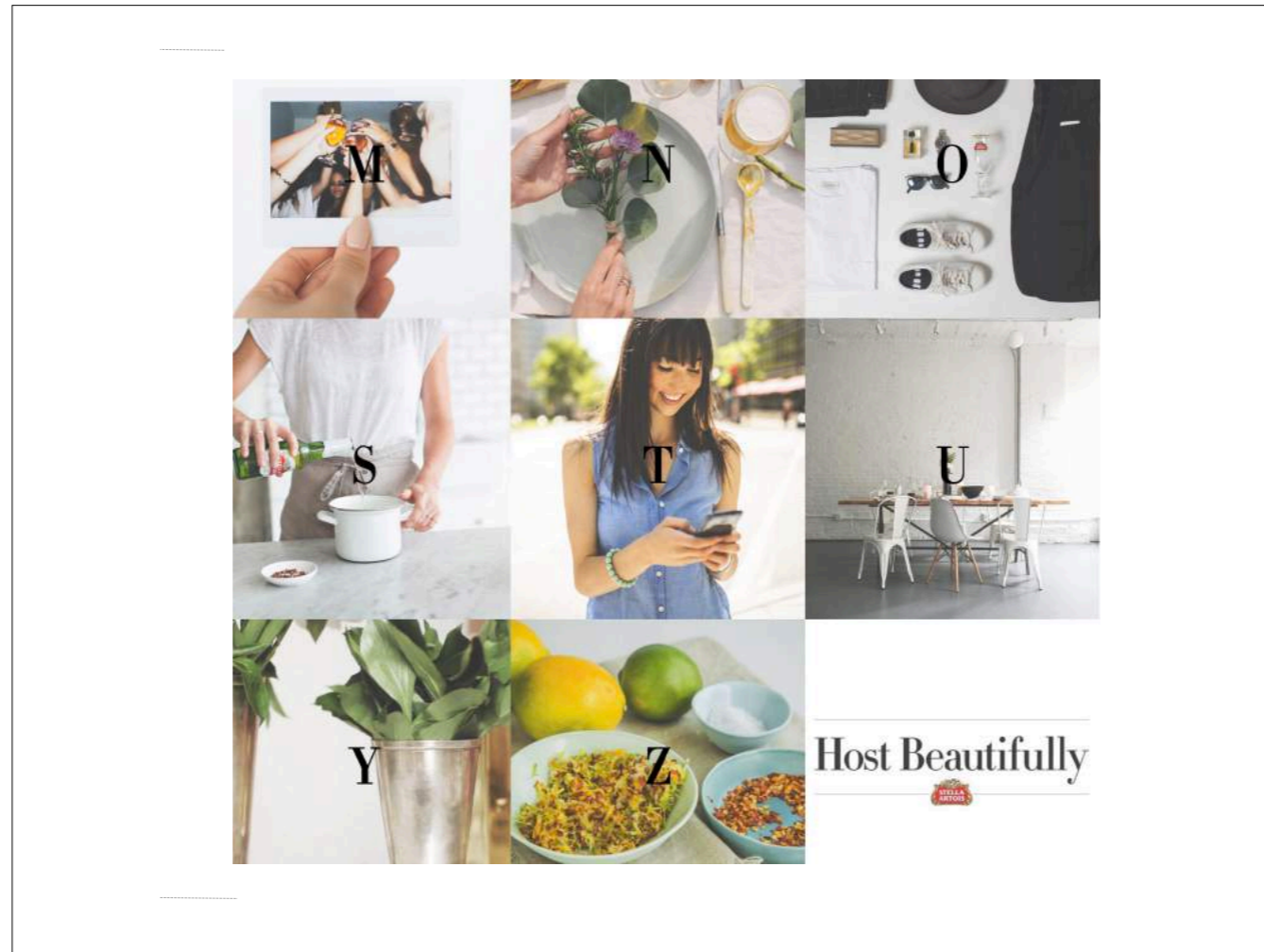
This was the beginning of a larger partnership between Stella Artois and Uber for new, inventive ways to host friends and family, anything from rooftop parties to sit down dinners.

I led the concepting sessions to figure out the editorial direction of our partnership and how we'd express that partnership through the campaign. At first glance, a ride-sharing platform may not sound like the most natural fit for a hospitality campaign but I knew the fastest way to find the intersections between the two industries, products and brands was through narrative design.

