

Continuous Improvement

A story about my time at **DataSift** by **Daniel Rajendran**



DATA SIFT

The short version

After nearly five years as lead web designer for the marketing team at Huddle, I was ready for an interesting new challenge. In November of 2014 I received an email from a recruiter at DataSift, detailing a position for a front-end web developer, attached to the Marketing team. The company was looking to expand it's UK operations outside of their headquarters in Reading, starting by opening a small London office, and this role would be the first hire for this new office.

DataSift offered the opportunity to work with new and varied technologies and platforms in a completely different space, as well as the chance to be part of an exciting new product launch. Even though the location of this new London office had yet to be decided, I quickly accepted an offer, to start in January of 2015.

As the contract for the new office was still waiting to be signed, I spent my first two weeks with the engineering team in Reading, followed by two weeks with the marketing team in San Francisco. When February rolled around, we finally took ownership of our new office in Canary Wharf.

During my time at DataSift, my main responsibility was ownership of the customer facing websites, such as the marketing site, blog, learning site, and careers portal. I also assisted in various design activities, such as the creation of ebooks and white papers.

Early on I was instrumental in launching new content for the announcement of our PYLON platform and Facebook Topic Data. This included the creation and testing of large amounts of new web content, creation of sales collateral, and co-ordination with operations team to launch the new content at the same time as our news coverage went live.

Along with my usual responsibilities, I also assisted other marketing team members in the creation and improvement of our existing lead tracking and scoring system, using Salesforce and Marketo. This involved optimising our existing web-to-lead forms, as well as the design and creation of new email tracks.

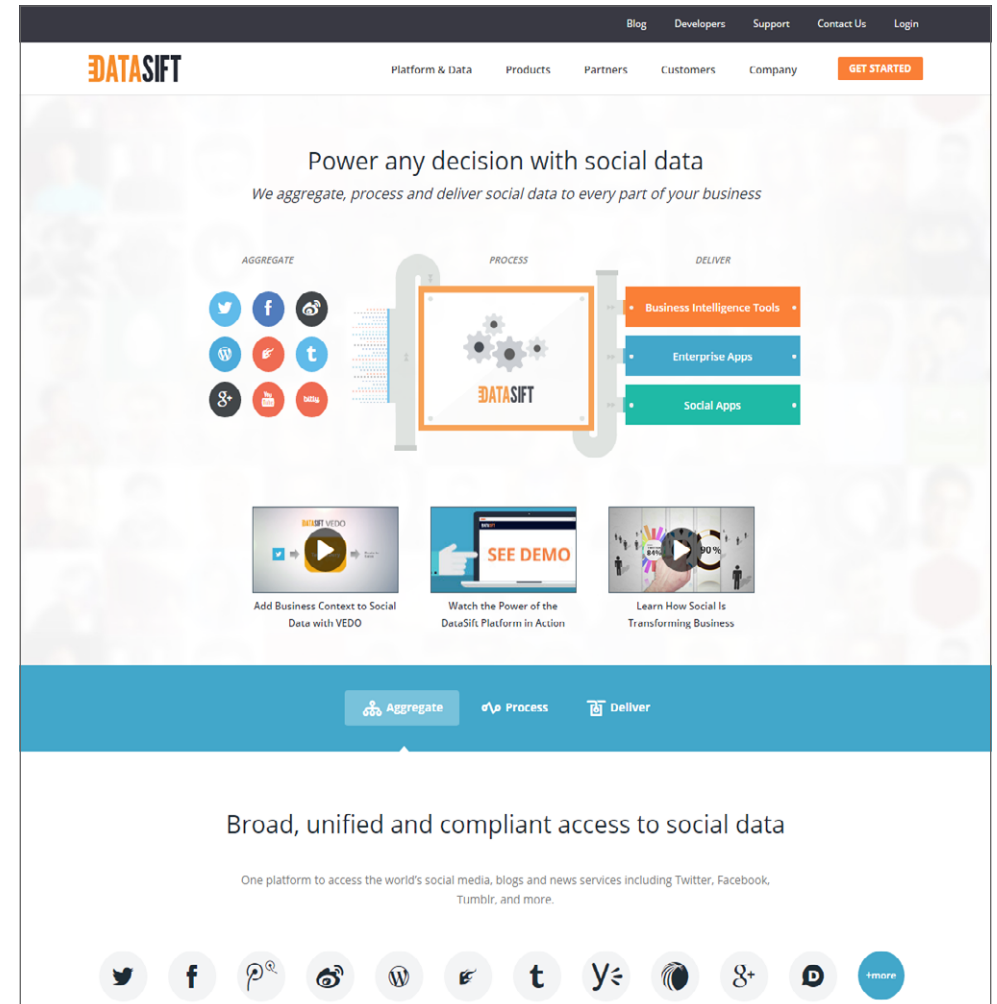
Towards the end of my time at DataSift I began assisting the product team with UX related activities for the development of a new product. This involved roughing out new designs in Sketch, discussing requirements with our agency team, iterating designs with the product team, and co-coordinating with our front-end team to create working prototypes. Unfortunately, work on this project was halted shortly before I left the company, towards the end of 2016.

