THE CREATIVE DIRECTOR'S CHECKLIST

How to overcome the greatest
obstacles to creativity

In collaboration
with D&AD

REIGNITING CREATIVITY WITH A TRUSTED SYSTEM

IN COLLABORATION WITH D&AD, FRONTIFY ASKED 60 OF THE WORLD'S LEADING CREATIVE DIRECTORS (...) FOR THEIR OPINIONS ABOUT THE GREATEST OBSTACLES TO CREATIVITY TODAY.

In collaboration with D&AD, Frontify asked 60 of the world's leading creative directors (CDs) and senior creatives and designers who judge D&AD for their opinions about the greatest obstacles to creativity today.

Surprisingly, the main challenges turned out to be more organizational and executional than strategic — including lack of time (70%), lack of brand alignment (67%), and lack of collaboration (57%).

The key insight from these findings is that many CDs still don't have a trusted system for brand building — a shared platform that enables better communication, automation, and efficiency and frees creatives to focus more on creativity. The survey supports this insight: 80% of creative directors strongly agreed it would help more brands to have one centralized hub to keep all assets accessible and up to date.

Based on our analysis, we developed a six-step checklist for establishing a better brand-building system that drives alignment, collaboration, and efficiency. All in service of giving creatives the foundation they need to have an even bigger business impact.

Frontify

About Frontify

Frontify is one of the world's leading brand-building platforms. By combining a user-friendly DAM with customized brand portals, Frontify enables creatives and marketers to design, organize, and collaborate better together. Frontify serves more than 10,000 brands in over 200 countries, including 25 of Interbrand's 100 top global brands.

About D&AD

D&AD is a non-profit advertising and design association that promotes and enables excellence in design and advertising. D&AD believes that great creative work fosters better outcomes for all and that creative excellence is achieved through a diverse, inclusive, and sustainable industry that makes work that's relevant and representative of the communities it serves.

IT WAS THE BEST OF ROLES, IT WAS THE WORST OF ROLES

Creative director (CD) is perhaps the best job in marketing. It's an amazing chance to shape the global footprint and creative output of brands and clients.

But it can be lonely and stressful, too. Every day, CDs wrestle with a myriad of challenges in aligning people, resources, stakeholders, and deadlines across multiple projects. This often leaves little time for what feels like "proper" creativity — the kind of visionary leadership creatives aspire to.

But CDs are not alone: Their challenges are recurring, if not systemic, problems for modern marketers. If unaddressed, these issues drain creativity and impact business results.

Surveying global creative leaders

To help identify the shared problems and common solutions for creative directors, Frontify has surveyed *60 leading creative directors and senior creatives from around the world.* The respondents were sourced from the judging committee of the D&AD Pencils, which features some of the most influential creatives working today.

Our participant group comprises 30% EU residents, 25% US residents, 20% respondents from the UK and Ireland, and 25% from the rest of the world (including Brazil, China, Japan, South Africa, and Australia). 55% of those surveyed held the titles *of creative director or chief creative officer, while the others held senior titles like head of creative, design director, or founder.* 60% worked in agencies; 40% worked in-house.

We've identified the top problems, analyzed the underlying causes, and developed a simple checklist with potential solutions to help creative directors reclaim their creative spark.

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TIME. FOCUS. COLLABORATION.

70% OF CREATIVE DIRECTORS SURVEYED AGREE THAT THE LACK OF TIME IS THE MAIN PROBLEM THAT PREVENTS MEMORABLE CREATIVE OUTPUT.

Frontify's survey paints a picture of leaders squeezed between various organizational dysfunctions, with three major obstacles named by most respondents.

Problem #1: No time

70% of creative directors (CDs) surveyed agree that the lack of time is the main problem that prevents memorable creative output, with constant time crunches leading to rushed and reactive work conditions.

In fact, over 25% of CDs surveyed mentioned — with no prompting — time as "the greatest obstacle" to delivering creative value in their role.

Quotes

Not enough time. Time. No time to upskill. Usual stuff… time, money. Time and momentum to get work made vs. the time it takes to discuss, simplify, and craft creativity.

Problem #2: Lack of brand alignment

67% of CDs say their organization or client has no single shared vision or strategy for the brand.

Quotes

Not being able to spread a creative vision consistently across the network and making sure people live and breathe it. Lack of clarity in communication and stakeholder alignment.

Problem #3: Low collaboration

57% of CDs say they struggle with people and departments not cooperating and communicating well. Many also mention the lack of risk-taking, commitment to creativity, and beliefs in the value of branding and design in their organization or among clients as a big hurdle to overcome.

Quotes

Cross-team misalignment, working in silos. Clients (and colleagues) that don't want to push for something outstanding if there's a risk involved. Receiving contradictory feedback from different stakeholders can be a big obstacle.

THE MAIN CHALLENGE FOR CREATIVES ISN'T A CREATIVE ONE

Creative directors don't have a creativity problem. They have an **organizational problem.** Modern CDs struggle with time allocation, lack of shared brand knowledge, collaboration challenges, and overworked teams.

The real issue behind many of their problems is that there's no **shared system for brand building. Such a centralized setup** would allow CDs to take back the initiative through better time allocation, greater internal alignment, more labor division and automation, and a common understanding of their brands.

This observation is further reinforced by the respondents: **80% of creative directors surveyed strongly agree it would help more brands to have a single digital brand-building hub** where the strategy, guidelines, and assets are stored and kept up to date.

Creative directors need a system that helps them and their teams re-establish the freedom and space to create — a solution to transform colleagues and partners into true collaborators in building a brand.

CREATIVE DIRECTORS DON'T HAVE A CREATIVITY PROBLEM. THEY HAVE AN ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEM. (...)

