



UXPin

Flat Design Trends 2016

A Practical Visual Guide



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Authors



Carrie Cousins has more than 10 years experience in the media industry, including design, editing, and writing for print and online publications. Carrie is also a sports fanatic and spends way too much time planning football and basketball trips and obsessing over stats.

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Ryan Thomas Riddle is a UX Content Strategist at UXPin. He is an award-winning writer for his work as a mild-mannered reporter for the Bay Area newspaper, The Daily Post. His previous work has appeared in the San Francisco Bay Guardian. Formerly, he worked for ZURB, a digital product design company, as their Lead Editor. You can read all about his adventures through time and space on Twitter, @ryantriddle. You can find more of his writing on his [personal website](#).

Introduction

Flat design is more than a passing trend. The aesthetic will continue to evolve and is sticking around thanks to its roots in design theory (minimalism, Swiss, clean typography, etc.).

But what constitutes flat design? This trend can be characterized by five elements:

1. No added effects such as drop shadows, embossing or gradients.
2. Focus on great, and simple typography (particularly sans serifs).
3. Use of simple elements and iconography.
4. Bold color palettes with more and brighter hues than we were used to.
5. Design with an overall minimalist approach with as few elements as possible.

While flat design is still tied to these concepts, the “rules” are a lot looser today. And the trend is evolving. As we dive headlong into 2016, here is how you can keep up with the ever-changing trend as flat design continues to morph into something new.

For the love of web design,
Carrie Cousins

Increasing Use of Effects With Flat

Once shunned by flat design purists, the use of subtle effects is becoming synonymous with flat design.

Simple effects fix the biggest problem associated with the design style – that user interface elements and calls to action were often hidden, “lost” or difficult to find. The addition of small effects have gone a long way to resolve this issue and are just as much part of the flat aesthetic as any of the five original characteristics. The most common usage of subtle effects include:

Tiny shadows

Subtle drop shadows that most users won’t even see are used to provide an element of depth. The shadow should provide a bit of depth that helps “lift” the element off the background, but is not harsh and should not really stand out visually.

Ghost buttons

These aren’t buttons that are ghastly. Quite the opposite, they’re box outlines with instructions inside. This design element has grown in

popularity on sites that use hero images, illustration or video. These buttons are aptly named because the main part of the element is see through and allows the background image or color to come through. Ghost buttons provide a great element for a call to action without taking away from the main image on the screen.

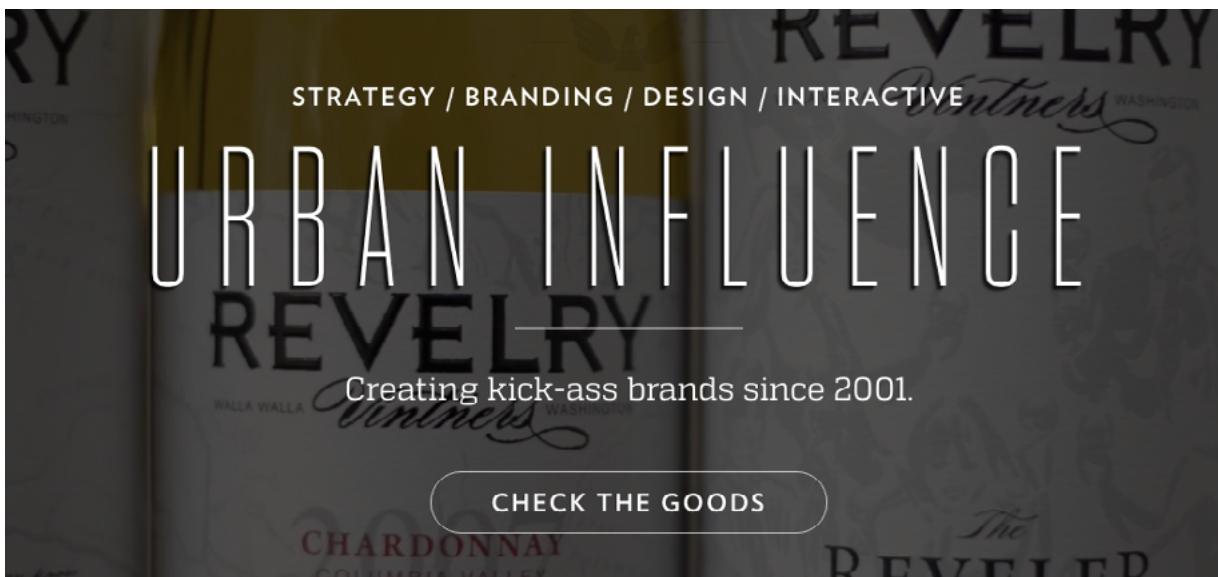


Photo credit: Urban Influence

Long shadows

These are exaggerated shadows that are commonly used in bright color schemes and don't include a lot of other visual elements. This technique is most evident with use of oversized icons. It's also a technique that is often debated. Designers tend to love it or completely hate it. Why? Because the exaggerated style has an almost cartoon-like element to it, like the [Superman logo](#).

Hover animations

Small movements that clue users into what actions to take as they move across the screen are a great navigational tool. Animation is

often connected to buttons but can stand alone as well. Hover animations such as a bump, spin, color change or swirl help users focus on where an action should take place. For sites with more complicated visuals, designers are extending this animation so that it is continuous and does not just happen with the hover of a mouse to better connect with and direct users as to what actions they should perform.

Color gradients

Once taboo in terms of flat, color graduation is making a comeback. The big change this time around is that it is a lot *less* subtle, changing between two bright colors. This duotone effect, as made popular by Spotify (below) emphasizes a gradient as a primary design element. This is in contrast to previous iterations of gradient trends where gradients were most commonly used as part of a background effect.