The lay of the land

When I joined DataSift, the company was around 100 employees strong, most of whom were based out of the company's HQ in Reading, which served as the main hub for the engineering team. Two smaller offices in San Francisco and New York made up the bulk of the marketing and sales operations, supplemented by some remote employees in Canada. The contract for the London office was still being negotiated at this time, and wouldn't be ready to move into for another month.

Going in, I knew that the majority of the marketing team were based in San Francisco, though there were already plans for more UK-based team members. Additionally, most of the current team were quite new to the company, with only one of them having been with the company longer than a year. While this meant that a lot of process and knowledge had to be built from the ground up, it also meant there was little resistance to new ideas or new ways of getting things done.

The most recent iteration of the datasift.com marketing website had been designed and built by an external agency, and although the marketing team encompassed a wide variety of skills and talents, they had no dedicated resource for making changes to the marketing website or blog, until I joined.



The DataSift.com homepage before I joined the company, in October of 2014.

Ready to launch

My first major project came around about 3 months into my time at DataSift, with the launch of the PYLON platform, and Facebook Topic Data.

PYLON represented the first step on a road towards anonymised and aggregated social data, that would allow our customers to obtain more diverse and in-depth insights, without compromising the privacy of the end-users who used the social networks. On it's own, this was an important step for DataSift, but it was made even more ground-breaking as we would be using the PYLON platform to offer exclusive access to social data on the world's largest social network, Facebook.

We had to design and create numerous pieces of collateral that would support the sales team in their efforts post-launch. This included new data sheets, ebooks, white papers, and case studies. We also had to prepare a new set of emails that would advertise a new webinar series, to educate customers about the PYLON platform and Facebook Topic Data.

Updates to the website were on a slightly larger scale, and encompassed revisions and improvements to many existing pages, as well as the creation of several new pages, or entire new sections, such as the [resource library](#) and [partner portal](#).

The launch required co-ordination from numerous teams within the company, as we would need to synchronise updates to the website with press releases and news coverage going live at a specific time. This was particularly tricky to do, as there were several systems in place that cached various parts of the website, meaning these all had to be cleared to make sure that the new content could propagate to people visiting the website, at precisely the right time.