80% OF CREATIVE DIRECTORS AGREE THAT IT WOULD HELP MORE BRANDS TO HAVE A SINGLE DIGITAL BRAND-BUILDING HUB.

6 STEPS TO ESTABLISH NEW CREATIVE CONTROL
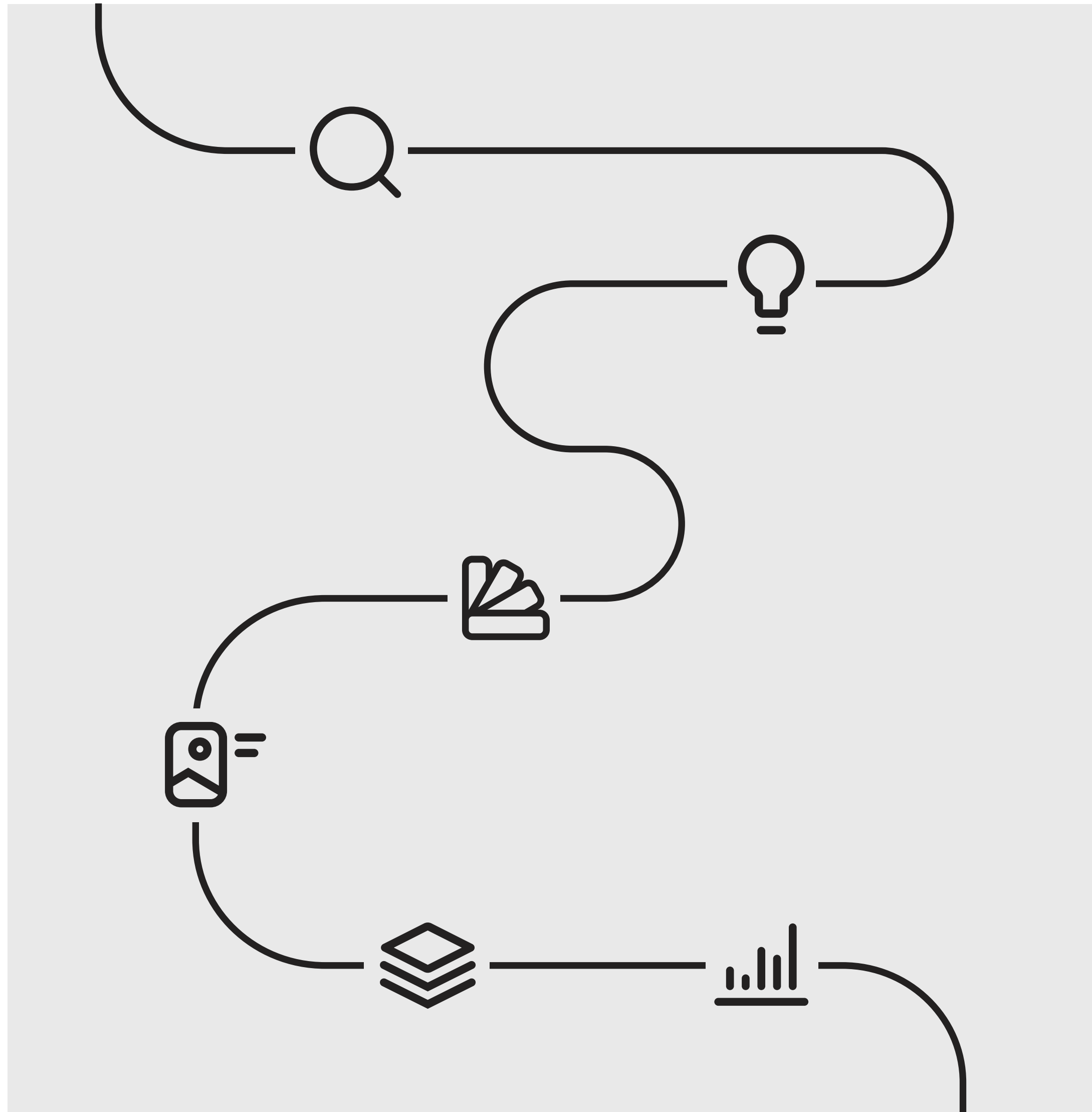
Our creative director's checklist is a guide to building a robust foundation for everyday brand creativity. It's a way of focusing and organizing yourself and your team to address the common challenges outlined in the survey above — saving time, promoting alignment, and deepening collaboration.

Note that the checklist doesn't attempt to prescribe how to solve every creative problem. It also won't provide detailed advice on strategy, ideation, or execution. This, we leave up to your unique vision.

The aim is to provide a guide to organizing creativity better — by eliminating distractions and inefficiencies so that you can fully harness your creative energy.

1. Audit your brand: Take stock together

2. Commit to a strategy: Reaffirm, refresh, or rebrand?

3. Build a brand portal: Create a shared source of truth

4. Establish DAM structure: Build for the long term

5. Automate with templates: Design for independence

6. Implement through analytics: Measure progress continually

The creative director's checklist

1. TAKE STOCK TOGETHER

Create a comprehensive inventory of your brand's current state, and gather honest feedback on what's (not) working. This will allow you to identify the problems and opportunities in your brand's development and lay the groundwork for better collaboration.

- **Review and evaluate:** Audit your assets — how many there are, where they're stored, and how happy and proud people are to use them.

- **Look for waste and repetition:** Pay particular attention to how often files are reused and how many new resources are designed in potentially time-consuming processes.

- **Identify access bottlenecks:** Find out if people access brand assets independently or if they ask their creative teams about the files. Determine how much time you waste on logistics.

Mercedes

Mercedes makes its brand more consistent and accessible by using Frontify to store all assets in one place for the first time in company history.

