

A Conversation with Jessica McRae and Kristen Yonson, Co-founders of SwatchPop!

Q. Congratulations on the major success of SwatchPop! To tell the company's story, let's start at the beginning: how did you two meet?

A. Jessica: Kristen and I were actually high school classmates ages ago in Georgia. We were friendly, but we weren't best friends. We went off to different colleges, and Facebook wasn't really around back then, so we lost touch. Kristen went on to work for a digital start-up, and I was working in sales and marketing.

When I first started thinking about what would become SwatchPop! in 2013, I'd just left my job to stay at home with my second child. Kristen and I had reconnected via Facebook, and I knew she was just as passionate about home decorating as I was. She'd actually started a blog on the side just because she was so good at decorating spaces, and people had started asking her for advice.

Whenever I got stuck with my own decorating projects, I'd started taking pictures and sending them to an interior designer friend of mine who lives in Charleston, South Carolina. I'd be like 90% of the way finished, but I'd look at something like my dining room table or mantel and think, "I wish I had a better centerpiece or finishing touch"—you know how it goes. But I had the luxury of being able to send pictures to my designer friend, who would quickly send me back advice and products that I should buy. It'd solve my problem.

I thought everyone could use a designer friend like this, who can give you bite-sized advice as you need it.

Q. So when and how did you share the idea with Kristen, Jessica?

A. J: I approached Kristen because I knew we shared the same home decorating obsession, and I'd been following her blog and knew that she knew all about digital marketing. We met at a coffee shop in 2014 after not having seen each other in 8 or 10 years. I told her the idea, and she was immediately on board. I presented a business plan to her, and from that day forward, we worked together, taking one step at a time to build this business.

We started with a really small, barebones prototype website built by an intern from Georgia Tech. In October of 2014, we went around to moms' groups—mothers of preschoolers, those kinds of gatherings—and showed them the site. They started using it, and then, they started telling their friends about it. People started coming back, again and again. We realized very quickly we were on to something.

We outgrew the prototype and developed the first full-fledged version of SwatchPop.com and launched it in January 2015. People found out about us through word of mouth and a little Facebook advertising. We also started blogging, and people loved that.

We never looked back--the ground we've gained has been incredible. We have grown 300% year over year since 2014.

Q. Kristen, do you remember what you were thinking as Jessica presented the idea to you in the coffee shop that day?

A. Kristen: I'm a bit of a serial entrepreneur. I knew Jessica had been working in New York and had small children, and then, when she came to me with this idea, I thought, "We can make this thing huge. Let's do it." I love interior design, worked for a start-up, and know how tech works--I knew this was something I wanted to be a part of. I was all in from day one.

Q. Why do you two make such a good team?

A. J: We always say we're like the yin and yang. I handle anything client-facing: marketing, promotion, clients, customer service. Kristen is really good at dealing with our investors and finances, and she's design-minded, so she can work well with our designers. We complement each other's skill sets.

Q. Let's define some terminology: what is a "pop"?

A. J: A "pop" is what we call any element of a room: throw pillows, a chandelier, a rug, a paint color. Every room has multiple pops all working together to create a well-designed space.

Q. Another interesting thing about SwatchPop! is the price point. To get started, it's just \$49. You probably could have charged more. Why did you decide to make it so affordable?

A. K: We were trying to create a solution that we would use personally. We had both hired interior decorators to come to our home, and paid beaucoup bucks, hourly. We wanted SwatchPop! to be affordable. It's an a la carte service. People can start small, add on, and then come back and add more to a project or start a whole new project.

That concept has really worked. We see people start with two or three pops, and then add on when they come back. We want people to trust us. When we launched, virtual design wasn't really a thing, so we had to introduce people to how it could work and make them feel both confident in it and comfortable using it. Having a professional designer help with something small, like throw pillows, with the option to enlist that designer for more guidance later was just such a new concept.

J: We really wanted this to be a realistic approach to interior design, and not at all intimidating. A lot of people have designers and decorators come to their house, and they get intimidated by that process. Instead, SwatchPop! has always tried to be accessible, approachable, and at a price point that makes it easy to get started and test out.

Most people aren't redesigning an entire room all at once. They tackle bite-sized pieces, refreshing, updating, and making changes as our budget allows. SwatchPop! operates with that reality in mind. And we've found that once people get comfortable with our process, they come back, again and again.

Q. You're both passionate about design, but you're not professionally trained designers. Did you find the fact that you didn't start as designers helpful when you created SwatchPop!?

A. J: Yes, I think it helped us tap into a consumer mindset. We were not interior designers trying to market interior designer services. We never really went into this as design experts. We dove in as consumers who needed this service. We wanted to create something we'd use ourselves.

Over time, we have learned so much, just from being around design all day, every day. It's our job to comb through designs and rationales of our designers. So even though we both started not as trained designers but people with an eye for good design, we have honed our skills and now get called upon for professional design help. We have partnered with online boutiques, there is a yoga studio in town that asked us to help them with their space--Kristen in particular is really great at this.

We've loved learning and now doing more design projects ourselves, but we are grateful for where we started and attribute a lot of SwatchPop!'s success to those origins.

Q. How do you decide which designers to partner with which clients?

A. K: We created a unique matching algorithm that takes the guesswork out of that pairing. We don't expect you to come to our site, browse through 50 different portfolios, and then try to find the designer for you. Our goal is to make this process as easy and accurate as possible. Good designers can design for anybody, but everybody has their own signature style, too, and we embrace that. Clients are partnered with a designer whose strengths match and relate to their style.