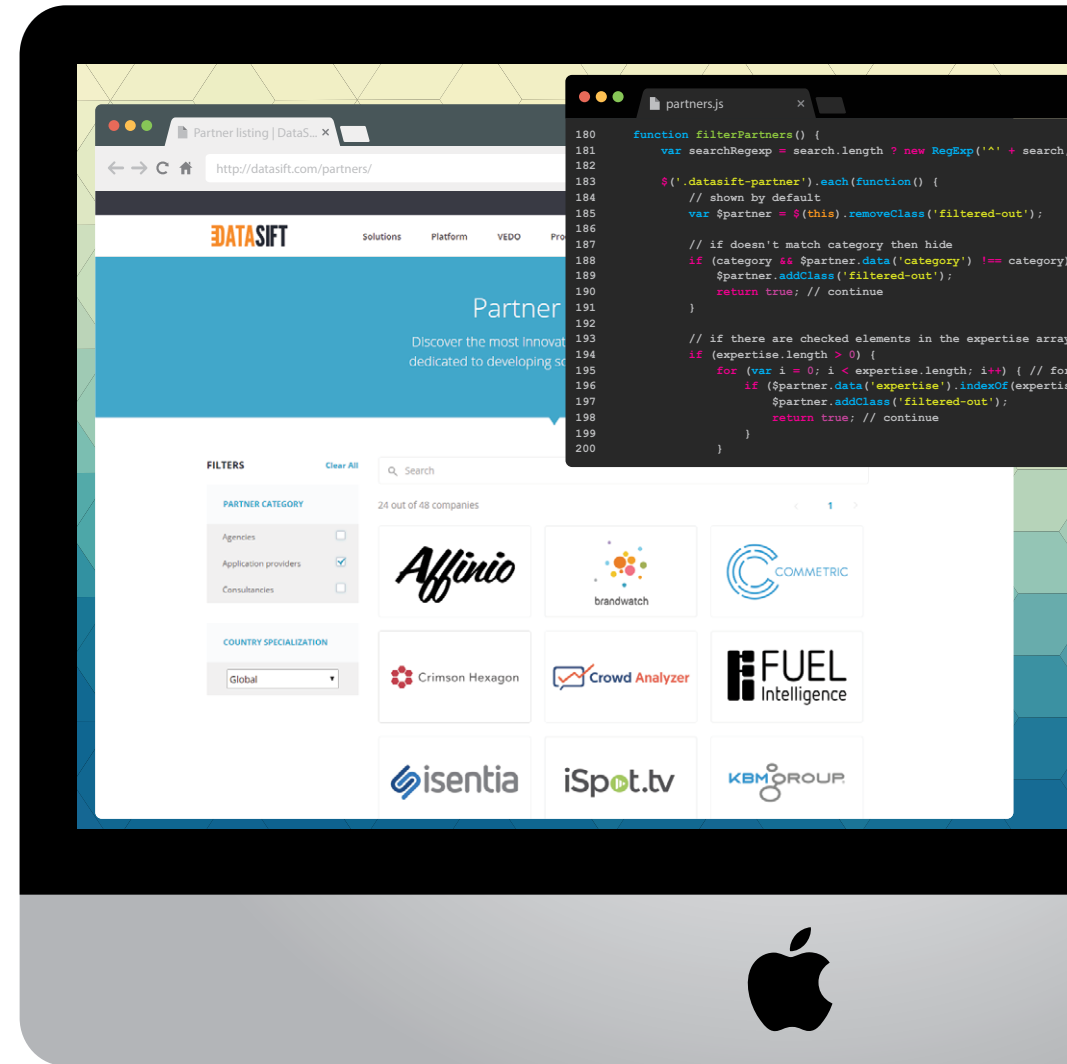


Thinking with portals

While the majority of the work required for the launch of PYLON was fairly routine, we also had to add two completely new sections, which would require some thinking. These were the [partner portal](#) and [resource library](#).

Work on the partner portal had already been started by an agency before I joined DataSift, but parts of the filtering system required finishing, and it was populated mostly by place-holder data. The filtering system itself was written in JavaScript and allowed users to filter out partners based on certain criteria, such as their category or country of specialisation. Partners could easily be added to the portal via a YAML data file, each entry of which included their name, description, logo, etc.

When it came to designing the resource library, it was quite tempting to re-purpose the existing code from the partner portal, but as the filtering and requirements were slightly different, I decided to start from scratch, using the [Isotope jQuery plugin](#). This plugin provided several existing methods for filtering, as well as various options for sorting data. It also included nice animated transitions when the data was sorted or filtered. Data was loaded into the library in a similar way to the partner portal, using a YAML data file.



Team effort

After successfully launching our PYLON platform and Facebook Topic Data, the marketing team got together for an off-site in San Francisco to plan for the rest of the year. We took this opportunity to also invite the designers from the engineering team, who look after the application's front-end and UI, so we could all sit down and decide on a new, unified design direction for the website and application.



Palette cleanser

One of the first things we tackled as a design team was cleaning up the colour palette we would use going forward. The existing palette, which we pulled from an early version of the company's style guide, was a confusion of numerous colours, many of which were no longer use in any current iteration of the website or app.

