

## USPTO Opens the Door Wider for Protecting SaaS User Interfaces

April 8, 2026

On March 13, 2026, the USPTO issued new examination guidance that significantly eases design patent protection for computer-generated interfaces and icons. The update relaxes how applicants must identify an “article of manufacture” under 35 U.S.C. § 171, giving software companies greater flexibility in claiming digital designs such as graphical user interfaces (GUIs), icons, and even projected or immersive displays. For SaaS companies whose competitive edge is often driven by clean, intuitive UI/UX, this change materially lowers the friction of obtaining meaningful design patent coverage.

Most notably, the USPTO now accepts design claims that place the interface itself front and center—such as “a graphical user interface for a computer”—without requiring drawings that show a specific display panel or device outline. The Office has also confirmed that claim language using “for” (rather than “on” or “with”) is sufficient to tie the design to an article of manufacture. This shift reflects a more modern view of how users actually experience software, where the visual design may be deployed across multiple devices, form factors, or environments without being limited to a single piece of hardware.

For SaaS startups, this guidance creates an opportunity to treat design patents as a first-class complement to utility patents. Utility patents can protect what the software does, while design patents can now more cleanly protect how it looks—often the aspect most visible to customers and competitors. In practice, companies should consider filing design applications that focus on distinctive screen layouts, iconography, onboarding flows, or other ornamental elements that reinforce brand identity and user adoption, especially where those visuals are difficult to capture through functional claim language alone.

From a drafting perspective, the takeaway is practical: keep titles and claims broad enough to cover deployment across computing platforms, avoid unnecessary hardware limitations in the drawings, and coordinate design filings with ongoing utility applications. With examination standards now better aligned to modern software delivery models, SaaS companies—particularly in UI-driven markets—have a clearer path to building layered IP protection around their most visible innovations.

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