Giacomo Peldi Guilizzoni

Balsamiq

Giacomo Peldi Guilizzoni is an Italian entrepreneur that founded Balsamiq in 2008. Before becoming the CEO of his start-up, Guilizzoni worked seven years in the United States as a programmer at Macromedia and Adobe. He used the launch of Balsamiq to move back to Italy. Balsamiq is the market leader in web Mockups. In a period of only three years and with a very small team of nine people located all over the world, it has generated more than $6 million in revenue.

Pedro Santos: How did you have the idea for Balsamiq and what did you do to get that idea to actually to turn it into reality?

Giacomo Peldi Guilizzoni: I have to admit, I went back to my old blog posts just a few minutes ago to refresh my memory, because it’s been such a ride. I feel like I’ve changed so much since the beginning, which was only three years ago really. But it’s been a very interesting time. The idea itself, I don’t really remember what it was. I think it just came over time. It was a need that I had for a while for my day job at Adobe. I was a programmer and I’ve always been a visual person. I need to draw what we’re talking about or I’m not going to understand it.

So during all these meetings at Adobe I would just get up and go to the whiteboard and start sketching the user interface for whatever we wanted...
to build. And that really facilitated the discussion, of course, for every feature that we wanted to build, etc. Lots and lots of people do this all the time.

That was all good. I really liked to do that. The problem is that we started working with developers who were remote, mostly in India, and other remote people as well. Then there was the problem of how do we communicate with those people who cannot see the whiteboard?

Even for the people who were in the same office, after doing the sketch on the whiteboard I always had to go take a picture and then rebuild it. Or sometimes you’d go home and then you’d come back the next day and none of what’s on the whiteboard makes any sense. You forgot what that meant because they’re such scribbles.

Either you were in the meeting and your memory was fresh or you forgot it all. Because that’s what happens, whiteboards get messy pretty quickly.

So there was this issue that was bothering me. What I saw happen over and over was that we had to write specifications and I noticed that most people just looked at the pictures. They never really read the words. I noticed that the more pictures I put in, the more effective they were, so I started doing specs that were mostly pictures.

The problem is that it took a while to create those pictures. I used to use Adobe Fireworks, which is a great tool, but it’s not focused. It’s a generic drawing tool. So it took a long time to do these things.

Sometimes I would just code the feature instead and then take a screenshot, do the bare minimum in order to have the screenshot ready, and take a screenshot. And that would also take time.

Then what I noticed what was happening is that whenever you spend time with something, you start getting attached to it, and I saw it with other engineers as well.

They came up with a spec and it wasn’t very good. We had this feedback and they were resistant to make changes because it took so long to draw it up or to code it. Already they spent all this time on it.

So in the end what would happen was that we reached compromises to use what was already there and change it only a little bit. The end result is software that is not as good as it could have been, for reasons that have nothing to do with the customers. They were internal reasons, laziness, or human nature.

So I was like, “This is not good. The customers, in the end, are not getting stuff that we know can be improved. We should be doing our best, our very, very best.”