Photo credit: Spotify

[Spotify](#) embraces design trends – and leads the way – almost like no other brand. The image is constantly evolving and the Year in Review

page exemplifies this. The design screams flat with a large, bright image, but look closer and there are small effects scattered throughout the design from a neon shadow on the image subject to a ghost button to sliding images with long shadows between movements.

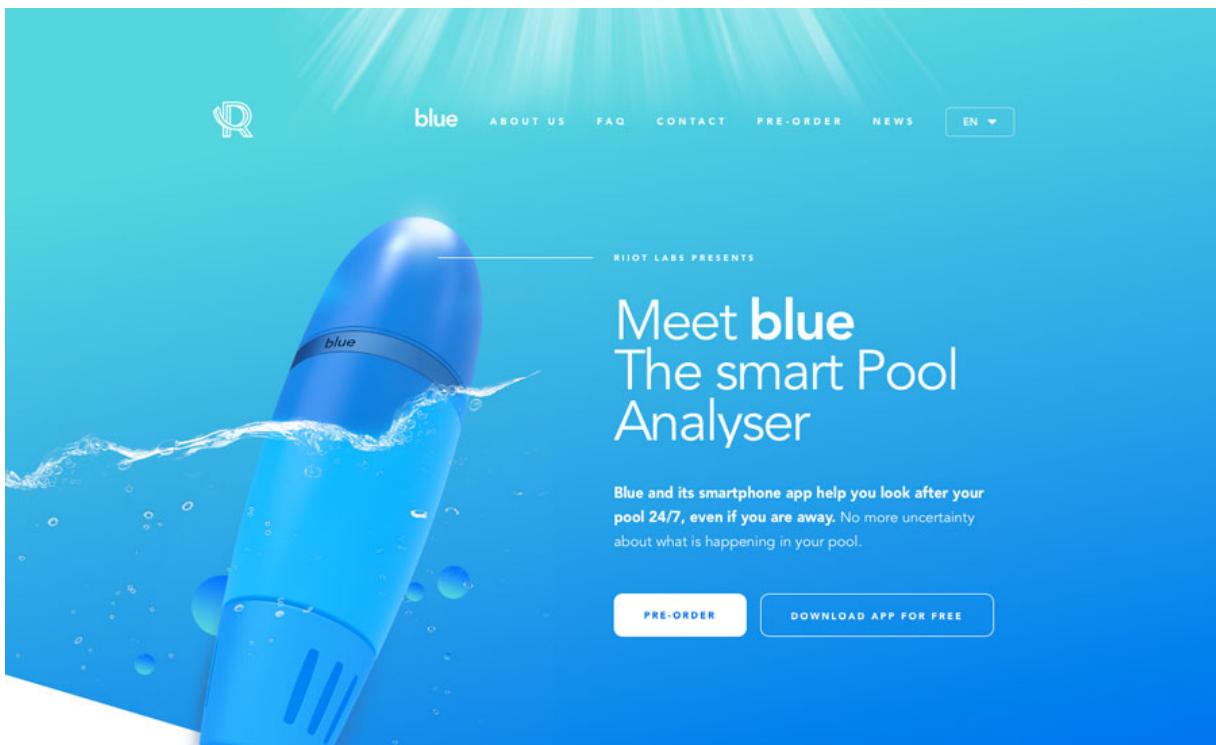


Photo credit: Riiot Labs

Riiot Labs is just as striking with the page for a smart pool tool. From simple sans serif typography to a minimal outline using bold color, the site is distinctly flat. But the design also features a background with a color gradient, animations to draw the eye and a ghost button-filled button pair to encourage click actions.

Think About Typography Pairs

When it comes to planning for a flat design, typography tops the list of designer concerns.. Remember when Apple took iOS flat, the chatter over their new uber-thin typeface? Everyone focused on the typography because flat aesthetics seem to use only a single typeface.

No more.

Think about type in pairs. You'll want to use simple typography paired with a novelty option. That means you can stick with your favorite sans serif, such as Helvetica or Roboto or Open Sans, but you can also add an element of surprise with a fun script, trendy novelty option or something completely custom. (If you want to be super trendy, consider a novelty option that has a retro or vintage feel, watercolor effects or an all-caps slab serif.)



Photo credit: Social Bakers

Social Bakers tugs on the heartstrings of Star Wars fans with a typeface that's an ode to the film series in Social Wars. The typography is the main draw in this design and is paired beautifully with a simple, but condensed sans serif. The pair is highly readable and attention-nabbing.