Writers and strategists often miss the chance to sketch out their ideas while, on the other side, strictly visual designers can forget that fleshing out their design challenges with words can really unearth their creativity. Remember, inspiration can materialize from anywhere and it's usually at the intersection of multiple disciplines. So to find the emotional connections behind products and bring teammates along for the ride, start by getting in a room together and picking up a pen.
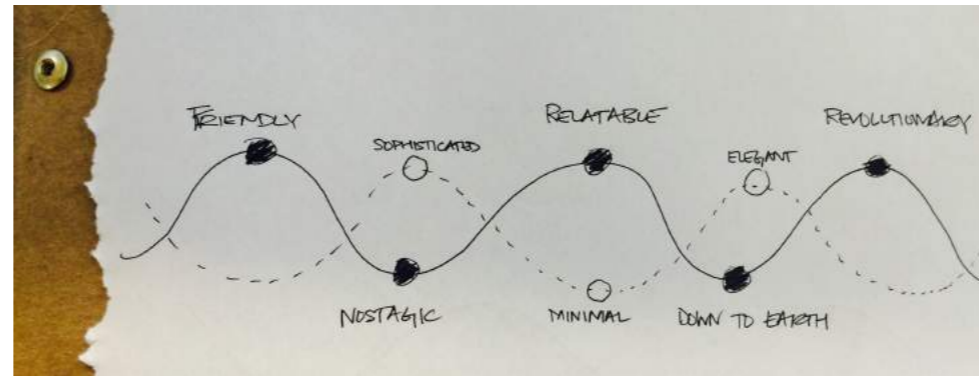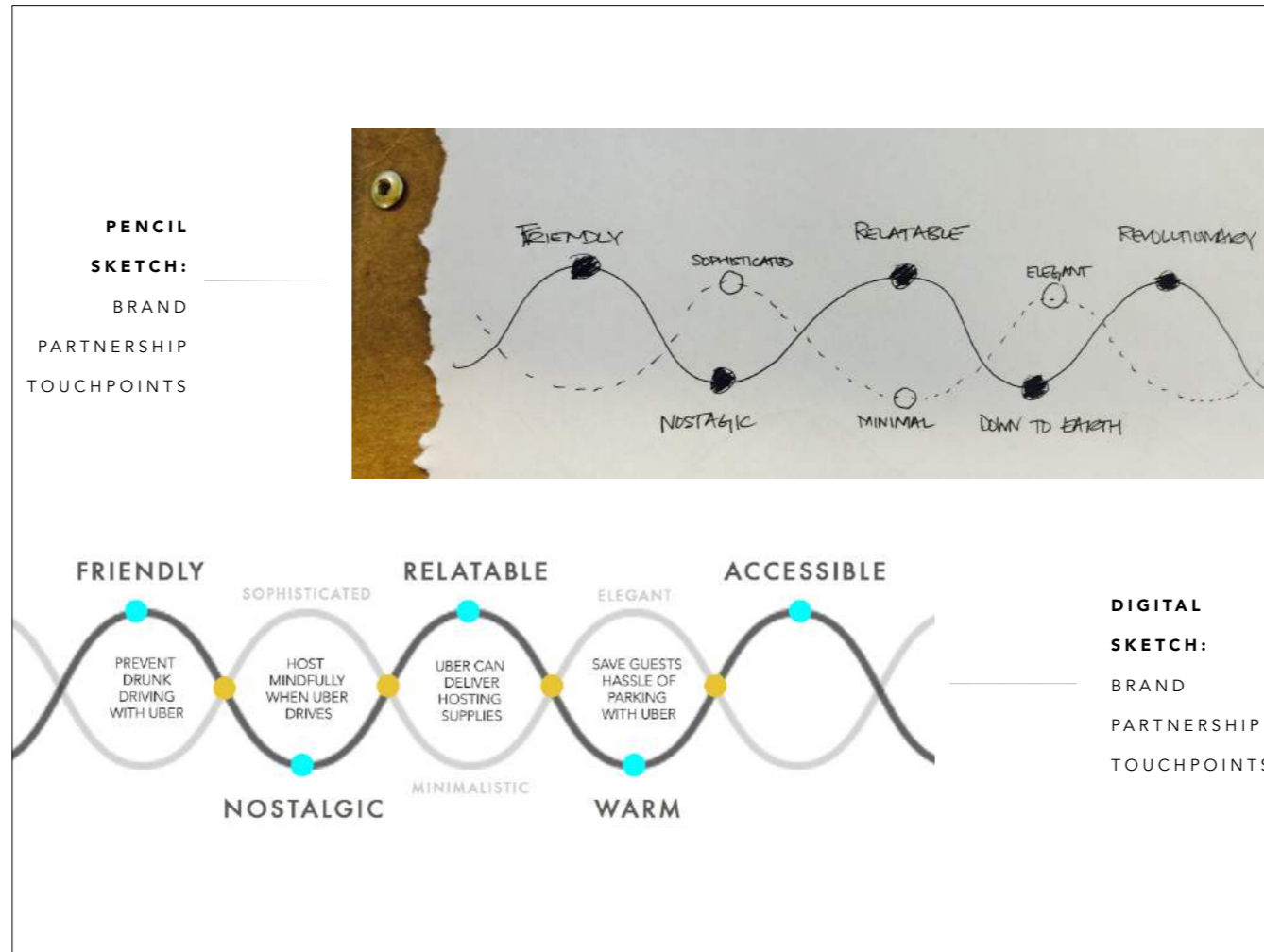
So I had to discover where Uber and Stella overlapped in both the real world AND the public's mind. What are those touchpoints where these two products resonated with users?