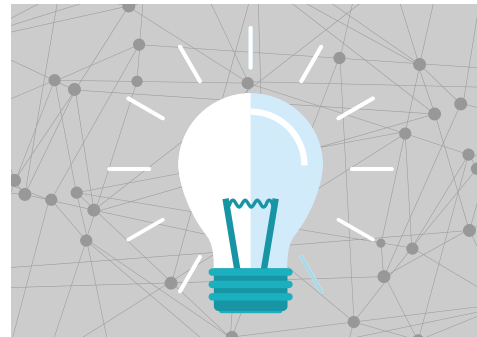
We trimmed about half of the colours from previous palette, keeping the remaining number as our core colours. These would be used as colours for the majority of website and app elements, such as backgrounds, buttons, and text. We utilised a much more relaxed palette for illustrations and diagrams, mostly for variety.



Picture perfect

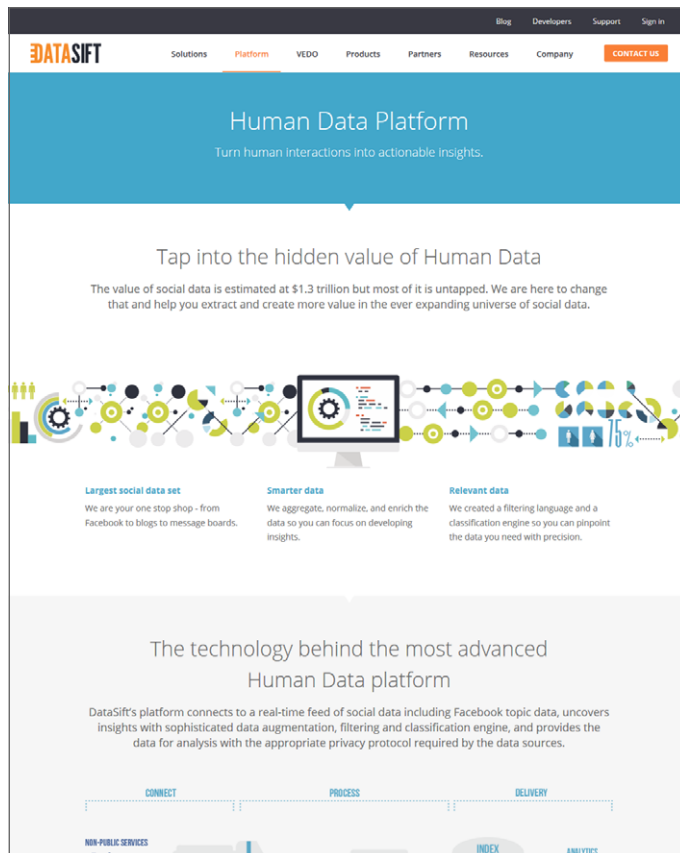
The original agency-created design for the DataSift website leaned quite heavily on using stock photography, which none of the current marketing team were really fond of. Therefore, it wasn't a difficult decision to transition to using illustrations instead of photos, which provided a much more flexible and colourful way of making website content more engaging.

The majority of the illustrations use one or two simple vector elements for the focus of the image, with one of the core brand colours used to unify the separate images. This style of illustration is present on nearly all the pages that were designed or redesigned during my time at the company.