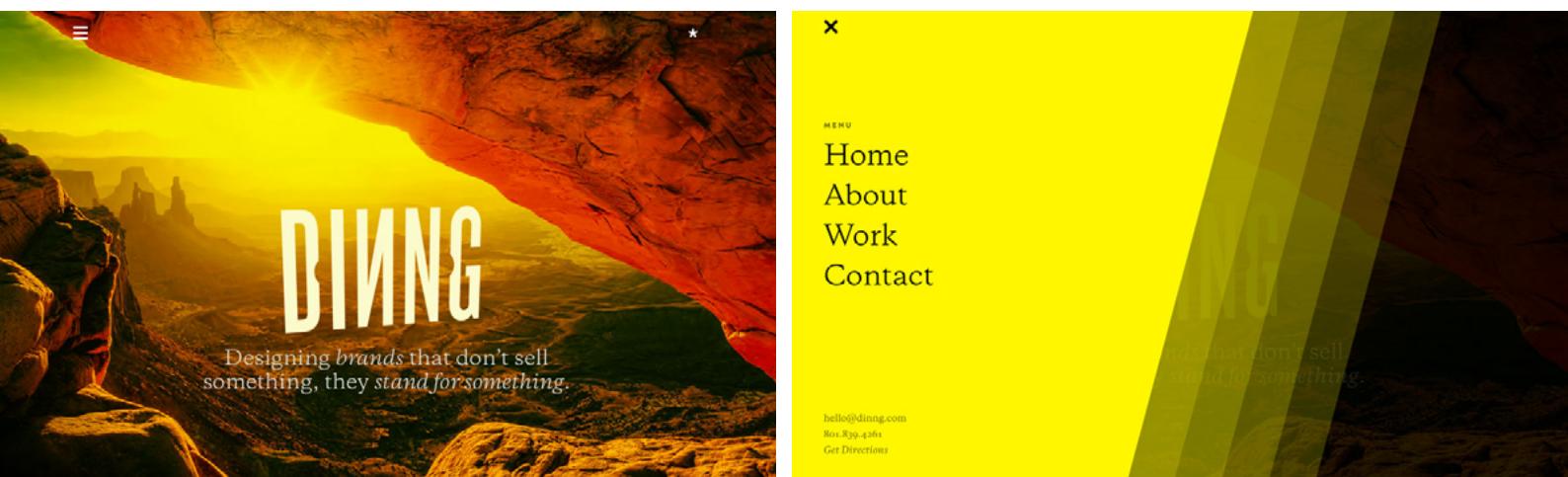


Photo credit: Dining

Dinng takes a quite different approach with the same concept. The site features a full screen image with a custom-looking typeface for

the company name. While the cool image grabs the user first, the interesting typeface piques interest. It's paired with a simple sans serif on the homepage and the novelty option is not used elsewhere in the design. Throughout the rest of the site, a serif is used for display, such as in the pop-out navigation (a popular element for flat websites).

You no longer have to be a mono-typographer on your flat designs. You can now mix and match to create a style that sets your site apart.

Going ‘Round and ‘Round

No doubt flat design was the precursor to Google’s Material Design. While flat’s influence can be felt in Material Design, the later is certainly having an effect on its predecessor.

The most evident influence – circles.

More circles and rounded shapes are everywhere in flat. The softer shapes are somewhat friendlier and a circle has a distinct mobile advantage. A circle on the screen looks like a place to touch, almost mirroring the outline of a fingerprint. (It’s also the shape of the thumbprint scanner on iPhones that unlocks the device or app use.)

Because of this, circular shapes are popping up everywhere. Circles are the de facto shape to contain play buttons for video. They are used to navigate through content and link to new elements. Circles, with a touch of material flair, are layered with other elements for a more three-dimensional effect that provides even more emphasis.

[Oyya](#) uses rounded shapes in a card-style pattern on its homepage. Cards are also an homage to material design. Circular buttons accent

the aesthetic. The design is focused and easy to navigate but it has a soft feel, which is quite perfect for the website for a bakery.



Photo credit: Oyya

Circular buttons and oversized icons are also popular. In the early days of flat design, icons were left to stand along, possibly in a square box but often not. Circular icons, such as those used by LMS, work well both on mobile and desktop. The shape almost implies that the website is responsive and that elements are made to work across devices. This simple visual cue is comforting for users even if they don't consciously think about it.

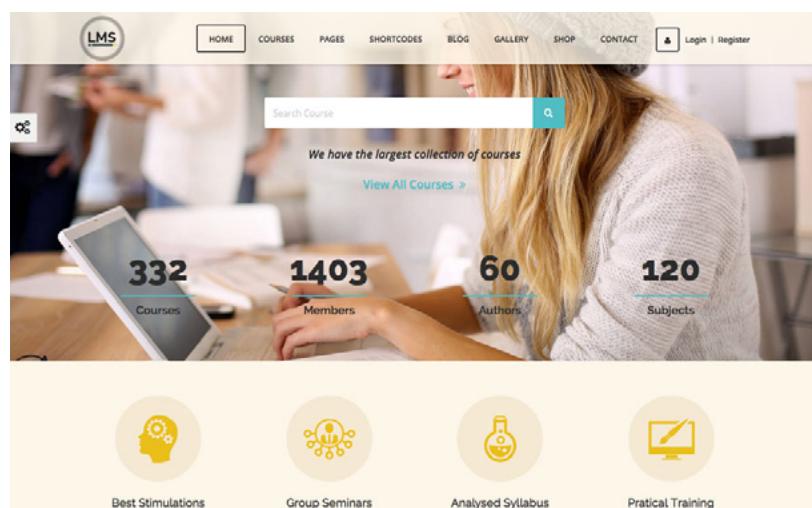


Photo credit: LMS

Mainstream Adopters as Influencers

Google, Starbucks, Microsoft. Big brands are all going flat. Their sites, not their sales.

The influence of big brands making a change like this is enough to push the trend further forward. Adoption from more and bigger brands will only push usage. Mid-size and smaller brands will definitely follow. (Which is a little ironic since “smaller” brands and designers were the first to champion flat design.)