I began to create a narrative design roadmap that the team could use to track their ideas to as we figured out the editorial concept. I visualized the brand attributes for both products. *A quick narrative design note on process here: It's always best to start low fidelity. You can keep the expectations low, the conversation casual and the flow of ideas really fluid because the barrier to entry for new contributions is very attainable.*

I visualized each brand attribute on a continuum. The more aspirational qualities (like friendly or engaging) rose to the crest…while the more grounded qualities…rested in the trough. I layered the two over each other for an easy, at-a-glance chart of where the two products would form those crucial touchpoints we could tap into for the campaign concept.

PENCIL

SKETCH:

BRAND
PARTNERSHIP
TOUCHPOINTS

FRIENDLY   RELATABLE   ACCESSIBLE

SOPHISTICATED   ELEGANT

PREVENT   HOST   UBER CAN   SAVE GUESTS
DRUNK   MINDFULLY   DELIVER   HASSLE OF
DRIVING   WHEN UBER   HOSTING   PARKING
WITH UBER   DRIVES   SUPPLIES   WITH UBER

MINIMALISTIC

NOSTALGIC   WARM

DIGITAL

SKETCH:

BRAND

PARTNERSHIP

TOUCHPOINTS

After externalizing our ideas, we needed to visualize our process so we could bring our teammates along to iterate. After some tweaks to the content, I cleaned up our sketches into higher fidelity mocks that would give us a roadmap for those consumer touchpoints: where do these two products overlap in the lives of our users?

We developed four strong contenders for the centerpiece of the campaign *(read through them?)* and could now begin to roadshow the ideas in a way that demonstrated our rationale to other teams and communicated our creative process.

The A-Z of Host Beautifully

T for Travel

with Uber

"Think back to the last time you felt truly transported. Chances are, it didn't require a passport. Just good company. That's why creating memories with friends is at the heart of hosting beautifully."

Suddenly, we had gone from a few fledging ideas to getting our key stakeholders really excited to contribute and move the ideas forward because our narrative design tools gave them a sense of ownership over the process.

Rather than pitching our shiniest ideas at the end to ensure a big ta-da moment, we brought the larger team along for the ride by demonstrating our process inclusively.

narrative design | communication

Alright, so you've got the first step in narrative design under your belt. You collaborated with design partners to externalize your ideas and visualized your process so you can bring people along for the ride.

Here's where the second step comes in: communicating with stakeholders and cross functional teams to create a shared language and recruit idea midwives.

narrative design | find your idea midwives

2 practitioners x 2 disciplines + 1 shared vision = Exponential impact

As strategists and designers, part of our job is to identify what I call idea midwives. These are folks who will help usher your best creative ideas into the world. Hopefully with limited labor pains. Once you learn to spot idea midwives and invest in each other, they'll become linchpin partners in your narrative design journey.

So how do you spot em? Start by looking outside your discipline. Here's what you're looking for: people you connect with almost paradoxically. Think: shared values but different perspectives...people with whom you share a common vision of where you wanna get to but with a fresh approach on how to get there. For me, I'm always on the look out for design partners with an affinity for tackling robust problems using elegant solutions.

Remember, idea midwives can hide in really unlikely places. Some of my best collaborators have been engineers and project managers whose eye for systems thinking and holistic design was vastly different from mine. The one thing that drew me to all of them was a sense of wonder and openness. So take advantage of design sprints and hackathons not just for the ideas themselves...but for the idea midwives that may be hiding in plain sight.