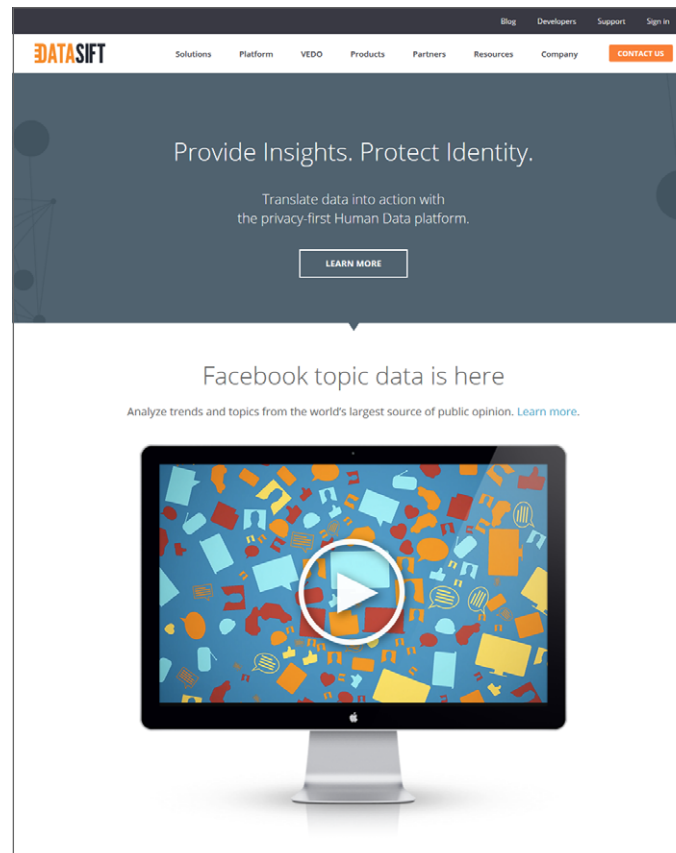


In with the new

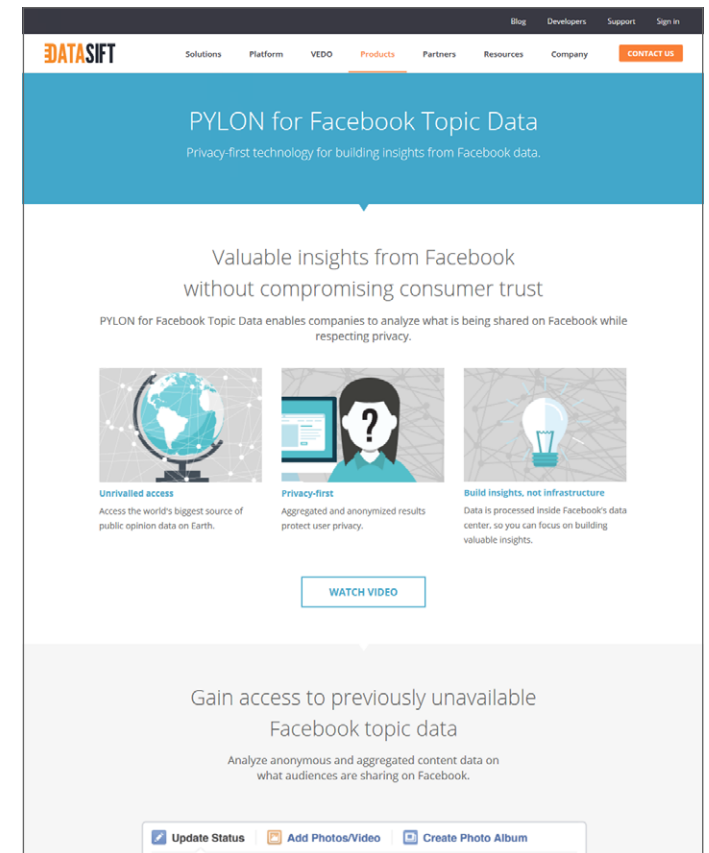
While we never had the time to invest in a complete, site-wide redesign, we were constantly re-visiting old pages to bring the content in line with the newer design style we had been using for new content. Some pages, like the home page, were simply given a facelift to bring it up to date, while others required a complete refresh, due to outdated content or templates.



