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A Small Lighting Design and Manufacturing Firm's  
Innovative Use of Shared Workspace  
Collaboration Tools

An Interview with Account Manager Byron Wilson

*By Ronni T. Marshak*

*Sr. VP and Sr. Consultant, Patricia Seybold Group*

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Patricia Seybold Group / Interview

# How Visual Comfort Uses GroveSite's Collaborative Workspaces to Improve Time-to-Market

*A Small Lighting Design and Manufacturing Firm's Innovative Use of Shared Workspace Collaboration Tools*

*An Interview with Account Manager Byron Wilson*

*By Ronni T. Marshak, Sr. VP and Sr. Consultant, Patricia Seybold Group*

*August 3, 2006*

## BACKGROUND: CUSTOM LIGHTING PRODUCTS FROM VISUAL COMFORT

Visual Comfort is a small Houston, Texas-based business that designs and sells residential lighting fixtures to consumers through three different channels: lighting stores and interior design showrooms, large retailers (national accounts), and as private label products through large name-brand retailers and catalogs.

The majority of Visual Comfort's manufacturing is done in a factory in Asia. The company has a long-term partnership with the factory owner, and Visual Comfort constitutes about 70 percent of the factory's business.

**BACKGROUND.** In 1987, Andy Singer was a young, energetic sales rep for several different lighting manufacturers. Going from lighting showroom to lighting showroom, trying to make sales for others, Andy decided to open his own business. Working with a manufacturer in Taiwan, he developed a line of lighting fixtures and lamps. Andy started small, in his garage, with only six SKUs. Visual Comfort has grown to more than 60 employees and 3,000 SKUs.

## HOW VISUAL COMFORT USES SHARED WORKSPACES TO SHORTEN TIME-TO-MARKET

### Q&A with Byron Wilson, Account Manager, Visual Comfort

**PATRICIA SEYBOLD GROUP (PSG).** What was the business problem you were facing that led you to using collaborative technologies?

**BYRON WILSON.** It all started because we were having trouble effectively communicating the design element of our product development cycle. A large part of the design process requires sending drawings and digital photographs, along with detailed production instructions. Not only were the email attachments very large in size, but we also lacked any form of version control of the files.

**PSG.** What process did you use prior to implementing a collaborative solution?

**BYRON WILSON.** We were using email for communications, trying to categorize things as best as possible, but there was a real problem finding the right email with the right attachment. We tried having everyone involved save every attachment with the date in its file name, but we were fighting an uphill battle; there were too many people involved in the development process, and we really couldn't rely on everyone handling things in the same way.

You see, our lines of business are handled differently. For direct and national accounts, where we design the products, we have an in-house product development team of four or five people as well as about seven third-party designers. The designers submit their designs and then our product development people get involved. Product development makes sure the designs are ready to send to the factory for manufacturing, asking the designers for clarification or modifications. Once the drawings are sent to the factory, the manufacturing team takes over—a coordinator, draftsmen, production planner, etc.

Our Private Label business is a little different because in addition to utilizing designs from Visual Comfort's design team, our customers may also have their own design teams and may send their own designs to us to be manufactured. Adding these additional parties to the communication chain just made things more difficult because we were still sending the approved drawings and still trying to find the right versions from all the back and forth emails.

**PSG.** What collaborative solution are you implementing to address this problem, and how did you first learn about it?

**BYRON WILSON.** One of our largest accounts, a major national discount department store, uses GroveSite's online collaboration workspaces with its hardlines (non-apparel) suppliers. We're one of those suppliers, and we were introduced to GroveSite in late 2004. (For more information on the GroveSite solution, see our product profile, "GroveSite Collaborative Workspaces"<sup>1</sup>) The company set up a separate workspace for each supplier or product line. We can log in and download design specs that they provide and then submit our bids for manufacturing the products. We can also discuss issues with the customer within the

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<sup>1</sup> See "GroveSite Collaborative Workspaces,"

August 4, 2006, Ronni Marshak,  
<http://www.psgroup.com/detail.aspx?ID=740>

site, create project plans with schedules, and suggest improvements or revisions. Even though we didn't manage the site, it made it very easy for us to do business with our customer.

**PSG.** What attracted you to the GroveSite solution for Visual Comfort's use?

**BYRON WILSON.** I liked that the workspace was so clearly laid out. Many of the pages we used were structured like a table, or online spreadsheet, with columns and rows. These tables contained information such as posting date, project name, and designer name, as well as a link to the specification file. I initially had no idea how the pages were built, I just liked how it looked and how it worked.

I contacted Jane Hagen, vice president of marketing and sales at GroveSite, and she set up a test site for me to play with. GroveSite did a really nice presentation, putting our logo and company colors on the test site. I played with the site for a bit, and it was really easy to add pages, upload files, and communicate information.