Now that you've spotted your idea midwives, tap into their expertise not only to encourage your creative process but, more importantly, to challenge your thinking. **These people will be your best allies in the war against your own ego**. You know, it's that voice that says your ideas are precious and should be delivered, unvarnished to the world. Instead, let your idea midwives help identify your blind spots and point out the gaps in your product knowledge. As you roadshow your team's vision and put pressure on those ideas, you'll start to see how narrative design helps to create a shared design language.
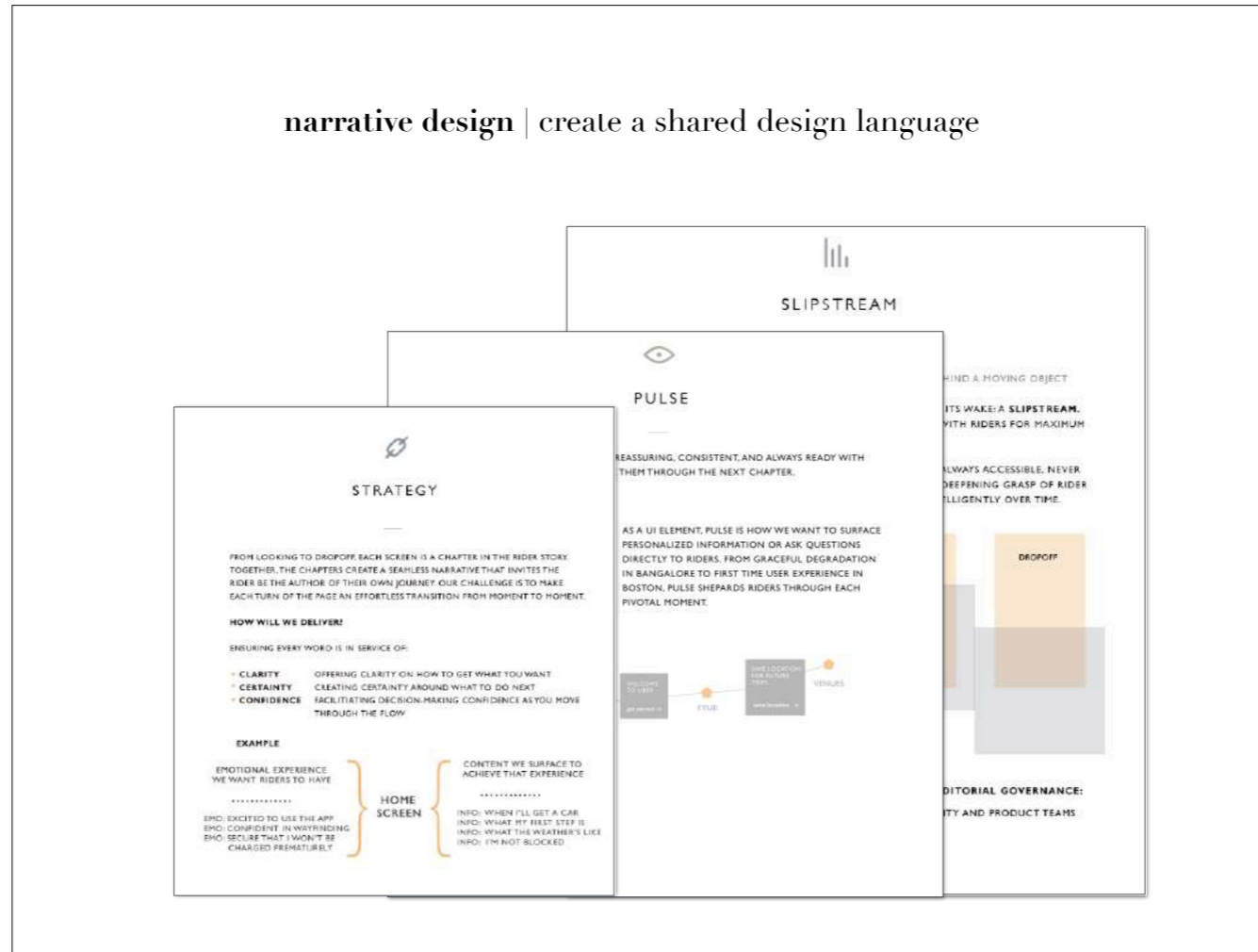
In working on the Uber redesign, I wanted to create a narrative design that our teams could really rally around as we made our way through different design explorations. We needed something that would tell the product story, centralize our conversations and keep us focused on the team vision. So I created a book of sorts, complete with chapters and images, that would answer the questions: what are we doing, why are we doing this and how do we plan to get there?