Emmys

The National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences reimagined its brand building for the iconic Emmys by taking stock, reconnecting with its rich history, and supporting more local brand activations.
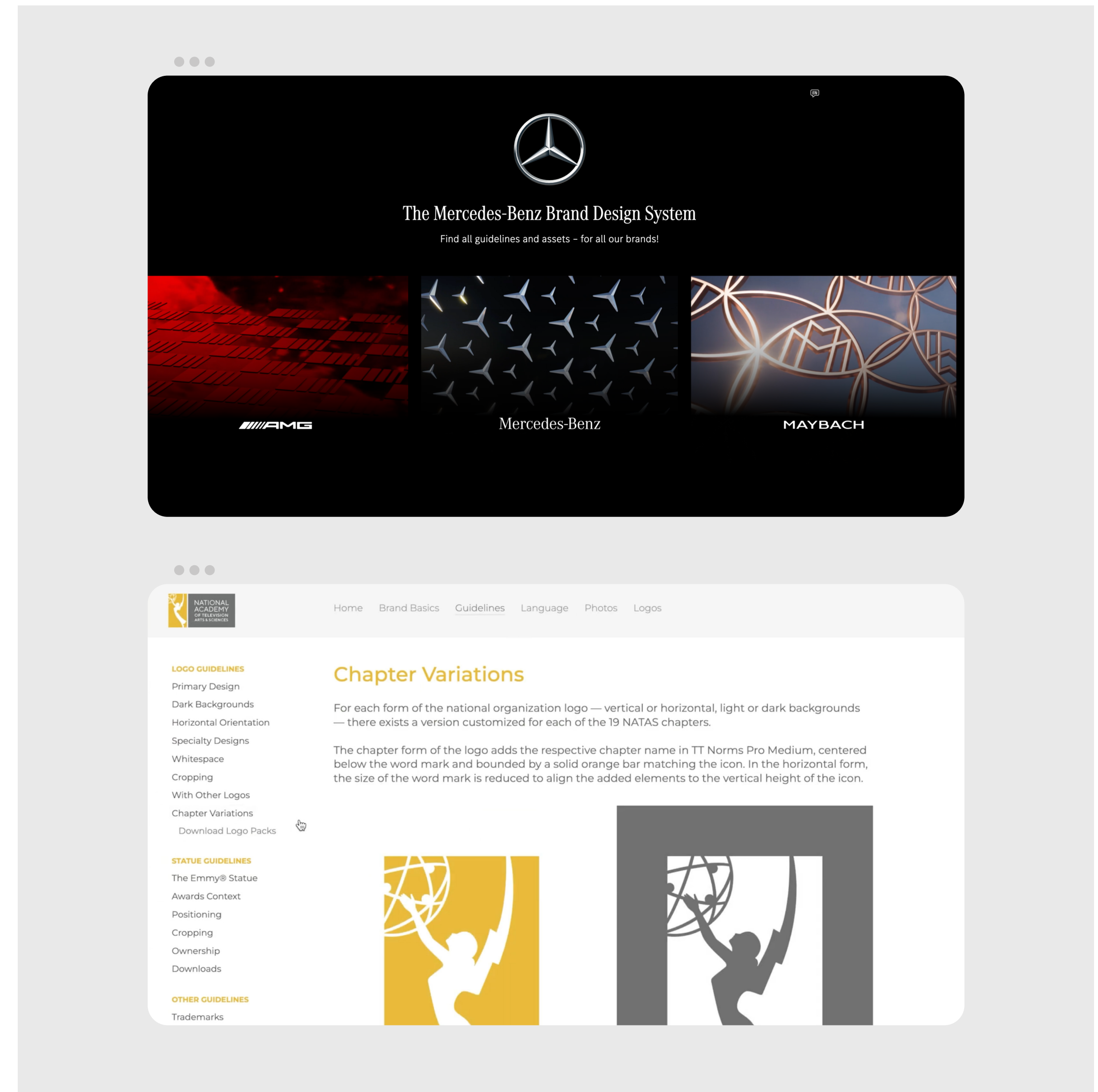
2. REAFFIRM, REFRESH, OR REBRAND?

Use your brand audit to evaluate how much change is necessary to improve. You can bring in outside help but create alignment with the changes.

- **Gain momentum through customer focus:** Gather insights to tell your customer story — how you win them, serve them, and keep them. Explore how your teams can meet the customer needs of the future.

- **Identify the costs of NOT changing:** Change is hard, and the status quo is seductive. But depending on how old your brand is, how often it's been updated (or not), and where your key touchpoints are, there likely comes a day when you have to rethink your approach to keep up. Evaluate if you want to reaffirm what's there, refresh it, or commit to a larger rebrand.

- **Remember that perfect is the enemy of progress:** There's no one right way to build a brand. Excellence in branding is often about choosing a direction and pursuing it with energy and passion. A strong commitment to something good is better than a shaky promise to impossible perfection.

Uber

Uber keeps its brand united and focused through many changes and acquisitions, in what Global Creative Director Brian Coonce calls their "one Uber, one brand" strategy.

Tietoevry

Tietoevry fused two brands to create a new global entity while pushing the envelope on implementation speed by harmonizing over 1,020 portals and services.

The creative director's checklist

3. CREATE A SHARED SOURCE OF TRUTH

Guide and engage more people in building the brand. A centralized system keeps everyone aligned and prevents the creative team from being reduced to enforcers or a production bottleneck.

- **(Literally) Center your brand:** The key to success is a brand portal — a single source of truth. Variously known as a brand center or brand hub, the name is less important than the function: providing a clear direction for building the brand in one easily accessible location. A brand portal shifts the CD's role from judging what's on brand to creating shared responsibility across the company.