However, what’s equally important to study is how these influencers use flat design. There are a few commonalities:

- Flat logos
- Dominant use of one brand color
- Plenty of simple shapes, particularly squares or circles
- Flat user elements paired with big images or video
- Simple, bold typography

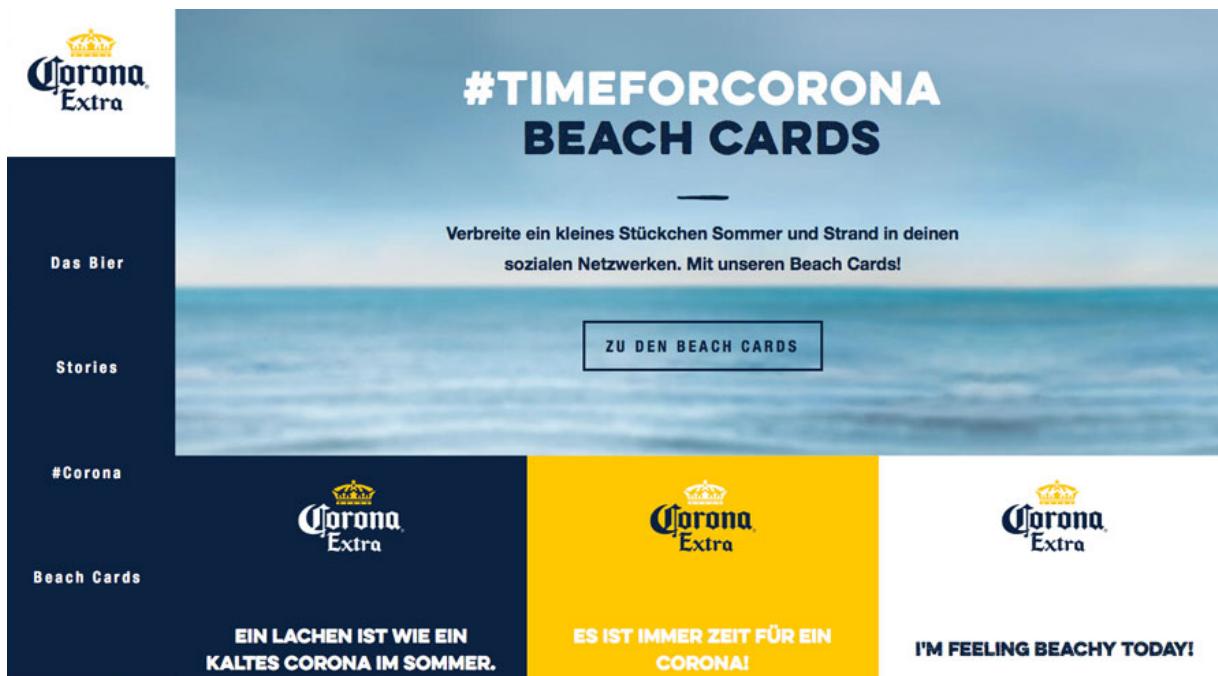


Photo credit: Corona

Corona uses a very flat aesthetic for its international presence. (The United States site is still a little less flat.) The design features a large iconic beach image – as the brand is known for – with color-blocked cards for more clickable content. Each page of the scroll and navigation use this flat concept with plenty of trendy touches, including social media integration, ghost buttons and oversized navigation elements.