Using this narrative design, we could show stakeholders that each screen in the experience was a chapter in the user story. Together, those chapters create a seamless narrative that invites the people using your products to be the **author of their own journey.** Our challenge as strategists and designers is to make each turn of the page an effortless transition from moment to moment. At the end of the day, we're trying to take something that's daunting for a lot of people and turn it into an empowering experience.
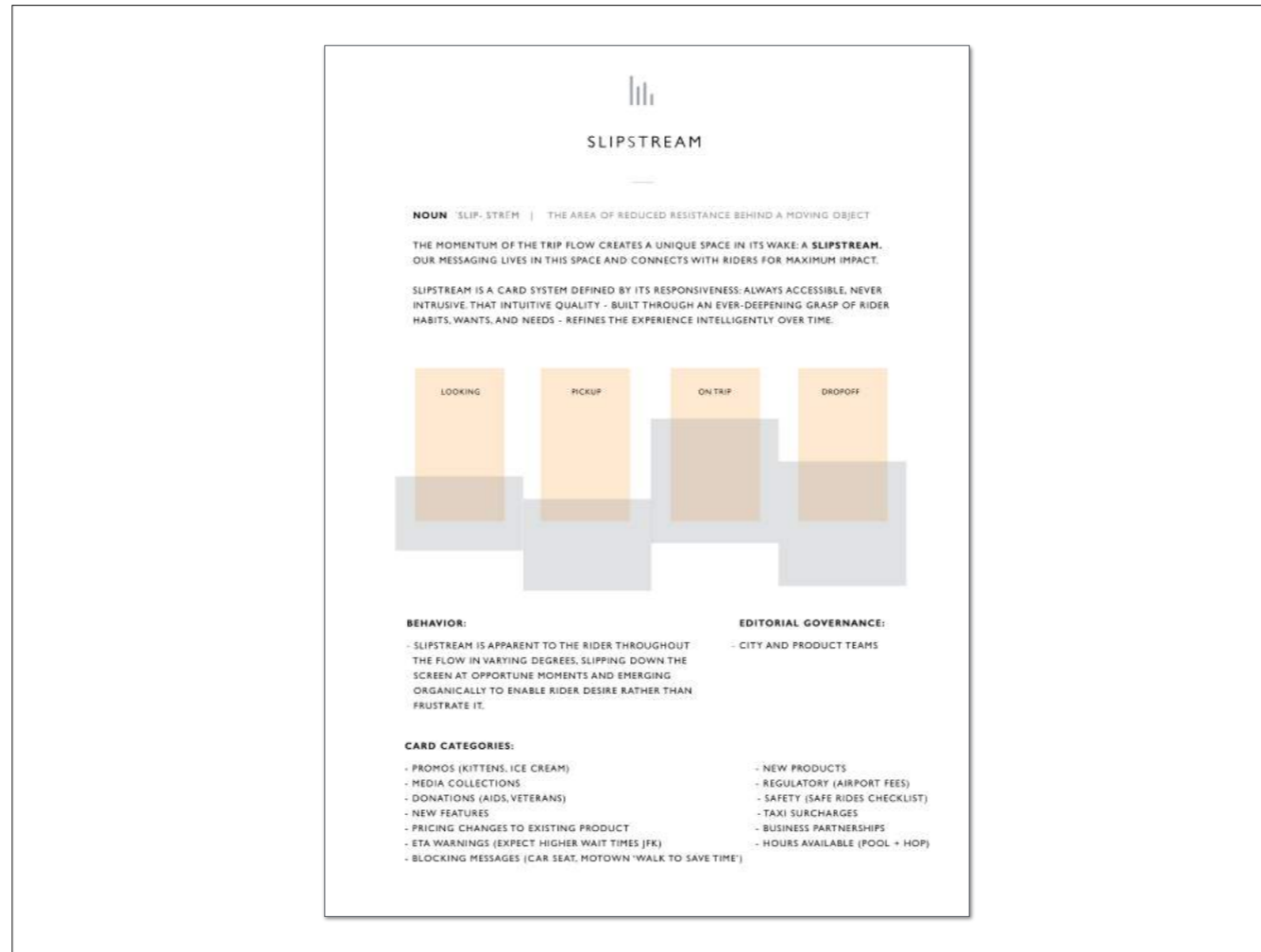
As we all know, products have their own inertia that carry users through the flow. It's the momentum that takes you through (1) from concept to completion (2) from the top of the funnel to checkout or (3) from composing a message to tapping send. Slipstream was an early way of thinking about the card system that now lives within the Uber app and, for us as strategists and designers, it was also a way to use narrative design to **codify** those ideas into a simple concept.