Human Data Platform page



DataSift.com home page



PYLON for Facebook Topic Data page

Sketching it out

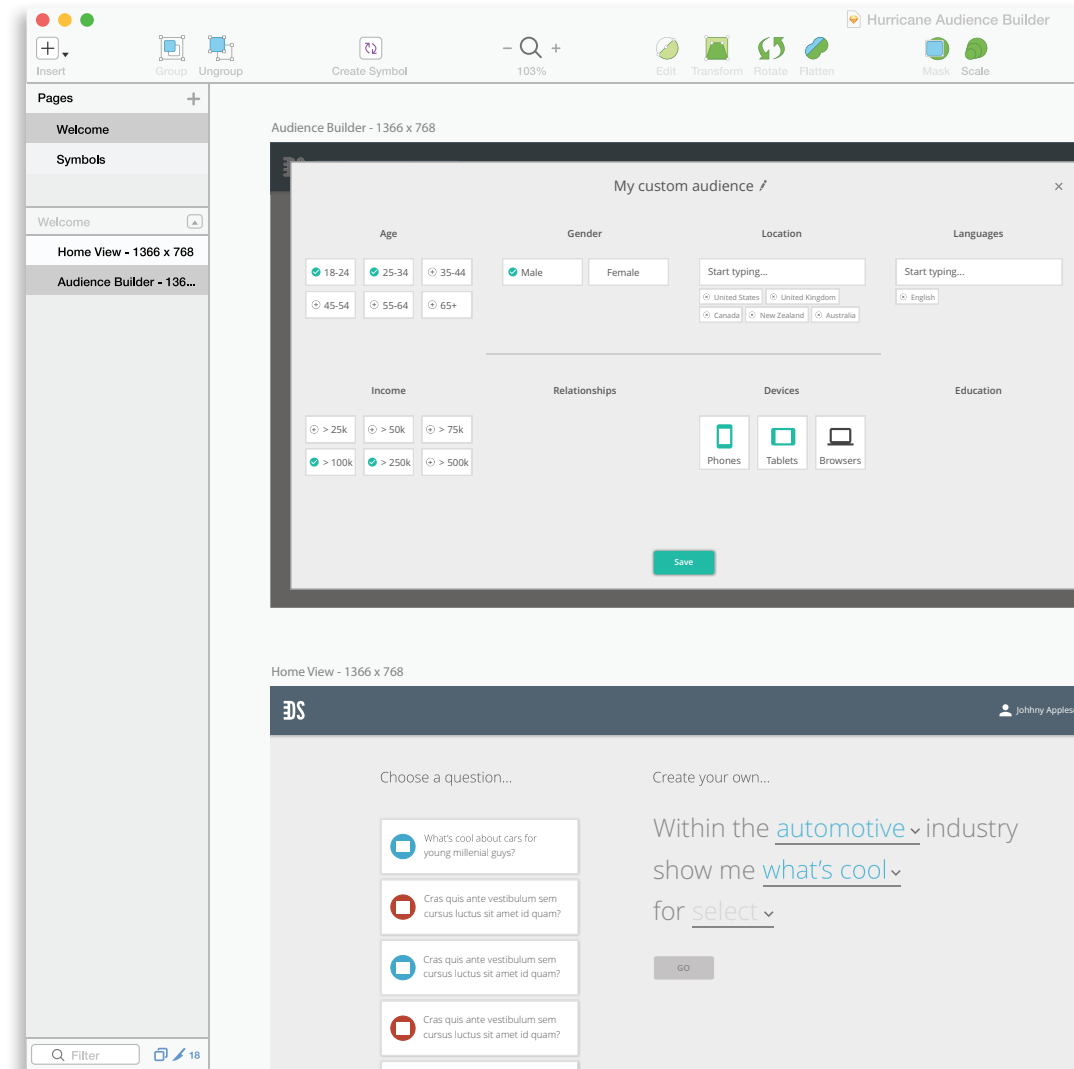
At the start of 2016, a few members of the product team began working on a new application prototype that would be based on a new data source from one of our existing data partners.

As I had expressed an interest in being more involved with the product development, I was invited to join the team, and began sitting in on their sessions to discuss the requirements and direction for the new project. After few meetings, we settled on an MVP that would be able to demonstrate the insight available from the new data source.

We quickly began working up designs in Sketch, sharing them with the team, then iterating on them, before passing them on to our front-end team to be made into working prototypes.

While none of this particularly new to me, it was nice to be involved in the processes that drove design, whether it involved talking to customers, researching other products, or simply discussing available options as a team. It was also useful to gain more experience with applications such as Sketch, as well as Adobe XD and Marvel.

Unfortunately, work on this product was put on hold, and didn't proceed further than the first few working prototypes.