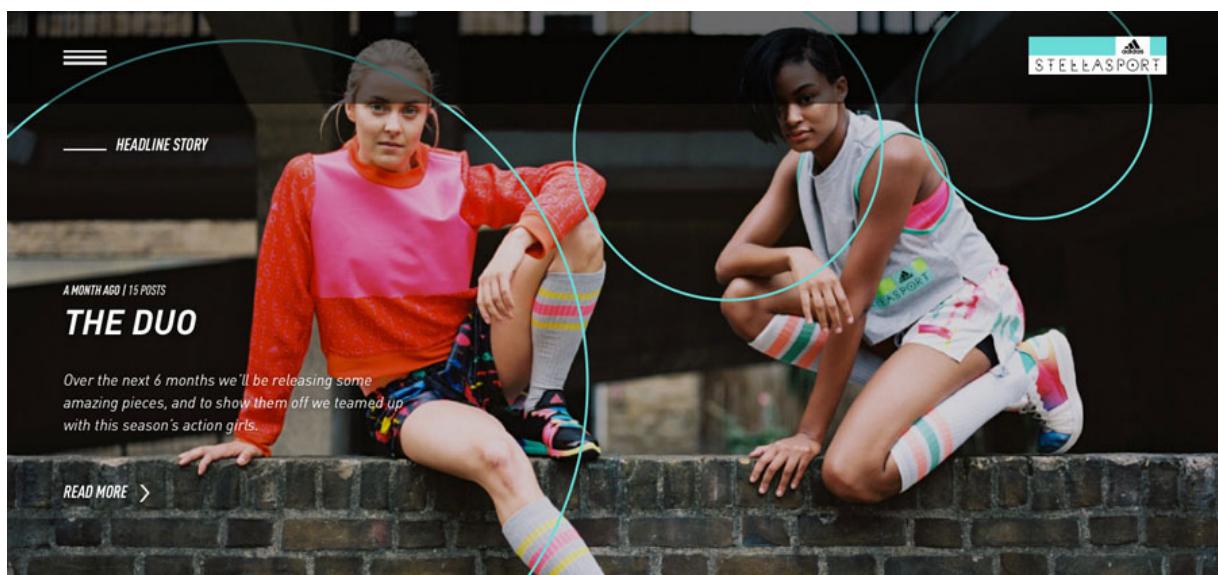


Photo credit: Adidas Stella Sport

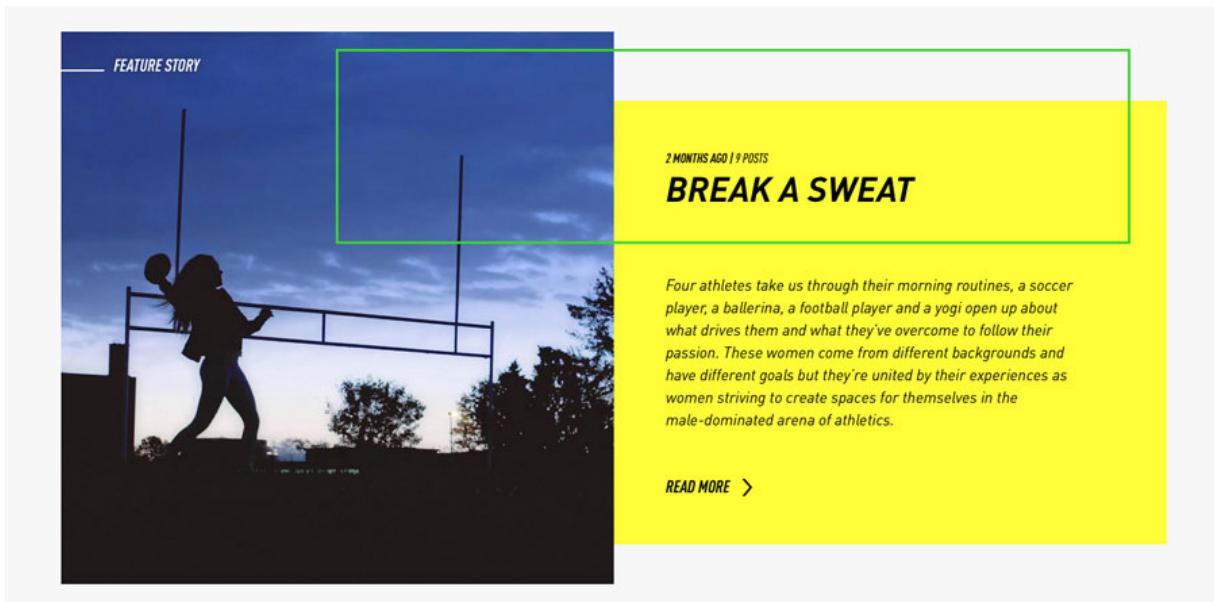


Photo credit: Adidas Stella Sport

Adidas Stella Sport features a flat layered design that has touches of material design, flat design and an almost 80s vibe. The aesthetic uses plenty of bright colors with geometric shapes and simple sans serif typography. While there is a lot going on from screen to screen, the design still maintains a bit of a minimalist outline with plenty of space and clean lines.