When you're using narrative design to share your ideas, draw on the best of *both* disciplines at your disposal: from storytelling to internal feature naming to iconography to framing devices (like chapters in a book) in order to reach your audience. They're way too often overlooked. You're essentially creating a design fiction that allows people to invest themselves in your process and feel ownership over the outcome. And don't forget: it's also a really powerful tool to infuse emotion into your work and reveal the connective tissue between the team's ideas.
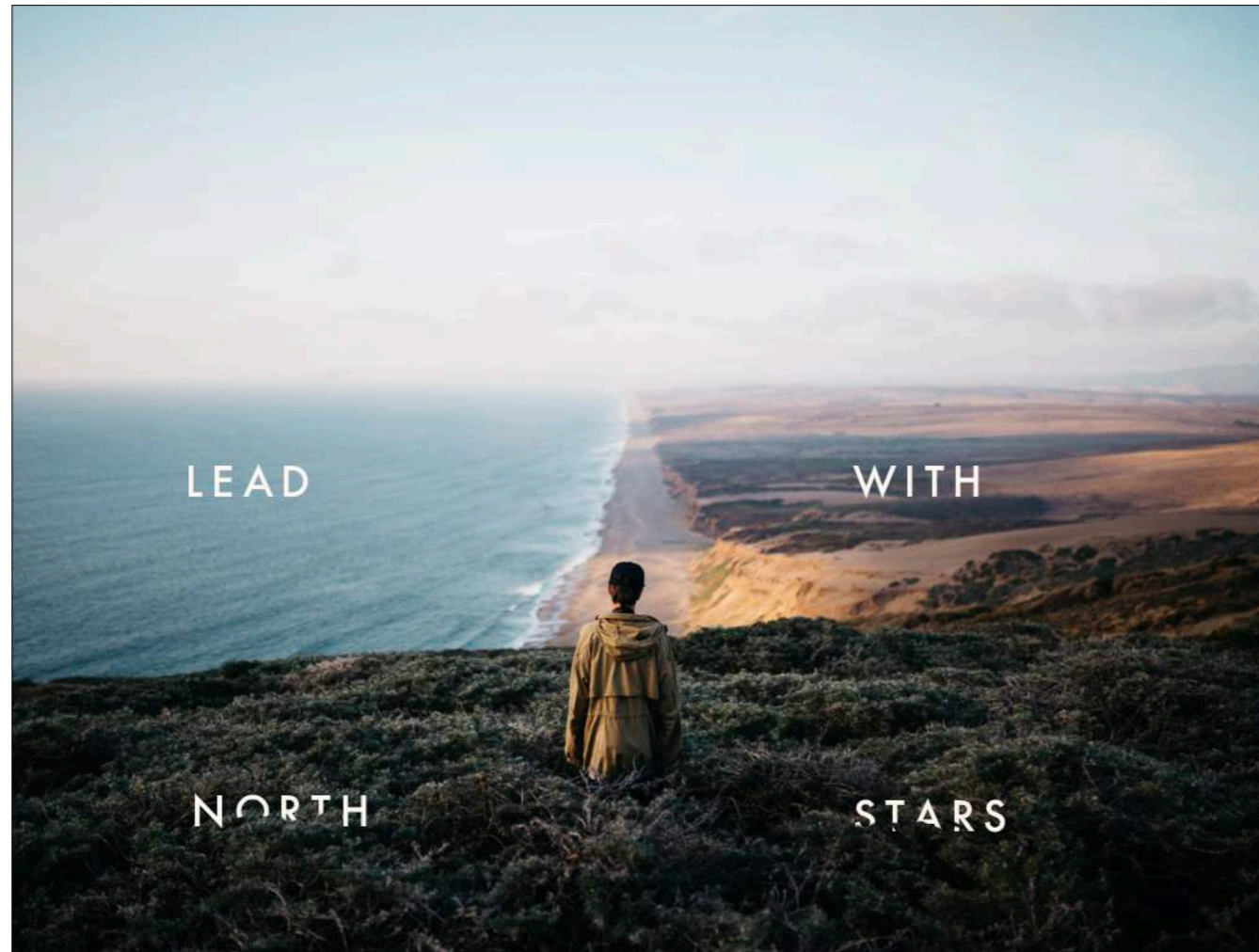
We started our conversation today by exploring the global and granular aspects of content strategy. You can tap into that global perspective by leading with your narrative design **North Stars.** They can be of the content or design variety....but preferable they'll be both. I'll show you what I mean in a second.

They work on three levels:

1. North Stars create a valuable infrastructure for you, as the strategist or designer, to build on as you explore solutions. You can keep track of your progress, spot detours you've already taken and prevent future design partners from reinventing the wheel.

2. North Stars support the rationale and reasoning you used throughout your creative process. All good creative environments offer feedback and, inevitably, you'll get some pushback. Having a central narrative design that tells the ongoing evolution of your story is priceless.