- **Develop guidelines:** Once you've committed to objectives for your brand, document them in comprehensive guidelines. When combined with the relevant assets and templates, teams get the framework to collaborate independently — and creatives can devote more time to impactful ideas.

- **An engaging brand experience starts from the inside:** Customize your portal to provide a distinctive experience and update it easily as your company evolves. Set up multiple portals for different brands or campaigns to smoothly roll out multi-market initiatives.

KIA

Automobile trailblazer KIA rebranded in 2021 and brought everyone along for the ride. Using Frontify, KIA makes connecting with and contributing to its new brand easy for everyone.

Mary Kay

American beauty brand Mary Kay created harmony across its 34 markets with a brand-guideline solution from Frontify — and a faster, stronger organization through a single source of truth.
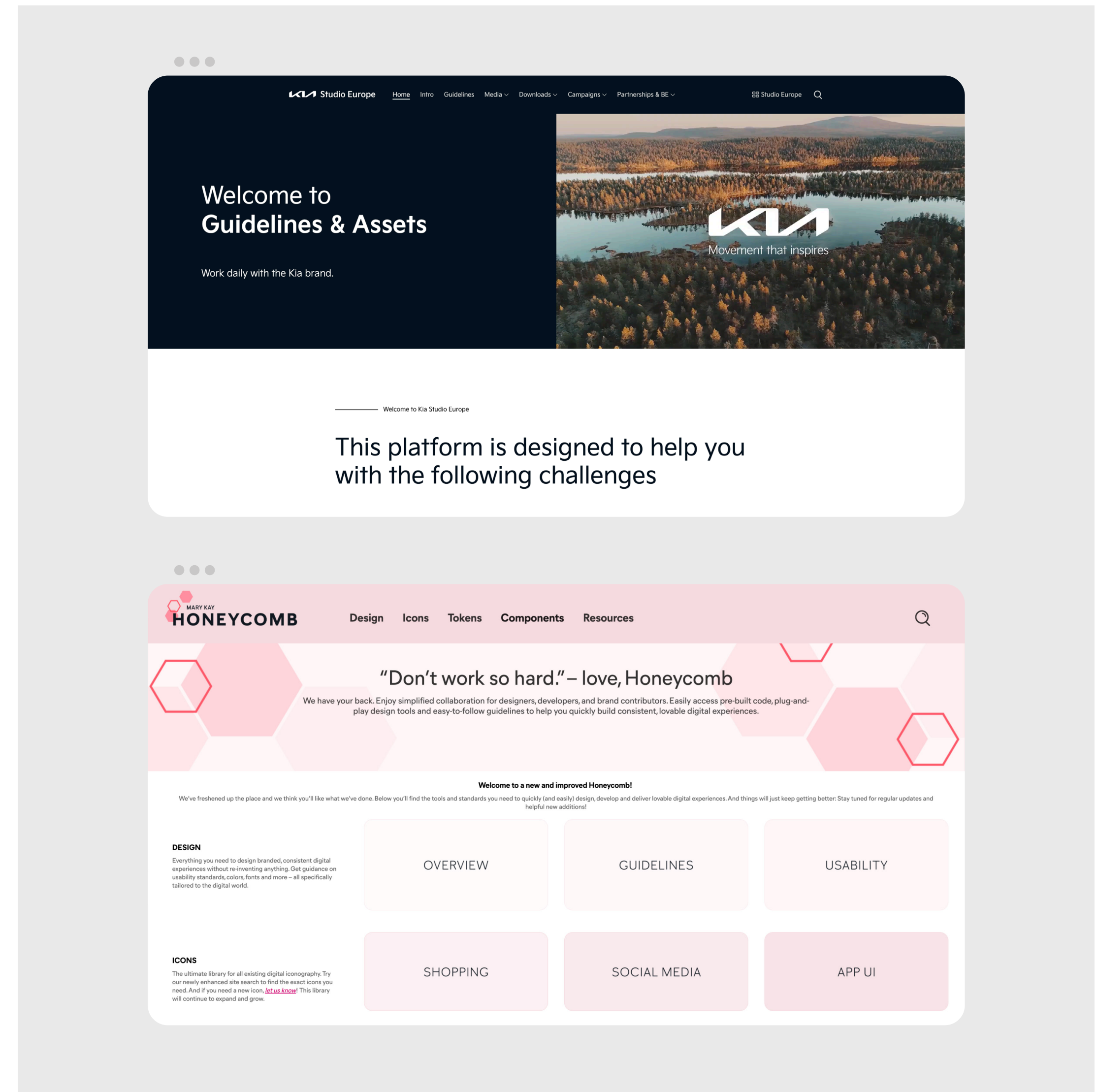
4. BUILD FOR THE LONG TERM
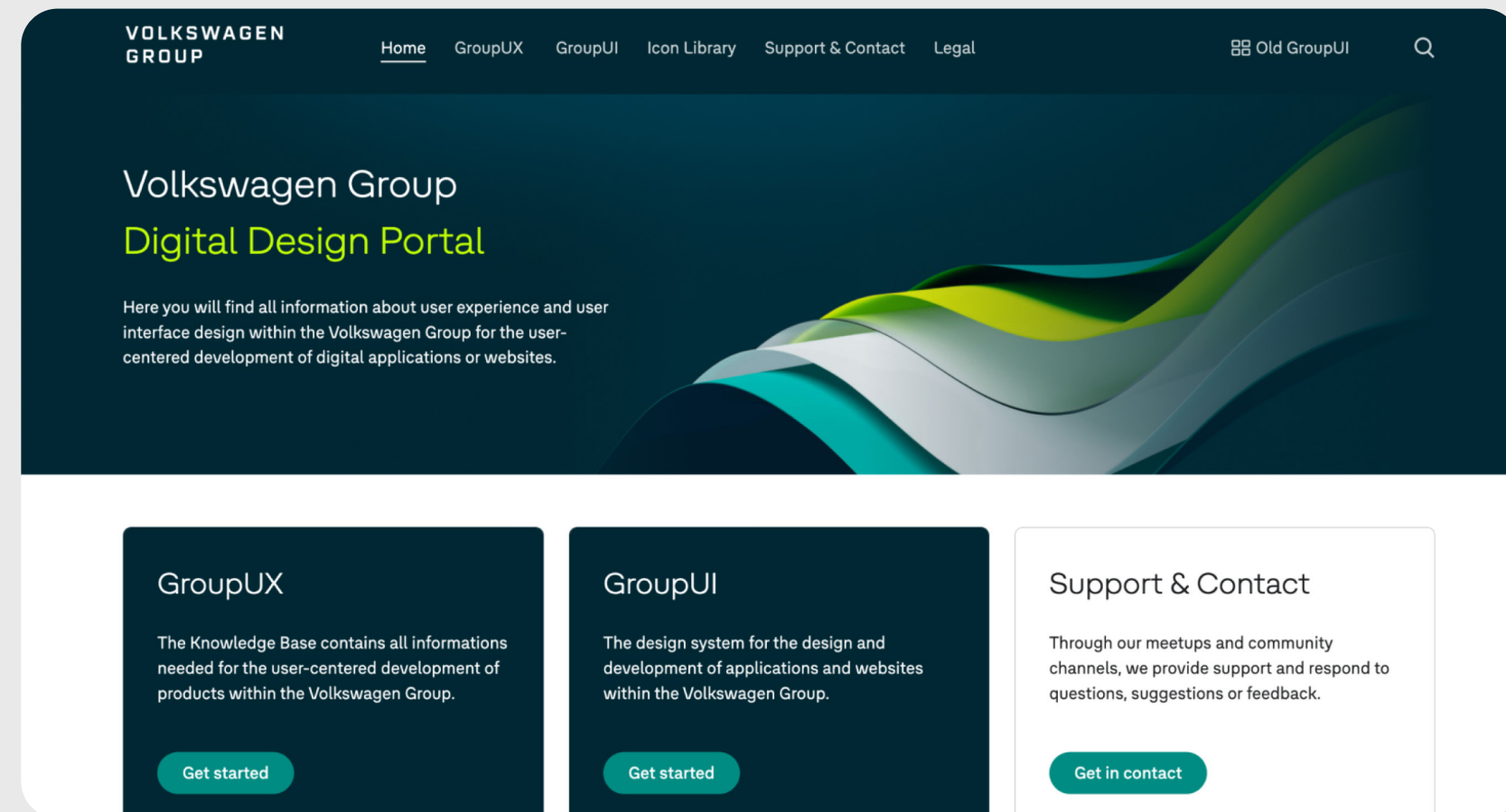
Behind most successful contemporary brand experiences is usually an effective DAM solution — a software system that helps brand builders organize, share, and deploy brand assets.