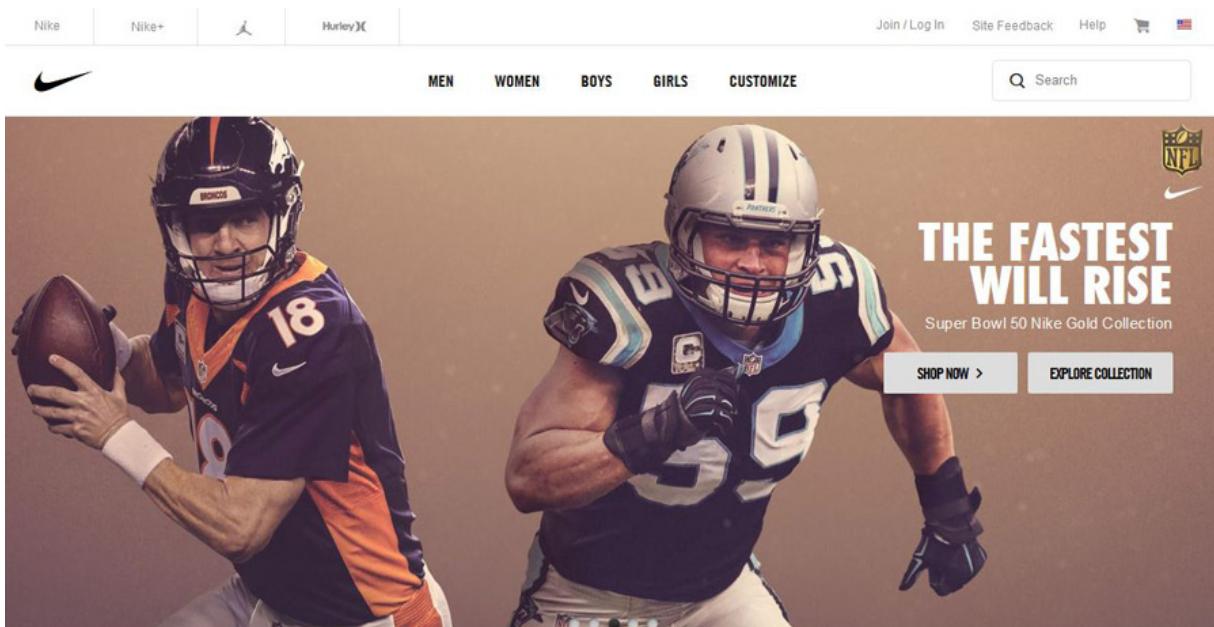


Photo credit: Nike

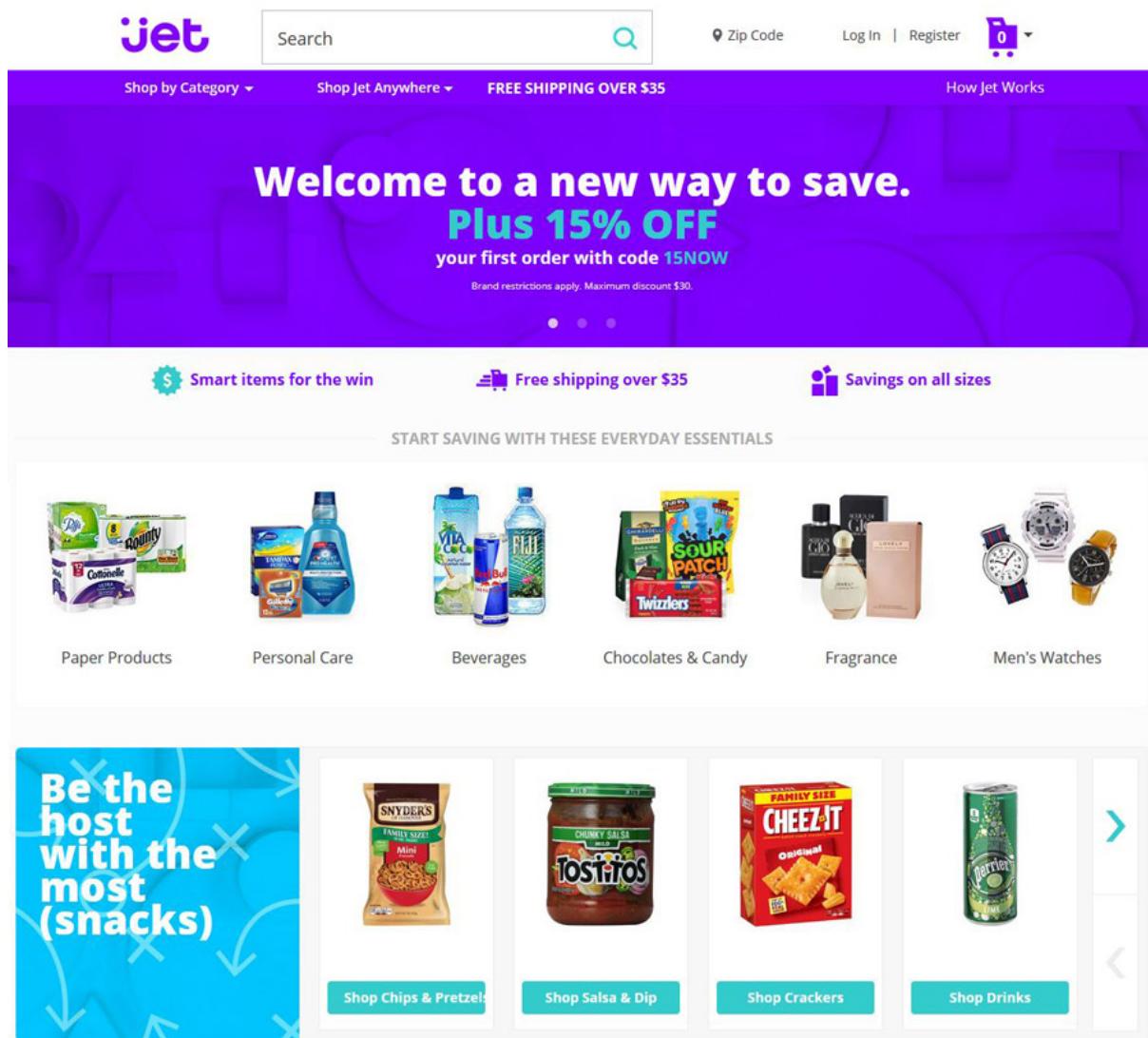


Photo credit: Jet

In addition to aesthetics, flat design comes with other benefits as well. When done well, a flat framework can help increase website conversions. [Giles Thomas](#) looked at flat button styles, among other things, and found a 35 percent increase in clicks when a flat design style was used. This factor alone might be why so many big brands are using flat and almost-flat design for their retail websites.

Color, Color and More Color

Vibrant is in, from backgrounds to text to duotone images. But the shift is in the number of colors used and the amount of saturation displayed.

Highly-saturated color choices and palettes that might contain five, six or seven colors of equal use marked the early days of flat. Today's flat color choices are a little more muted, but still bright, and are often more limited in the number of primary colors used. Duotone coloring is particularly popular because of this.

Color is also emphasized through image choices. Flat design initially came with very limited use of photos or illustrations as dominant art. Most of today's flat projects include large imagery. Because of that change, many of the color choices and palette decisions are based on bright or vibrant colors.

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Photo credit: [Well Made Studio](#)



Photo credit: Culture Experience Days

The website for [Culture Experience Days](#) might be one of the best examples of using color trends in this showcase. The site design screams cool and fun. It uses plenty of effects and somehow manages to still look flat. The pair of duotone images help bring attention back to the novelty typography in the center of the screen (if the animation did not get you there first). The rest of the design is super simple. There's plenty of space, type that's easy to read and plenty of places to click and engage.

Flat and Video

Visit any three websites in a row, and it'll be hard to jump from site to site without finding video on at least one of these pages. And you'll find more and more that those videos are on pages with flat design. Designers are finding new ways to work the aesthetic in with video.

