

## **Getting Real - Powerful Tools for Non Hacker (et all) Web Entrepreneurs**

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The process of turning an idea into a winning software product is a daunting challenge for any entrepreneur. The odds of success are increasingly slim when you're bootstrapping your startup and you're not an experienced developer, which is exactly the situation our team was faced with in creating Rephoria, which by the way is not quite done yet, but getting closer and closer each day. When you're a business or marketing person building a software/web based application, your first order of business is translating the idea into a detailed product specification. A clear and concise explanation of the product and related features is a logical starting point, but until you're working through use cases you really only have a glimpse of what you are actually going to build. Most likely those first iterations are mere stepping stones to the discovery of the product you will eventually build, launch, and hopefully grow into an amazing company.

### **Leading with U/I - U/X**

One of the most influential design and development methodologies we have adopted at Rephoria is the 37 Signals approach to developing amazing products, described in their semi-recent book, *Getting Real*. The team at 37 Signals is very adamant about leading software projects with the creation and rapid iteration of the actual screens users will engage with. This way all the theoretical stuff gets boiled down to actual use cases and the aesthetics of the application are not left for the design team to piece together a few weeks before launch.

This approach can be difficult for both business and technical people, as both groups want to revert to their respective areas of expertise, be it business planning or database schema's before worrying about how users will actually use the product. After creating a tightly restricted version 1.0 feature list our team needed to translate these features into screens. We started looking around for a tool to help get this done fast... and inexpensively.

We stumbled upon iRise and found out about their "iRise for Entrepreneurs Program" for early stage technology startups. After a few emails, phone conversations, and a simple application, we got the green light to use iRise's suite of tools. At Rephoria we used iRise's software/web application simulation tool to define and simulate our web application before engaging with developers. We knew that if we were ever going to get our idea out to the market we would need to move quickly through the first few iterations, and we didn't have the money to go through that process while paying a team of developers. While we all know the horrors of unending, ever changing software projects, many people may not know that there is actually a tool for building fast simulations to clearly and accurately define development needs.

There were so many technical and business issues that arose as we were actually designing the page by page flow of the product that we didn't even foresee until we were smack dab in the middle of a user scenario. Without digging into the UI these type of issues might have been glossed over and left for the developers to figure out, but they never go away, and a recently hired developer is certainly not going to have all the answers.

In the spirit of Getting Real, a tool like iRise places the spotlight on the holes and gaps, and forces the core team to solve them. Through the process of iteration and refinement we actually reached the point where we could hand the project off to the developers and with a reasonable degree of certainty knew that what would come back at the next meeting would look and act like what we had envisioned and designed. Additionally, the application we created is ours, instead of the developers interpretation of what they thought we wanted, so whether it totally rocks or really sucks, the credit/blame falls squarely with us.

### **Tips for Simulation Success:**

Don't sweat the pixels: it can be very easy to spend hours aligning boxes and fonts – at version 1.0 this is wasted time – stay focused on accurately translating must have features into real screens / scenarios

Start with a feature list: before anything goes into the simulation – create a “must have feature list” – if its not in the feature list its not important

Write lots of notes: even with screens much of the details are happening behind the scenes – make sure these back-end details are well documented

If your starting out on the rocky road of software/web entrepreneurship and need a tool to translate your amazing idea into an actual product, consider using iRise to build a simulation of your application. Get Real and get that idea from the depths of your imagination into a format others can see, use, and help you improve.