- **Maximize efficiency:** A DAM streamlines processes and saves resources. It allows teams to find the right resources more quickly, encourages reusing files, and simplifies updating assets across all touchpoints.

- **Avoid change debt:** When brands delay improving content and refreshing workflows, inefficiencies and inconsistency intensify. An intuitive DAM is critical to avoiding such a backlog — by enabling real-time updates and maintaining brand consistency across all assets.

- **Prepare for emerging opportunities:** With appropriately organized, tagged, and searchable files, you lay the foundation for sustainable change — or sweeping updates during a rebrand.

Volkswagen

Global mobility leader Volkswagen is scaling its design solution using Frontify's DAM to connect all its assets, tools, and brands.

Tony's Chocolonely

Tony's Chocolonely has created a delicious DAM system on Frontify to bring their ethical, chocolatey goodness to the world — including a portal for partners and a toolkit for high-profile campaigns.

5. DESIGN FOR INDEPENDENCE

Make it easy to share, automate, and reduce requests. Build the templates, tools, and AI-ready structures that save resources and strengthen creative consistency across touchpoints.

- **Start with access:** Give your teams and partners relevant access and training to design assets on their own — and reduce the strain of routine requests for the creative team.

- **Set up templates:** The next step is automation. Setting up digital templates for common or high-volume assets can be a game changer for creative teams and processes, allowing for the repetition and optimization of engaging content.

- **Lay the groundwork for enhanced automation:** The opportunities in automation are endless, whether it's AI-powered applications or custom-made content generators. Continue building the foundation of a shared system that empowers more people to help and contribute so that your own and your team's attention can be focused on more thorny, challenging, and potentially game-changing creative tasks.

Kansas City Chiefs

The Kansas City Chiefs, a US football team, built a one-stop brand shop to focus on its most important work, save over 10 hours per week, and realize its vision of being "the world's team."

Caribou Coffee

The coffee chain Caribou Coffee saves its team time with a DAM, brand hub, and templates from Frontify that make serving amazing coffee easier across 700+ locations.

