

By

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*"I can't believe I've never heard of this site before,"* was my first thought when I came across [Quirky.com](#). Though there are hundreds of millions of websites, I'm always surprised to find something unique like Quirky. Quirky exists in an interesting space. It's a product crowdsourcing company like [Kickstarter](#), but Quirky differs in one important way: it yields an incredible amount of a product's development to users.

Product development once only took place behind closed doors, and was driven by industry professionals. Now, Quirky allows users to submit ideas and vote on different elements of a product's design and branding. Not only are users in the sausage factory—they're making the sausages.

## Pivot Power

A Quirky Process

An example of the Quirky process can be seen in one of its most successful products, the [Pivot Power](#). The Pivot Power is a surge protector that contorts and flexes to better fit your environment compared to typical power strips. Jake Zien, a member of the Quirky community, thought up and submitted the idea while still a student at the Rhode Island School of Design. Quirky's staff of designers and community members then evaluated the idea in one of their weekly in-person meetings before putting it to a hand vote. The idea was a go.

From there, the project entered an initial research phase. Quirky uniquely incentivizes the research and design process to get users to contribute. As an example, survey respondents in

the research phase split 0.5% of a released product's gross revenues amongst themselves. When a product is successful like the Pivot Power, this could mean receiving hundreds of dollars for answering a short survey.

As a researcher, one of the coolest things about Quirky is their transparent process. For the Pivot Power and other products, [it's possible to view a timeline of the research and design phases](#) (including all the different design submissions and survey answers!). The Pivot Power only had two relatively-short research surveys for members of the Quirky community. One survey identified current needs and pain points in using power strips. The other survey, a week later, helped develop a mission statement for the product. Users also made suggestions and voted for the product's design, name, tagline, logo, and price.

## Target

### User-Driven Design vs. User-Centered Design

Being transparent and involving users is Quirky's greatest strength, but it is also a potential weakness. Quirky practices a kind of participatory design, bringing in users to help drive along a product's development. However, being *user-driven* isn't necessarily being *user-centered*. For every success like the Pivot Power there are countless missteps and products that don't connect with users. With so many users involved at different points, why isn't their success rate higher?

In short, it's the difference between being user-driven (like Quirky) or user-centered. It's one thing to have users want and vote for a cool idea, but without representative users interacting with the product, it's impossible to know if the item will work and bring value to people. Additionally, the users voting for a product might never use it in real life. As a result, Quirky ends up playing the standard product development game of darts: some products hit the mark, some miss.

Quirky is an impressive community and company, but it has room to grow. Just a few tweaks to their methodology could lead to better user-centered products that are tested and ready for market. Wresting a small amount of decision making from Quirky's users might paradoxically lead to a better user experience for them. As Quirky matures, it will be interesting to see if a user-centered design approach is used to a greater degree in their process.

*Written and illustrated by Greg Hansen, a member of the User Research team at Blink. Illustrations created with [Paper](#), a product from Blink client [FiftyThree](#)*