It also wasn't a huge cost investment, like some other products, so even if it didn't work out after I tried it for a few months, it wouldn't be a huge loss for the company. It just seemed like a

good fit for Visual Comfort.

**PSG.** Did you consider any other collaborative solutions?

**BYRON WILSON.** One of our Private Label customers uses Retail.com, a site maintained by Oracle, but the product is out of our cost range, and, from a user standpoint, it was not what we were looking for. We needed something more cost effective and that can be modified easily. GroveSite fit the bill.

**PSG.** How are you using GroveSite at Visual Comfort?

**BYRON WILSON.** Within the organization, we've set up a GroveSite workspace for each private-label account and for our in-house designs. Each in-house designer can post their drawings; then the product

### Visual Comfort Sample Request

**Visual Comfort & Co.** Est. 1887

**Company XYZ**  
Product Development Tracking

Byron Wilson | Log out | Org Admin

Administration | Turn on edit | Broadcast | My info | My home | Search | Help

Welcome

**Sample Tracking**

**Company XYZ Sample Requests**

Closed Requests

Sample History Cards

**Reference Info**

- Pending Instruction Sheets
- Approved Instruction Sheets
- SKU List
- Hang Tags
- Product Spec Sheets
- UL Reports
- Parts Requests
- Useful Links
- Members
- Shipping Addresses

#### Company XYZ Sample Requests

Please post all requests for new samples on this page, and include all relevant details.

**Expanded View** [Summary View] [Add a New Sample Request]  
[Download] [Delete Records] [Upload Records]

| Order #↑ | B # | Description              | Qty | Pty Item  | Sample Type   | Req Date | Conf Date | Ship Date | Ship Via | Last Date         |
|----------|-----|--------------------------|-----|-----------|---------------|----------|-----------|-----------|----------|-------------------|
| 120      |     | Wooden Candle Stick Lamp | 1   | AF1186745 | A-Development | 08/20/06 | 08/22/06  |           | UPS      | 07/27/2006 04:33p |

**Turned Wood Collection Table C**  
SCALE 1:3

**Ship To:** Product Development Dept  
**Ref:** 157275  
**Cord:** Black  
**Socket:** Dimmer  
**Wattage:** 150W  
**Other Comments:** 1. Please include linen shade, 9 x 20 x 13.  
2. Cord should be 8' in length  
**Photo**  
 turnedwoodcollection\_C.jpg (3399h by 2200w)  
7/27/2006 4:33p (554kb 3 min @ 28.8kbps)  
**Actions:** [add new]

**Total Records:** 1 out of maximum of 1000.

Powered by **GroveSite**  
Submit Feedback

© 2004 Visual Comfort  
Contact Byron Wilson  
7/27/2006 4:36p

© 2006 Visual Comfort

Illustration 1. The detailed record view of a Visual Comfort sample request.


development staff can work on making them ready for manufacturing.

In the Private Label segment of the business, we coordinate all design-related communications with the factory through GroveSite. All designs from either our designers or the customer’s design team are uploaded onto a custom table on the respective customer’s site. We specify such details as finish, bulb type and wattage, and sample due date. Additional information is later completed by factory personnel

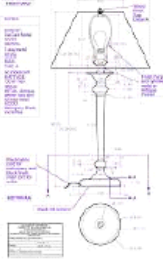
in China—information like item number and confirmed ship date. Then, as the sample development process progresses, we can communicate further sample details or review progress photos to ensure the development is on track. (See Illustrations 1 and 2.)


Because everything is in one place, we don’t have a problem with finding the right information or the right versions of documents—there is only one

### Custom Table Expanded View

Company XYZ  
**View**


Edit this Record
Close

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| Photo              |  <p style="font-size: small; text-align: right;">turnedwoodcollection_C.jpg (3399h by 2200w)<br/>7/27/2006 4:33p (554kb 3 min @ 28.8Kbps)</p> |
| Order #            | 120  |
| B #                |  |
| Description        | Wooden Candle Stick Lamp   |
| Qty                | 1  |
| Pty Item           | AF1186745  |
| Sample Type        | A-Development  |
| Req Date           | 08/20/06   |
| Conf Date          | 08/22/06   |
| Ship Date          |  |
| Ship To            | Product Development Dept   |
| Ship Via           | UPS  |
| Ref                | 157275   |
| Tracking           |  |
| Cord               | Black  |
| Socket             | Dimmer   |
| Wattage            | 150W   |
| Other Comments     | 1. Please include linen shade, 9 x 20 x 13.<br>2. Cord should be 8' in length  |
| Member responsible | Byron Wilson   |
|                    | <span>Edit this Record</span> <span>Close</span>   |
| Credits            | Created by Byron Wilson on 7/27/2006 4:33p.<br>Last updated by Byron Wilson on 7/27/2006 4:33p.  |

Powered by  
  
 Submit Feedback

Site Time: 7/27/2006 4:37p

© 2006 Visual Comfort

*Illustration 2. This illustration shows an expanded view of a custom table designed specifically for Visual Comfort.*

version of a design drawing on the site versus the multiple versions that used to be emailed around.