The creative director's checklist
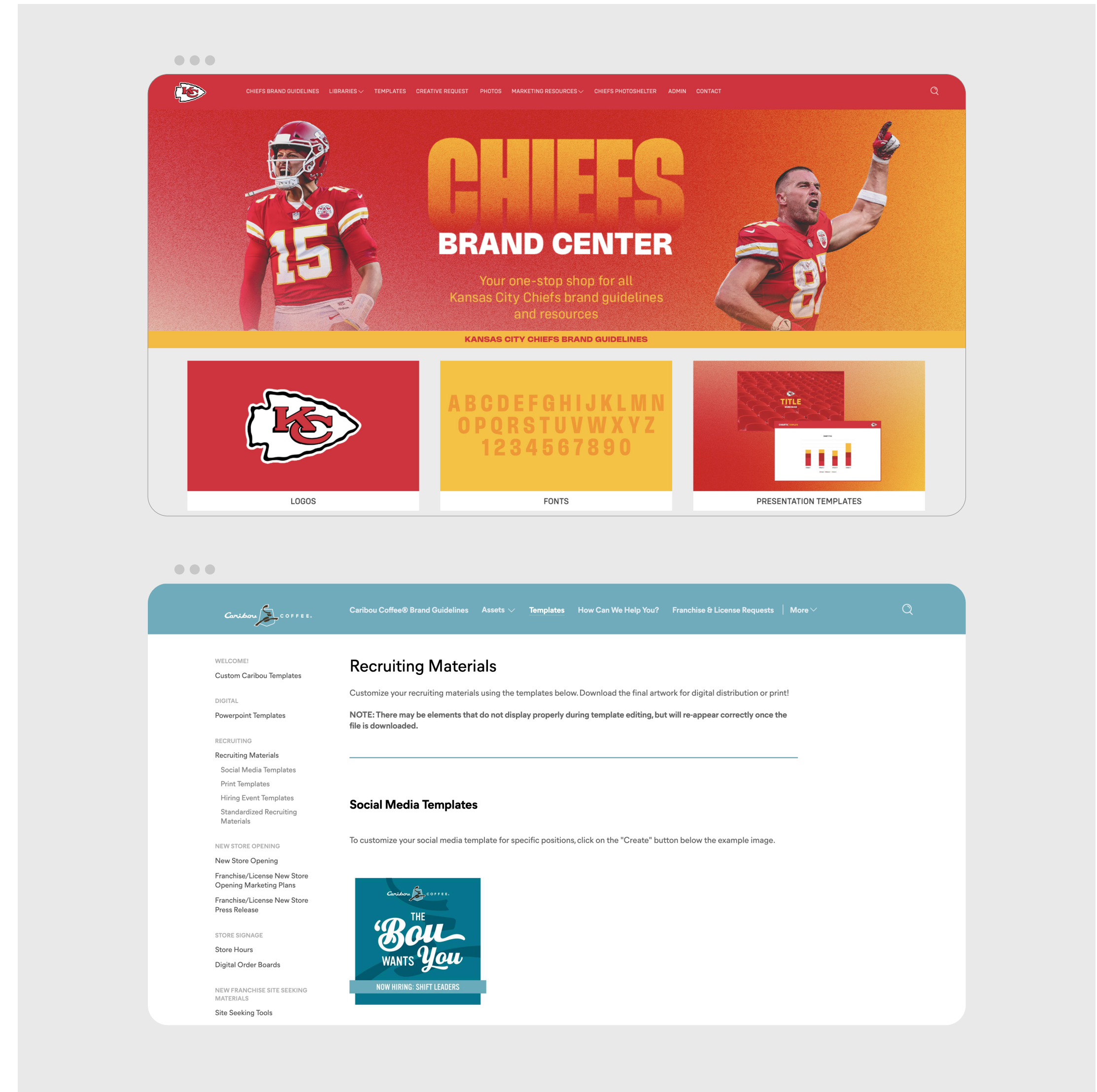
6. MEASURE PROGRESS CONTINUALLY
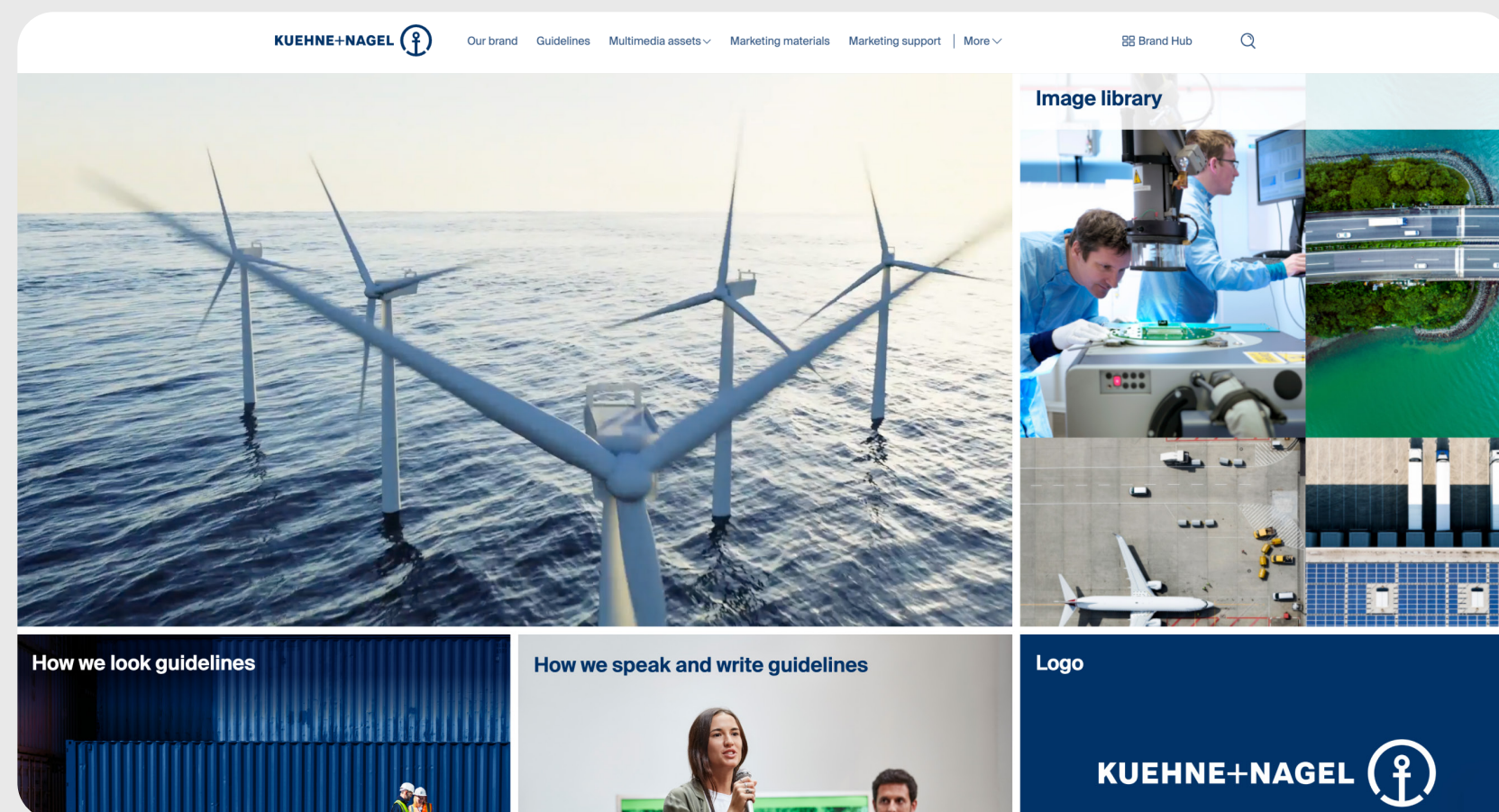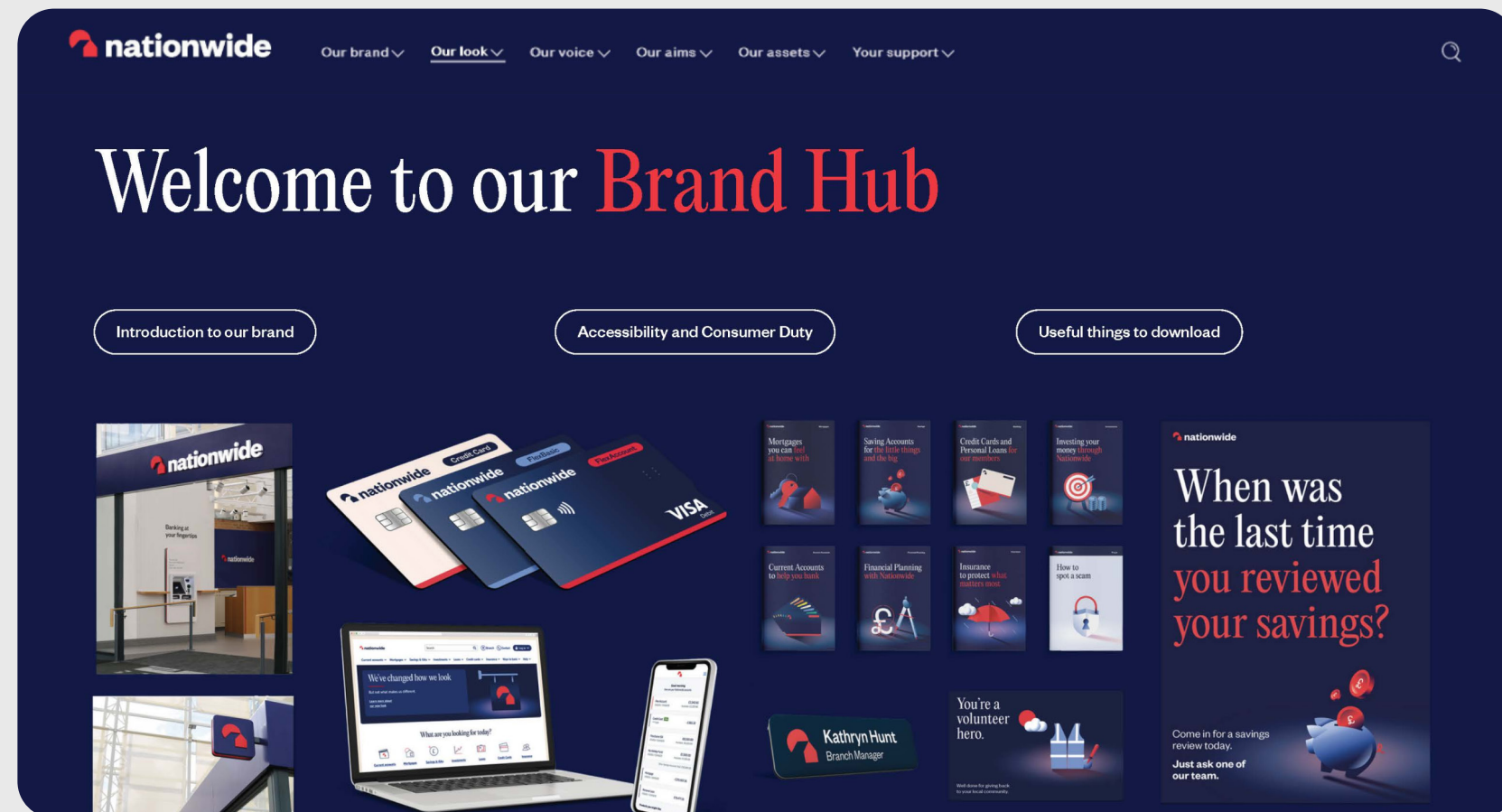
Analytics is the key to keeping the whole brand on track. Monitor your progress to make brand alignment, collaboration, and time-saving wins permanent across your organization.