Lastly, North Stars are a really effective weapon against scope creep. All projects are susceptible to the dangers of adding just....one....more....feature. Pretty soon, your original mission is loaded down with other teams' agendas. You can use narrative design tools to keep everyone focused on the ultimate goal.
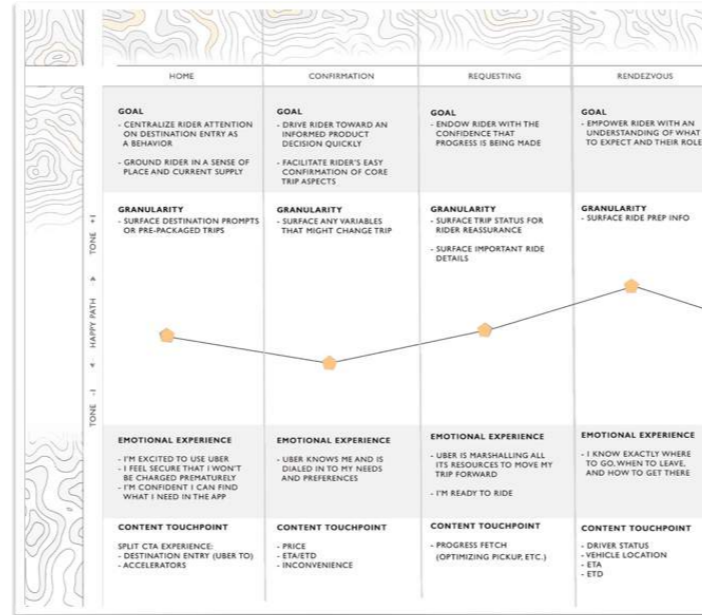
Any time people use a digital product, each screen in their experience has a distinct emotional topography: peaks of clarity and delight alongside valleys of uncertainty. Our job as designers or strategists is to elevate those dips in the user journey while pushing enjoyment to new heights. That's why creating a user journey map can be the perfect north star for you and your team.

Along the way, that terrain is dotted with inflection points that can derail the experience. In this case, the team was exploring a way to transform rough moments into opportunities for immersive experiences. We used a journey map to tell that story to our stakeholders in a compelling way that made all the difference.

narrative design | connection

Finally, let's talk about using narrative design to help people fall in love with your product.

narrative design | manufacturing destiny

FAMILIAR   UNIQUE

The best design solutions are elegant in their simplicity. So elegant in fact that, in hindsight, it seems impossible that any other outcome could have been reached. The same can be true of product naming. The best product names always end up feeling...preordained somehow. When the process is over, you look back and it seems like these two unrelated things (a product and a name) were actually meant for each other in ways you wouldn't normally ascribe to inanimate objects. Almost like you're manufacturing destiny.

But of course, that's not what really happens. The reality is much different because naming is that rare instance when your benchmark for success can only really be measured after the product's been released into the wild. It'll happen on a random Tuesday night in the Safeway peanut butter aisle when you'll hear someone casually slip the product's name into their conversation like they've been using it all their lives. In that moment, it's really gratifying to see your team's work pay off.

Naming products *well* requires a perspective shift. Most of us start by seeing a potential name's attributes on a flat continuum. It's either a good name or a bad name. It'll either work for the product or it won't. Very black and white, very linear, very zero-sum...also very untrue.

narrative design | manufacturing destiny
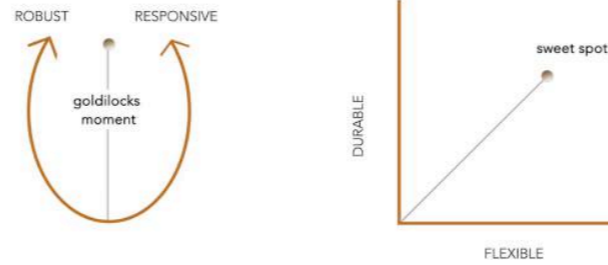
It's untrue because when you develop enough product naming explorations, your thinking evolves to reflect the true nature of language. Language is far more nuanced than a linear spectrum. Instead, it's more of a horseshoe-shaped symbiotic relationship between the emotions that certain names evoke and the associations they bring up. Ultimately, when you're designing a product name and narrative, your sweet spot is gonna be at the intersection of emotion and logic.