**PSG.** How long did it take to create the first site? How long does it take to create new sites for working with your designers/suppliers?

**BYRON WILSON.** Surprisingly, it didn't take very long. GroveSite had already set up all the color schemes and page types I needed. I just had to click

“new page” to select the features (page types) I wanted in the site. Uploading files and adding data was pretty simple. The first site was done and the factory personnel enrolled in one day.

We now create new sites very frequently. And it's really easy because we copy the structure from an old site without any content. At most, it takes a half hour to create a new site and fill in the basic information.

Creating new types of custom table pages for our sites takes a bit longer. Initially, I mocked up the table layout and columns I needed on paper, then paid GroveSite staff to create a new page type, just for us. However, GroveSite has come a long way in its capabilities since we started; now they have a Custom Table Editor feature that I use to create my own new page types. I can modify my existing custom tables or create new ones on my own, and it is very simple.

**PSG.** What has been the response from users?

**BYRON WILSON.** The factory staff has embraced GroveSite to the extent that they now refuse to act on any product development that's not in GroveSite. Even urgent requests have to go through the site.

The factory has not propagated the use of GroveSite with other customers, but that's probably because of the language barrier, and their understanding of collaborative technology isn't the same as ours. The factory doesn't make any changes to the sites; they are more comfortable as users.

**PSG.** How has using GroveSite benefited your business?

**BYRON WILSON.** The main improvement is in the communication of design specs. The accuracy of manufactured samples is greatly improved because everyone knows where to find the information they need. We have far fewer errors now.

The time-to-completion is also considerably shortened. Overall, it now takes between two to four weeks less time from order to manufacture. Before GroveSite, you had to consider that each email took a day to receive because of the time differential, which is 13 hours—or 14 hours when daylight savings time kicks in. And then it took another day to respond. Now any changes or issues are noted in GroveSite, and people can act on that information when they are able. And, because of the improved accuracy, there is much less work that has to be clarified or redone, also improving speed-to-market.

Meeting deadlines has definitely improved. When everything was done in email, our dates were almost never met. Now everyone can see in the ta-

bles on each site, what's on time, what's delayed, and any other problems. When I get on the phone with factory representatives to talk about upcoming deadlines and potential problems, we both are looking at the GroveSite information. So we are literally on the same page.

Even though it's hard to quantify relationships, we do see a lot less animosity and frustrations over samples coming in wrong or missed deadlines. This is a result of using the collaborative workspaces.

And now more people can be involved in the development cycle without clogging up email, and that improves business for everyone, from customer to designer to "agent" (facilitator of communication between the customer and the manufacturer—a role we use in Private Label).

**PSG.** Are there any things about GroveSite that you would like to see improved?

**BYRON WILSON.** The one major roadblock in the product involves permissions. Say you have a page with 10 drawings on it; there are three different people at the factory who each have different responsibilities for the drawings. One should fill in the item number in the table associ-

ated with the drawings. Another person should add the shipping date. And so forth. Right now, GroveSite does not have the ability to let us control access to specific fields on an individual basis. So, we go with the trust method—trusting individuals to update only the content they are responsible for. There have only been a few problems; on rare occasions, when a sample has come out wrong and the factory has changed data on GroveSite to blur responsibility for the error. In general, our collaboration with designers and factory personnel has gone very well.

Koren Elder of GroveSite has been terrific in finding workarounds for us, and she is so responsive. We always get same-day response to our emails. But I look forward to the time when GroveSite will provide more levels of permissions to better fit our situation.

**PSG.** Any final comments?

*The accuracy of manufactured samples is greatly improved because everyone knows where to find the information they need. We have far fewer errors now.*

**BYRON WILSON.** When we first started using GroveSite, Andy (Singer) was resistant. But he let me give it a shot. Even though the product has its limitations, it has vastly improved communications, sample accuracy, and overall organization of the product development cycle.

I used to spend lots of sleepless nights talking to my factory contacts in China to review product development details. These conversations used to take quite a bit of time since every detail had to be explained, and then all parties had to search emails or

files to look for answers. While I still talk to the factory to maintain the relationship and discuss urgent issues, using GroveSite has really helped me conduct my phone conversations much more efficiently.

Now everyone depends on it and Andy Singer loves it, saying, “Using GroveSite, we have been able to create an open conduit for communication between designers, manufacturers, and customers, which facilitates faster, more accurate sample turnaround. The end result is that we bring new products more quickly into the marketplace.”