- **Analyze your brand building:** Use your DAM and portal analytics to identify gaps or misalignments by tracking how and where your assets are used.

- **Learn and re-prioritize:** Use your results as the starting point for your action plan. Lean in to what works and show the measurable success that reaffirms the commitment to big brand investments.

Nationwide

Nationwide, the member-owned UK financial institution, reaffirmed its democratic commitment to its people by creating a new brand hub to drive engagement and consistency.

Kuehne+Nagel

Logistics company Kuehne+Nagel has 81,000 employees across 1,400 locations in 100 countries and uses Frontify to centralize and harmonize the brand expression on its continued journey.

The creative director's checklist

USE YOUR NEW EFFICIENCY TO DREAM BIG

Implementing a shared brand-building system will take time. But every step is a step forward — toward aligning your brand, increasing collaboration, and reducing the distractions and routine tasks that waste creative time.

A centralized solution with a robust DAM, collaborative tools, and automated tasks optimizes daily operations and adaptability to major changes. Consistent brand usage promotes efficiency and effectiveness in the long run. This setup builds the foundation for bigger, faster, and more daring creative projects.

Protect your time gains

With a brand-building system, you get back the most important resource any creative can have: time. Time for ideas that aren't half-baked or half-heartedly executed but brought to their full potential. Just make sure you protect those time gains — and not sacrifice them on the altar of efficiency.
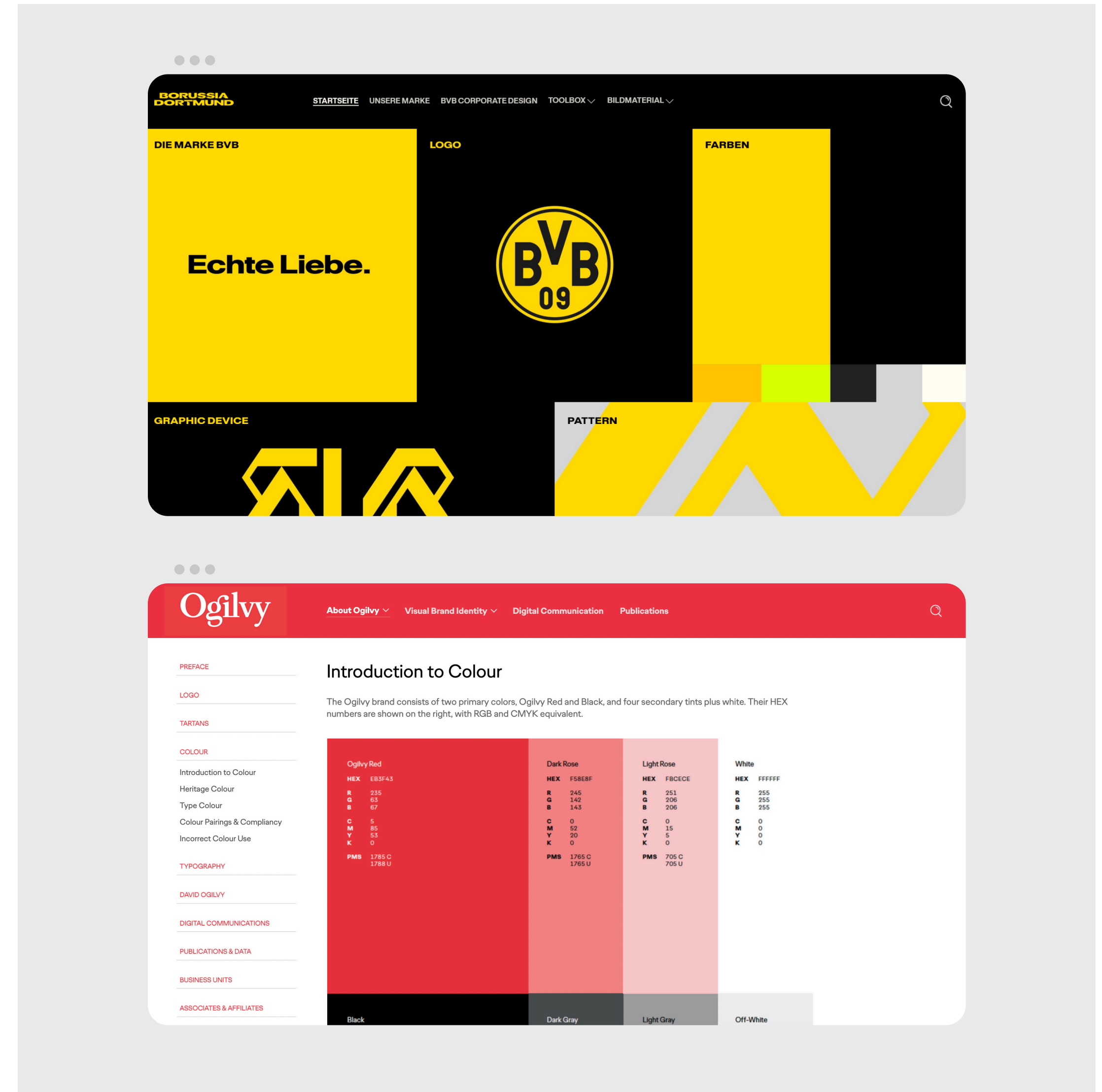
BVB

German soccer team BVB (Borussia Dortmund) uses Frontify to develop its processes to become a global brand and leverage the fans' enthusiastic devotion.

Ogilvy

Creative agency Ogilvy uses Frontify to drive its own digital transformation, improve client relationships, and help brands grow even more creative.

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