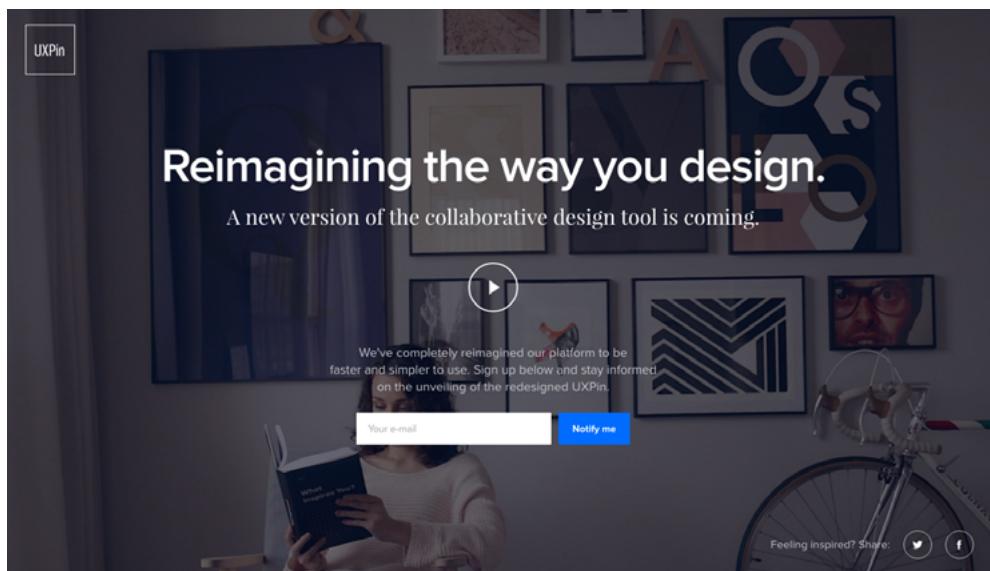


Photo credit: UXPin Redesigned

This concept has been in use for a little while now as combined with full-screen images, such as the example above. But video can present a whole new set of challenges, particularly because the main visual element might not stay in the same position on the screen or include

sharp color variations. This can make it harder to set placements for other elements or determine color for text or buttons that overlay video.

The most common solutions are layering elements or stacking user interface items around video. Layering elements can have an almost Material Design feel with buttons and tools place around the periphery or in the center of video, while also falling a bit outside the edge of the movable portion of the screen. This layering effect creates a “container” for the video against a bit of a background (even if it is white) and 3D elements that beg to be clicked or tapped.

With stacking, flat elements create a border around a video player container. This could include a header or footer. It could also be in the form of a video that does not autoplay and pops up over the home screen. The common theme is that all elements surrounding video have a flat aesthetic and are super simple in construction, use and overall design.



Photo credit: Reuters TV

[Reuters](#), the age-old news organization, takes “TV news” to the next level with a flat-styled website that includes a live news stream. The design is modern design meets YouTube functionality with a great interface that

lets you choose the news story to watch in a right-side navigation table that automatically shifts to the next news item. It's a perfect meshing of usability and design, thanks to a clean look and easy user patterns.

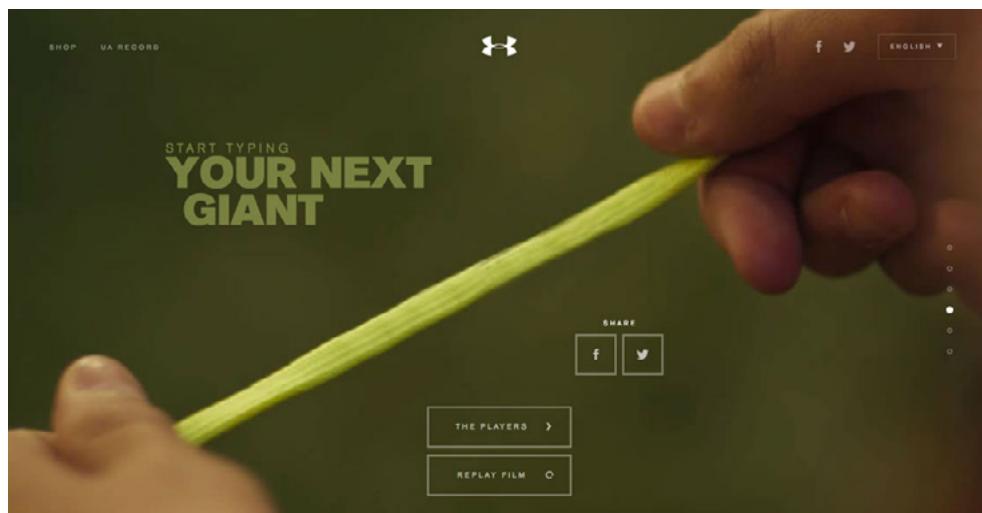


Photo credit: Under Armour

Under Armour's Slay Your Next Giant includes a smattering of short videos with a personalized, game-style format that turns the user into one of the soccer players on the screen. And it gets you all the way to the end of the game, where the user can personalize his or her shoelaces. What's nice about the design – and different from many of the things you see out there – is that flat elements are overlaid on the video just as they might be on a still image or background. Ghost buttons are strategically placed around the item for sale. Even social media sharing icons are placed prominently as ghost buttons. All of the secondary and navigation elements fall into the background, providing a singular and distinct user experience and call to action.

Video and flat design will continue to go hand-in-hand in this year. We may even start seeing more sophisticated treatments, used to engage all of our senses.

Flat 2.0

And all of these things bring us to Flat 2.0. As we said in the free e-book *The Top 10 Web Design Trends of 2015*, his style is a compromise between the origins of flat design, hints of skeuomorphism, material design and usability. (It really is a bit of everything.)

There's no defining characteristic to Flat 2.0, other than it "seems flat, but isn't quite completely flat." This is the realm where most of flat design seems to live. The best parts of flat design are mixed with elements that enhance usability. (Right now that movement is shifting toward layering and 3D styling.)

Designers employ a few common effects to achieve that oh-so-Flat-2.0 look. Here's what they are:

- Raised or sunken elements to make it easier to see what actions a user is supposed to take. The three-dimensional effect helps users engage with an action, such as a click or tap.
- Animated elements help guide users to actionable elements. The trick with this technique is that animations are subtle and don't get in the way of the design.