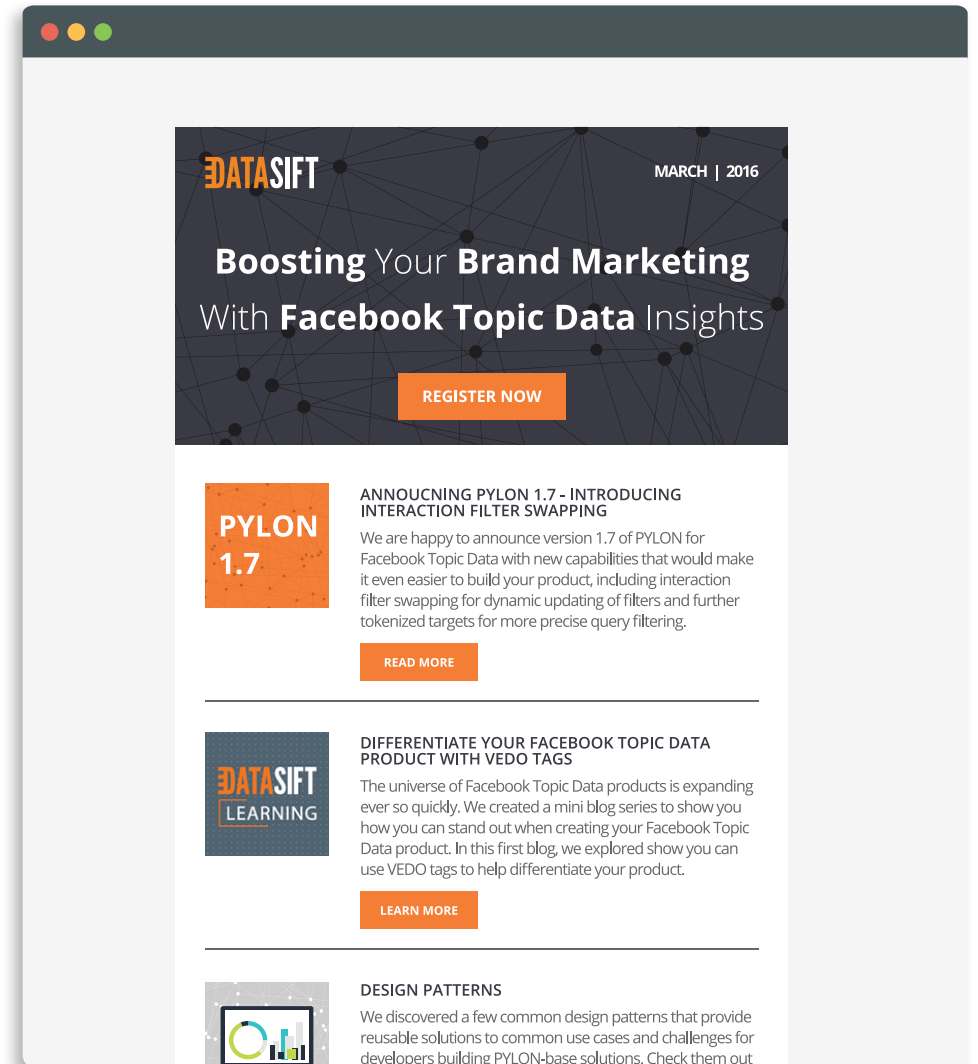


You've got mail

In the last few years I've gained a lot of experience designing emails using a variety of different email marketing systems, such as MailChimp, Aprimo, Marketo, and Eloqua. While they all have their pros and cons, it was nice to return to using Marketo, which offered a fairly robust templating and editing system, as well as an easy to use design studio so the rest of the team could easily populate emails with content.

As we were sending more and more emails it became important to optimise our emails for viewing on as many platforms as possible. This meant completely redesigning the templates, including making them responsive and optimising the file size, for viewing on mobile.

Our customer newsletter and announcement emails were rewritten from the ground up, while new templates were created for our partner newsletter, webinar announcements, and blog subscription, the latter of which required modification of our WordPress environment to support subscriptions via Marketo using one of our existing plugins.



Cover to cover

The new illustration style we had previously developed was soon adopted for the majority of our collateral, such as ebooks, white papers, and case studies. Though the general design concept was the same, we opted to be more flexible with our colour options, using several from outside of our core colour palette. This allowed us to make the designs more easily distinguishable from one another, without having to abandon certain design motifs that would otherwise become repetitive or overused. These particular ebook covers were initially designed in Illustrator, then moved into Photoshop to create the 3D and shadow effects that make it look like a real book.

