

Case Study: A deep dive into the thread experience

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Project overview:

This study was part of a larger effort to unify two Q&A platforms into one support experience. In a previous phase, users briefly flagged issues with the thread layout, but limited time and a broad research scope meant the topic wasn't explored in depth. With only surface-level insights available, a focused deep dive was needed to better understand how users engage with threads. This study evaluated the current thread experience and included comparisons with Reddit, Stack Overflow, and Apple. Findings helped inform design recommendations for a more intuitive thread layout.

In a nutshell:

The initial unified support research was well received by leadership and stakeholders. Based on those findings, the team chose to move forward with the Q&A platform as the foundational design and experience, while incorporating select elements from the Answers platform that were recommended for retention.

While stakeholders were pleased with the initial results, there was some hesitation about investing further in thread-specific research. At the time, the thread experience wasn't seen as a priority worth allocating additional design, research, or engineering resources.

Challenges:

If it ain't broken

- Some stakeholders questioned the need for further research and design changes, noting the current thread experience supported millions of users and appeared to work “well enough”
- Building support as the new senior UX researcher on the team to convince stakeholders why a deeper dive into the thread experience was necessary

Ambiguous stakeholder needs

- There was no consensus on what should change, and decisions risked being based on moderator complaints or assumptions
- Designers were tasked with redesigning the thread experience, but were told not to make significant changes due to limited engineering resources

Recruitment

- It wasn't immediately clear who to work with to get budget approval, even though we already had access to a recruitment panel of Answers and Q&A users

Methodology:

Be obsessed

Before starting the study, I reached out to a couple of moderators to ask whether they were frequently reclassifying comments as answers and vice versa. Their feedback helped confirm this was a recurring issue and signaled a deeper design problem worth exploring with users

Product walkthrough interviews + Competitive comparison

To navigate these challenges, I scoped the study as a product walkthrough with lightweight tasks, along with a brief comparative exercise:

- The product walk-through allowed users to engage with the current experience in a realistic way and revealed how users interpreted and interacted with the thread, uncovering pain points and usability issues
- The brief comparative exercise (Reddit, Stack Overflow, Apple) helped contextualize Q&A's strengths, gaps, and common design patterns and elements

Research questions

- Do users experience confusion when trying to interpret or contribute to a thread, particularly around the placement and distinction between comments and answers?
- Where do users go or what do they do when a thread fails them?
- How do users perceive Q&A compared to Reddit, Apple, and Stack Overflow?
- What mental models and interaction patterns shape thread usability?

Methodology (cont.):

Participants (N = 10)

Two user groups (5 per group) selected from internal panel through a screener

- Group 1: Answers forum
- Group 2: Q&A forum

All user must have engaged with the platform in some fashion

- Searched for answer/solution
- Posted questions
- Responded to threads
- Used thumbs up/down

Global mix across industries to ensure balance and minimized bias

Join forces

- Partnered with another Senior UX Researcher to review findings and strengthen the overall clarity and presentation of the final deliverable
- Also met with a smaller group of PMs to address any outstanding questions and ensure the report adequately covered areas they felt leadership might focus on or challenge during the final readout

Key findings:

The lack of visual hierarchy and structural separation made it hard to distinguish between comments and answers, especially in content heavy threads

Without clear cues like labels, grouping, or indentation, users often misinterpreted the purpose of each section, which added cognitive effort and made it more difficult to find relevant information quickly

Dense threads with minimal visual hierarchy made it difficult for users to scan and prioritize content

Helpful responses were buried under irrelevant or repetitive comments, and the lack of sorting options added to the effort required to find solutions

The absence of key features added friction and made it harder for users to find solutions

Missing functionality such as replying directly to comments, tagging other users, and sorting by helpfulness made it difficult for users to follow conversations and quickly surface relevant content. This was especially problematic in dense threads, where the lack of these features increased cognitive load and slowed down users' ability to resolve their questions

When the thread failed to deliver, users quickly left the platform

If a solution wasn't found quickly, users abandoned the thread and turned to Google, Reddit, or Stack Overflow. Some mentioned they would have asked a new question on Q&A, but the "Ask" option wasn't easy to find mid-thread

Report examples:

FINDING #06

Although comments are visually appealing, users expressed they are not presented in a way that is relevant or easily digestible resulting in increased cognitive load and time on the thread

- Although users noted comments can be valuable, many times they feel comments are irrelevant, take up too much space, are not easy to scan.
- Several users reported having to scan irrelevant content such as comments that say "Thanks" or "This worked!"
- When reviewing thread content on other platforms it was noted comments were either condensed or nested which made it easier to skim through.

Recommendations

- Explore engineering and design solutions that structures the comments in a more condensed and easier to scan format.

"You know spam can happen. So yeah, so I'm worried about. Like if there's too much irrelevant or unhelpful answers, how can I find the helpful answer in in in them?" -P1



"See, when the comment is useful, we can keep the comment, otherwise it should be deleted because it's not correlated to the question." - P9



"It's just that if the comments like pile up, like if there's a lot of comments, I will be unable to find what I'm looking for." - P6



"Something like stack overflows, condensed comments, or when I use Reddit or discord for example, I'll often set it to be condensed, so you can skim over it quicker to look for keywords, or information you're looking for." - P4



FINDING #09

The ability to upvote a comment is prompting users to seek sorting options to better organize and structure the page

- Users expect the thread to surface or prioritize comments that have received significant attention (e.g., thumbs up) from the community to guide them towards the most valuable content.
- Many users tried to find a way to sort the comments on the thread, assuming that if they could upvote them, sorting would be possible.

"It's a bit of a mystery how they're [comments] organized like that section right under the question I see that the first two comments they each have one vote and then it's followed by a few that have zero votes. They're also not an option to like, sort them by or filter by and so it just shows a lot of info and then we only see the accepted answer and then we see more answers that are not considered accepted answers, but rather additional answers. It's just a lot on the same page and a lot of scrolling, so I personally do a lot of control F and search." - P12



"And I would expect to see a pinned comment of some kind or most upvoted comment, but I don't see one there [under original post]." -P4



"I think when someone comments like on an issue that they're having and multiple people upvoted, this ups the relevancy of the comments so if someone from the product or engineering team sees this issue, they're like OK, this is a very important issue and we need to go solve this." -P2



"Let me ask, when you have the filter here, will it be filtering all the comments or is it just for the additional answer?" - P3



Recommendations

- Explore design and engineering solutions that enable users to organize and structure the thread content.

Wrap up:

Outcomes and reflections

- Surfaced critical usability issues in the Q&A thread experience that hadn't been previously explored
- Helped confirm and clarify internal hypotheses (e.g., reclassification of comments and answers) with direct user evidence
- Provided actionable design input on features like accepted answer visibility, sorting behavior, and thread structure
- Enabled PMs and designers to move forward with more confidence and alignment
- Demonstrated my ability to lead through ambiguity by scoping research that was lightweight, flexible, and high-impact

Own it

- I took initiative to follow up on a potential issue users had hinted at in a previous study. Even though the thread experience wasn't seen as a high priority by some stakeholders, I was proactive and determined to explore it further because I put users first
- I led this study from scoping through final readout, working cross-functionally with design, PM, and a second researcher to ensure the work was actionable

Measuring success

- Success was measured in how quickly the findings influenced early design direction and shifted internal conversation from uncertainty to action
- Several key recommendations, including accepted answer placement and sorting visibility, were prioritized in early design iterations

Expect Candor

- Despite clear user feedback highlighting thread density as a pain point, the issue was acknowledged but not prioritized for change due to the level of engineering effort required