- Elements that appear to act within the laws of physics or act realistically, such as those outlined by the principles of Material Design, create a “life-like” experience. When things on the screen act in the same manner as physical things, users have no trouble using or understanding them.
- Particularly for e-commerce, 360-degree animation or rotation is a popular tool. This gives users the ability to see an item (or product) in a very real way.
- Big, bold and oversized everything from type to imagery helps create a bold first impression, drawing users at a glance. Oversized elements are highly usable as well, particularly on smaller screens because you don’t have to worry about the “fat fingers” effect.

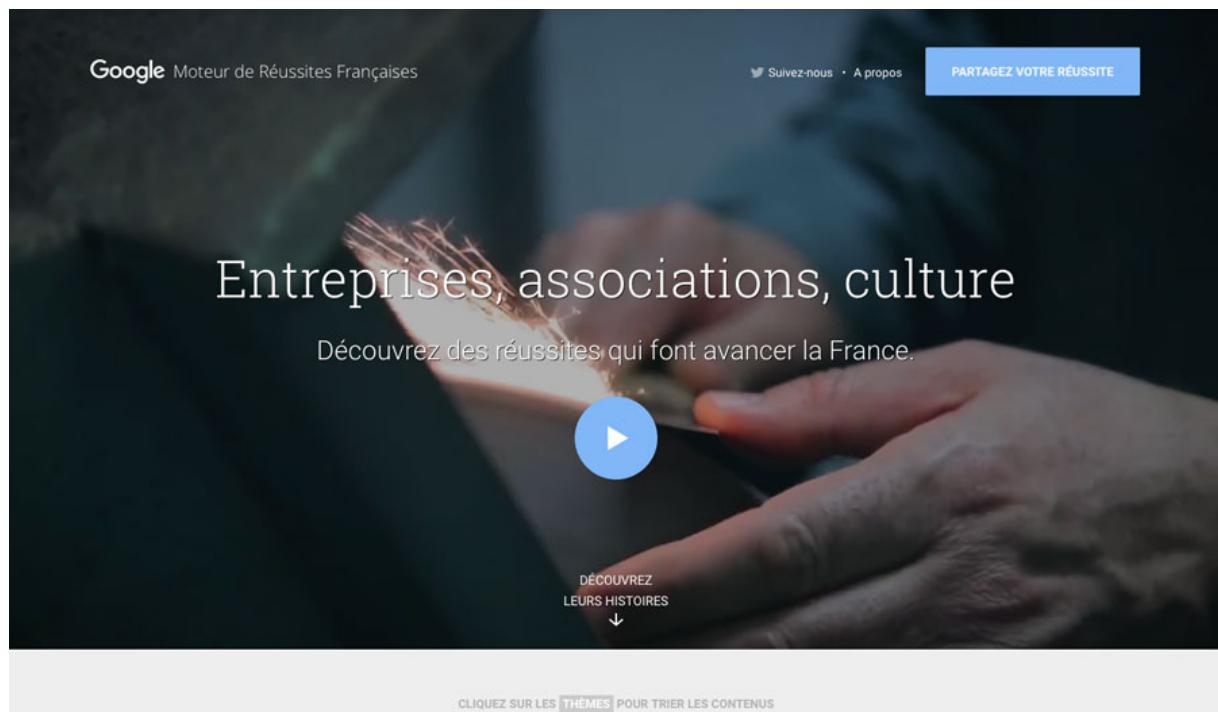


Photo credit: Moteur de Reussites

It only makes sense to feature a [Google Labs](#) example when thinking about Flat 2.0. [Moteur de Reussites](#) has an aesthetic that is very much material design in scope, but is also identifiable with Flat 2.0. That's

the trick to this evolution: Flat takes on a bit of everything, thanks to its classically-rooted principles.



Photo credit: Par Cours Canada

This [Canadian tourism site](#) uses plenty of flat concepts as well. Bright pops of color, simple layers, geometric shapes and brilliant typography pull it all together. The site is usable in a way that it wouldn't be without this combination of design techniques and has an almost timeless look and feel. Flat 2.0 elements help the user focus on calls to action, buttons and next steps in the navigation. The design effect creates a “mini-tour” with layers of elements that encourage the user to want to visit.

Resources

1. **Circle icons:** Ghost button styles in circular shapes (\$3)
2. **Colofilter.css:** Create a duotone effect
3. **Flat Colors:** More than 11,000 colors and 2,000 palettes
4. **Brand New:** Take a look at the gallery of brand logo changes and note the dominance of flat
5. **Long Shadow Graphic Styles:** Illustrator library to help you create the perfect exaggerated shadow (\$5)
6. **Google Material Design:** Full documentation on Google's design language, which is constantly evolving
7. **Hype for Type Top 10 Fonts of 2015:** Inspiration for new flat pairings
8. **CSS Button Generator:** Make ghost (or colored) buttons with CSS
9. **Icon Hover Effects:** Simple animation styles and code for icons
10. **Flat Icons:** 1,303 SVG icon packs in flat styles

Takeaways

So where do we go from here? What lessons have we learned?

- Flat design is not going anywhere anytime soon.
- Flat design is so connected to design theory that it will continue to grow and evolve.
- Flat design is a highly visual and usable technique that can work for varying site types.

One thing is certain: it's not too late to start thinking about a flat aesthetic. More and more companies – from big to small – have all gone flat. With that, we'll see others fully suit. So it looks like flat is here to stay, meaning you don't have to worry about getting caught in another passing trend. What's remarkable about this trend is just how much it has changed. Because it is rooted in elements of simplicity, flat design can be integrated into projects using other trends and techniques so that every project looks custom and original. Pair flat with almost any other trend and the result is a modern, fresh look. Finally, flat design just plain works. Each designer can manipulate the style in any way. That's because there's no perfect model of what constitutes a "flat design."

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