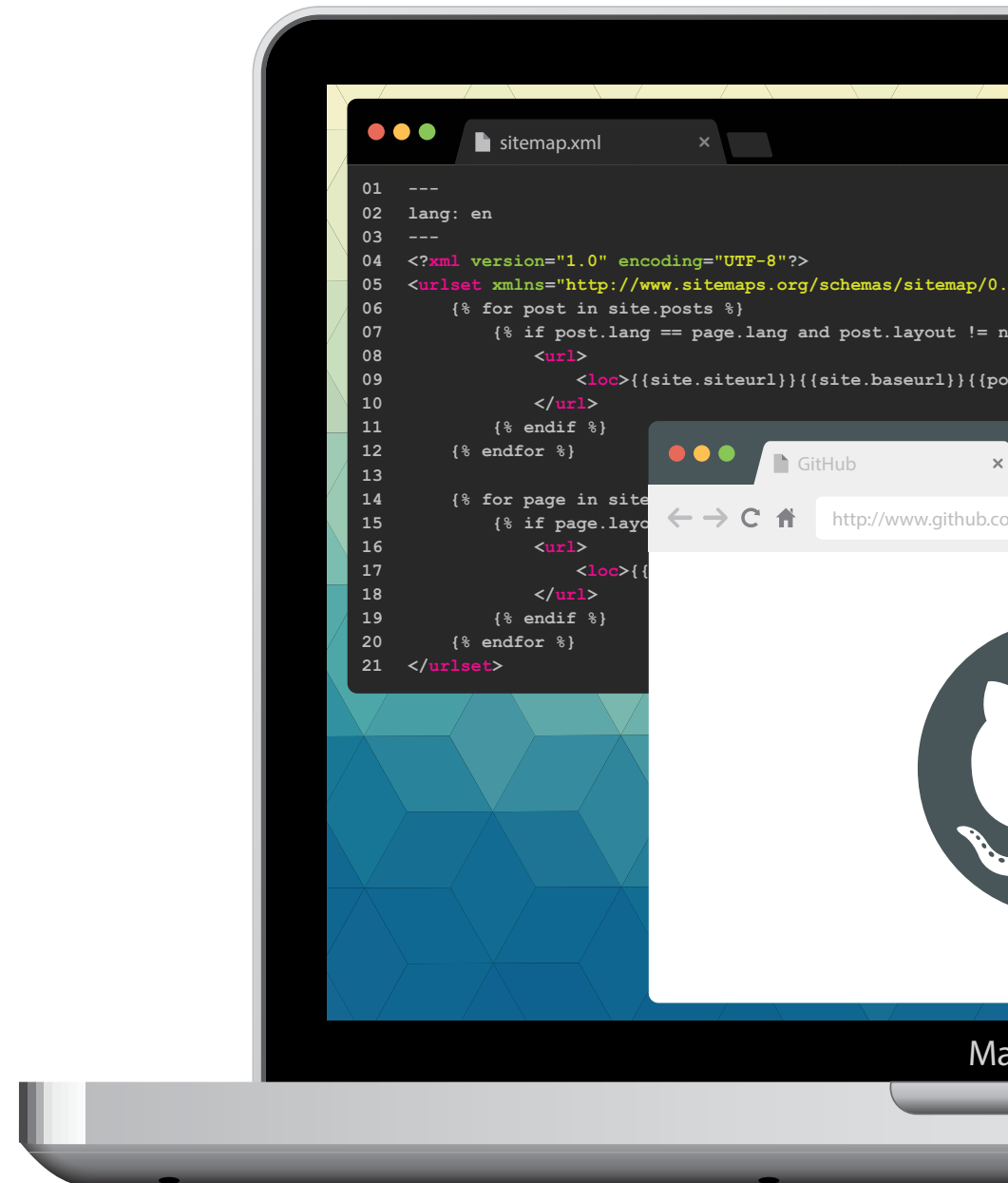


That's a wrap

In my nearly two years at DataSift, I had many opportunities to gain experience with new technologies, systems, and processes.

I set up a dev environment and began coding and designing on a Mac for the first time; I traded in WordPress for Jekyll and learned that you can solve most problems without the help of a plugin; I traded in bulky Adobe apps for new tools like Sketch and Marvel; and with the help of the rest of the design team, revisited the company branding and came up with a new visual direction for the marketing website and sales collateral.

Of all things, the most enjoyable part of my time was working with the product team on application development, and being involved in the discussions and decisions that drive good design. Up to that point I had been mostly building content from other peoples designs, so it was a welcome change to be on the other side, creating mockups and prototypes.



This has been a story by **Daniel Rajendran**



Want to get in touch? You can email me at
daniel.rajendran@gmail.com or visit **<http://www.danonthe.net>**