Q. How do you choose designers for SwatchPop!?

A. J: It's a very competitive process. We now have a waiting list--there are about 400 designers currently pending, wanting to be on our platform. E-design is a growing field, but when SwatchPop! launched, it was brand new. Back then, it was kind of tricky to find designers who could not only design, but communicate their ideas visually using technology.

Now, designers coming out of school are well-versed and trained in e-design. Subsequently, it's become a lot more difficult to get a spot with SwatchPop!. We ask every designer applicant whether or not they're professionally trained--not because it's a requirement, but because we want to know their background. But what we weigh most is the portfolio they present. After reviewing portfolios, work experience, any certifications, and other information they supply, we pick the best people.

Q. There are people who consider themselves very much within certain aesthetic camps—maybe you're a minimalist or maybe you're a staunch traditionalist. But what if you like a few different styles? Does the algorithm allow mixing?

A. Absolutely. Design terms mean different things to different people, and even regionally, they can translate totally differently. For example, California boho may look nothing like Georgia boho.

So, we don't like to use descriptive terms like that. Instead, we have created a style survey that asks you to rank various looks and styles that we show you. You rank looks, one through five stars. You'll tell us about any colors you love—and colors you don't love—as well as where you like to shop. You'll also provide the url to your Pinterest board so that your designer can have access to that when she receives your project. We will see your unique, personal style.

Q. Let's walk through the process. Where do I start?

A. K: The first step is to create your style profile, using our style survey. The second step is to build your project. You'll start by choosing your room—let's say living room—and then you'll pick your pops from our design menu. Let's say you're just looking to spruce things up a little bit: your pops might be coffee table accessories, throw pillows, and artwork.

Next, you'll tell us about your design goals and challenges. You'll provide any inspiration images or Pinterest links, as well as photos and dimensions of that room. Then, you'll set a budget or range for the project. Some people give us a hard number—say \$700 or less. But some people say, "I'm flexible, but I tend to go for budget-friendly, so let's look at Overstock and Wayfair, and stores like that."

Then, you'll check out. Next, you'll be matched with a designer. You're able to communicate with your designer for the length of your project using your project's chat screen. Let's say you find an additional image you want to share, or you want to let the designer know that if there is anything else they see in the room that could be updated, you'd like them to tell you—it's easy to share that info with them, all using the chat screen.

You'll receive your complete design solution in 3 to 5 business days. It's really quick, and it's really fun. Your design solution will include visuals so you can see how everything looks together, along with detailed advice: if your designer tells you to get a piece of abstract art, they're also going to tell you how many inches to hang it above your sofa. You'll have instructions for how to install everything. You'll also have a clickable shopping list, with products handpicked for your style and budget. You just click on one of the products, and you're sent directly to the online retailer—not SwatchPop!

J: You'll have 7 days after you receive your design to ask questions and request any revisions or changes. You can talk with your designer throughout that seven-day period. It's such a casual, fun, approachable way to get expert design advice.

Our clients can also rate their designer experience. One star means I wasn't really happy, and I want to try someone different next time; three stars means I got some good ideas, but I still might like to be matched with somebody different the next round; and four to five stars obviously tell us that you had a great experience and want to continue working with that designer. As a client, you have flexibility: if you find a designer you really connect with, keep building that relationship online and working together. If, on the other hand, you feel that the relationship has run its course and you're craving some fresh perspective, matching with someone new is always an option.

Q. What are your favorite elements about what SwatchPop! offers?

A. J: I just love that we're fulfilling a need for people and making professional interior design accessible for everybody--not just those who have enough money to pay a designer \$150 an hour to come to their homes. Anybody, anywhere can utilize SwatchPop!.

K: SwatchPop! is all-encompassing. You're getting a designer to look at your space and make recommendations, but then also tell you exactly how high to hang those window treatments, what size of rug to use, how to lay out your pillows, and what list of products will help you achieve the look you want. You get the information quickly, and then, you can implement the steps quickly, too.

Q. SwatchPop!'s growth has been exponential thus far. What do you see happening in the next few years?

A. J: What's really encouraging is because of the way we built our blog alongside our website and Instagram stories, people have come to see SwatchPop! as their main home decorating resource. Even if they aren't submitting a project today, they're still getting great ideas and tips from us, discovering new retailers and trends, and picking up tangible changes they can make in their home.

We really want to become that household name--the place you go to for decorating advice.

K: (laughs) You took the words right out of my mouth.

About SwatchPop!

SwatchPop! is revolutionizing the way we decorate our homes. Co-founders Jessica McRae and Kristen Yonson launched SwatchPop! in 2014 with the everyday design lover in mind: people who scour Pinterest and Houzz searching for ideas and inspiration but are left feeling overwhelmed. Through SwatchPop!'s interactive, virtual process, women and men looking to breathe new life into their spaces are paired with professional designers whose expertise matches their needs and style. As the client, you set the project scope and budget. After you complete a fun, fast online profile that pinpoints your aesthetic, you'll tackle your project. Your redesign can cover anything from an entire home to the key corner of a room. Then, your personalized design is emailed to you within three to five business days. Implementing your designer's suggestions is easy: beautiful pictures, clearly written advice, and links to purchase elements are all included. Customized design has never been so easy--or affordable.

<https://www.swatchpop.com>