

## Content-rich online community in 5 months

Simon & Schuster partnered with ThoughtWorks to quickly and cost-effectively transition its existing website into a future-ready online presence for its authors and readers. ThoughtWorks combined user-centered design techniques with iterative, distributed agile processes in an approach that allowed this business critical and technically challenging project to be delivered by a combined onshore/offshore team. This collaborative effort, in a span of just five months, transformed a decade-old US website into a content-rich, intuitive, interactive online community.



Simon & Schuster, Inc. (S&S), a division of CBS Corporation, was founded in 1924 and is a leading global English language publisher. Based in New York, the company publishes and distributes in printed, digital, and audio formats worldwide, including through its international companies in Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia. S&S consists of numerous prestigious imprints including Simon & Schuster, Scribner, Free Press and Pocket Books, and publishes nearly 2000 titles annually.

When S&S needed to revamp its original website to add rich content and social networking capabilities, they faced tradeoffs familiar to many businesses today. Should they make enhancements based on the existing platform, or could they afford to move to an entirely new and more flexible architecture? A new architecture looked desirable, yet could they manage the additional complexity? And how could they get all the new features required to market their books in today's world, yet remain within budget?

### Highlights

- **Advantage of experience:** ThoughtWorks' strong experience and knowledge in leading edge and open-source technologies helped S&S executives make the best decisions in architecture and in development alternatives to meet business needs.
- **Flexible technology:** The advanced yet flexible technology of the new site's Ruby on Rails platform gives S&S a new online look that continues to allow customers to easily find and buy books online, while at the same time expanding the site content far beyond what was possible with the previous platform. Instead of a one-way street, the site is now a community of readers, authors and the publisher.
- **Fast time-to-deployment:** The new site was developed and deployed using Agile techniques in just five months.
- **Cost savings:** ThoughtWorks' team worked closely with S&S to the figure out which website features would provide the greatest benefit for the amount of development work. ThoughtWorks' Optimum Offshore framework delivered the results within their IT budget.

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The new website needed to offer the existing features plus an array of new features and capabilities to support reader and author created content, interactivity, multimedia, content aggregation and other Web 2.0 characteristics. But Simon & Schuster faced challenges familiar to all large-scale IT projects. The first and most important was to meet the necessary requirements within the budget and timeline. In addition to the many new features desired by the company's publishing units and marketing departments, twenty third-party applications such as Twitter, Brightcove Media Player, and a legacy database of digital content had to be integrated. Since not all requirements could be included at the outset, the new website would have to support additions at a later date. Also, responsibility for content was spread across different departments, and the new content database design was the responsibility of a separate team and would evolve during the project, adding complexity.

To deliver the best value for S&S's technology budget, ThoughtWorks proposed use of open source software, including Ruby on Rails, for the platform and a distributed Agile process based on ThoughtWorks' Optimum Offshore framework. The goal would be to combine the cost-savings of offshore resources with the fast results and flexibility of Agile. The Ruby on Rails architecture easily accommodates new features in later releases.

ThoughtWorks and Simon & Schuster began the project by conducting an Inception phase at Simon & Schuster's New York office, analyzing the existing workflows, determining opportunities for improvement, and generating an initial list of user requirements, all in close collaboration. ThoughtWorks helped the business stakeholders to prioritize the initial list, in some cases suggesting less expensive approaches to achieve the business goals. The resulting roadmap included development techniques to reduce costs, such as creating webpage templates to handle similar designs and strategically modeling databases to allow for evolving requirements. ThoughtWorks helped S&S make informed decisions regarding the cost benefit tradeoffs and business risks of using Open Source Software (OSS), including assessment of staff skills, system requirements, and support alternatives.



“In addition to giving our authors the red carpet-like, celebrity-style treatment they deserve, our new site is designed to immediately engage the visitor, better enable search, and foster discovery. It provides the tools to help both the dedicated and casual reader make educated choices, use viral methods to share information and opinions, and generate that all-important virtual word of mouth.”

**Ellie Hirschhorn - Executive Vice President and Chief Digital Officer, Simon & Schuster Inc.**

After Inception, development began using ThoughtWorks' offshore team in India, closely collaborating with Simon & Schuster's Product Management group, the new content database team, and other critical teams. To ensure that the business vision and requirements were fully understood, the website was delivered in time-boxed iterations. This delivery model fostered frequent feedback from the business stakeholders to developers, reducing the risk and impact of the miscommunications that frequently result under the typical offshore model. The team also employed User-Centered Design techniques such as prototyping and usability testing to ensure a rich, intuitive user experience.

The new site was launched in an alpha-release to all Simon & Schuster employees a month prior to the public launch, and just four months from the project Inception. The alpha-release allowed the joint team to get feedback from a larger group prior to the public launch. Employee feedback went directly into the requirements process for future modifications to the site.

The joint ThoughtWorks and S&S team successfully launched the new US website in only five months, using a cost-effective offshore development model and went on to develop four additional sites for the Pimsleur brand, Canada, and the UK, all in the subsequent quarter. The distributed Agile process allowed the business users to see just how far along the development was at every iteration, maximizing transparency and feedback while minimizing risk.

The new SimonandSchuster.com offers improved and simplified navigation. The search capability has been upgraded to make it easier to find books, authors, topics, and categories. The new website succeeds in presenting S&S authors not only as authors but also as personalities, experts, readers, and celebrities. Serving as a curator for the author's brand, the site now aggregates author-related content from around the web so fans can follow activity either by or about the author, whether it is news, Twitter or blog posts, media and in-person appearances and events. More than 150 authors contributed exclusive original content to the site at launch, with more material being added daily.

“SimonandSchuster.com offers readers an engaging way to connect to their favorite authors, express their passions, find out about new books, and enhance their reading experience. It provides a level of access, interaction, and information that is fully commensurate with what consumers have come to expect in the digital era, and serves as a welcome showcase for our authors and their books.”

**Carolyn Reidy - President and CEO  
Simon & Schuster, Inc.**

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