In this case from a few jobs back, the team was developing a grocery product. The name had to be flexible enough to encompass upcoming features that we hadn't build yet but still evocative enough to conjure up the image we needed in the minds' of consumers. We essentially had to future-proof it without knowing what the future would bring. Our product narrative boiled down to the fact that getting food on the table for you and your family can be the hangnail of your weekday. No matter what, it's something we all have to contend with. So our goldilocks name had to convey a solution that smooths those rough edges off your daily routine.
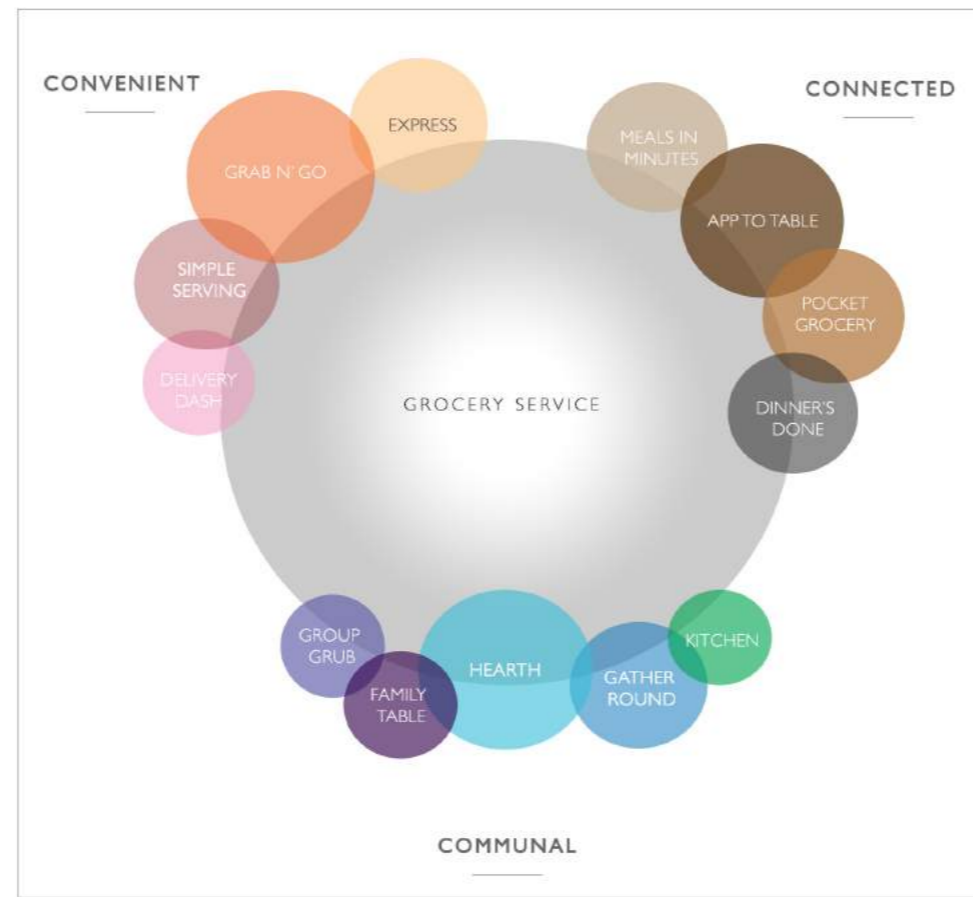
For the first phase of this naming exploration, I worked with our research, business development and marketing teams to identify the top three ways we planned to position our grocery service in the existing food delivery space. Our data told us that users wanted the experience to be connected, communal and convenient. So in this step of the narrative design, we were able to do two things: (1) centralize **lots** of disparate ideas and (2) spur on stakeholder conversations by visualizing the relationships between each clustered family of names. Ultimately, we found this structure was really helpful for spotting more naming opportunities and allowing patterns to emerge over time.

	SIMPLICITY	OVERLAP	ECOSYSTEM	AFFORDABILITY	CLARITY	EVOCATIVE	CONVERSATIONAL	CAVEATS	SCORE
grab n' go									15
pocket grocery									11
app to table									16
hearth									17
gather round									11

The second phase of this naming exploration, was about honing in on the best options and developing criteria for our rationale. Remember, you're coming from the freewheeling brainstorm phase and bringing some precision to bear on which name will best serve your product now and in the future. That takes some critical thinking and there's no better way to do that than by laying out all your options in a rubric.

A weighted naming rubric with language attributes on the x axis and product names on the Y is a really valuable tool. The top line has different traits that are meant to answer questions like: does this name convey the affordability of the product…does this name overlap too heavily with existing products….or does this name fit easily into conversation?

Each box on the rubric is sized small, medium and large and, at the far right, they're all converted into a 1-2-3 scale giving us, a nice at-a-glance measurement for our trouble. Ultimately, the right name will deliver on the product narrative you've laid out. But it'll also do something far beyond just scoring high on the rubric. It will evoke emotion. Product naming calls on your team to not rely entirely on the numbers but to also listen to the emotion in the room. What gets people excited about the product, what allows users to see themselves in the experience is where you'll find your Goldilocks name. And **that's** the beginning of your narrative design skill set.

thanks for your time!