ALL WEBSITES LOOK THE SAME

When was the last time you saw a website that didn't have a huge image fitting to the screen with some giant text overlaid on it?

Scroll down a little and you'll be greeted with either another full width panel, this time a solid colour with centred text sat in it, or a bank of 3 columns with icons sat above them. **Websites are all blending into one.**

But why?

I guess the first question is why, why has one style swept across the web design world and been implemented across so many websites? I've thought and thought about this and never really come up with a single answer. Initially I looked at the huge theme market that exists where creators sell their themes to any number of customers. The theme market is massive, and as a result creators mimic the best selling work in an effort to make more money. You're not going to make a lot of money in the theme market by going out on a limb and creating something incredibly unique and personalised. **Generic wins out every time.**
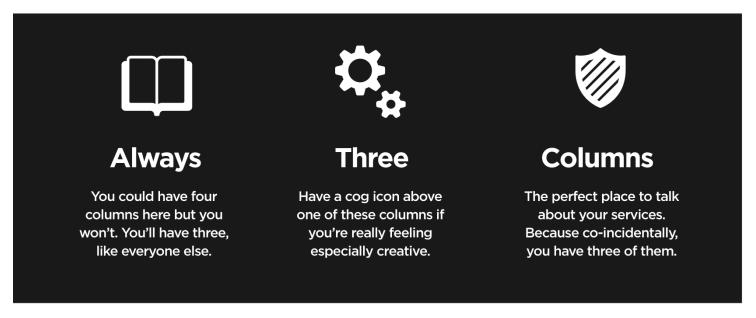
YOUR WEBSITE

IS | THIS | YOUR | WEBSITE

WE'RE UNIQUE

FIND OUT HOW UNIQUE

● ● ●

This is the bit where you talk about how unique you are as
a business and that you're different to all of your competitors.
Your website looks the same though.

Always

You could have four
columns here but you
won't. You'll have three,
like everyone else.

Three

Have a cog icon above
one of these columns if
you're really feeling
especially creative.

Columns

The perfect place to talk
about your services.
Because co-incidentally,
you have three of them.

© If someone did own the copyright to this layout, if that were even possible, they'd be rich!

Simplicity I believe plays another part. It's a very simple style to both design and develop. You're not having to dig deep into graphics software to learn how to centre a paragraph of text on a big block of colour. Likewise when it comes to developing. **It's an achievable style, anyone can do it.**

They style itself is now so mainstream that clients ask for it. It's happened to me, more than once. I've created sites that follow the formula. This surely is another reason. If clients are seeing a lot of sites that are the same style, it's causing them to ask for it. It's a bold business owner that will take a risk. It shouldn't be, but it is.

Design Agencies Are Guilty Too

What baffles me though is that it's actually design and digital agencies that are the worst for over using the style for their own websites. Design agencies don't need to use Wordpress themes to create their websites. They don't need to worry about technical capabilities and they are their own client when it comes to building their own website. **They should be the very ones pushing things and taking a chance on something new.**

At times I think back to when websites were produced in Flash. For all its downfalls (and there were a lot) one thing was always true. **Flash sites rarely looked the same.**

Thinking about going freelance? My ebook **Go Freelance** has everything you'll need to know and more.

Comments

Ryan Townsend:
24 Feb 2015 13:09:43

Some people have even wrapped up this style/trend into a framework, so now you can conform even quicker than ever! (see: **http://designmodo.com/startup/**)

Andy Cotgreave:
24 Feb 2015 13:13:16

I agree. I think one problem is the challenge of mobile-first responsive designs. I don't think people have come up with a great responsive design that doesn't fit this template. In order to accommodate the need for one site that works on mobile and desktop, designers have had to simplify designs. That simplification has ended up with a compromise of creativity.

Dave:
24 Feb 2015 13:20:19

Ryan – I'd not seen that before, signing up now and passing all the work off as my own ;)

Andy – It's a fair point and not something that I'd considered. That said, it's a desirable style for whatever reason at the minute and I don't think that's from a compromise.

Graham McDonnell:
24 Feb 2015 13:47:38

I've thought about this a lot over the last few months and come to a few conclusions.

1. Years ago there was no yard stick so it was a bit of a a free for all, but now that anyone with a mac can throw a website up, decent designers have to differentiate themselves but showing that their designs aren't just pretty and actually convert? (This probably ties in with the recent trend of designers calling themselves 'UX Designers') Are all sites like this because over the years we've come to the conclusion that this is just what 'works' best?

2. Frameworks like Bootstrap, Foundation, etc. definitely have a big part to play. Especially in agencies where efficiency is a big factor. Studio managers see no reason to

reinvent the wheel when it comes to shaving a few days off a schedule.

Still, theres no reason why designers shouldn't bring something unique and creative to their designs where possible (as long as it doesn't become style over substance).

Saw this a while back... **https://twitter.com/timcaynes/status/554593526034731008**

Dave:
24 Feb 2015 13:53:54

Cheers Graham, I thought about Bootstrap (and other frameworks) but then I thought, well actually they're supposed to speed up development which should in theory give you more time to create something unique. I think you're right though. In reality, any time saved is probably just removed and profits taken rather than re-invested in design though.

Pete Avey:
24 Feb 2015 15:16:10

I'd consider this design style a pattern thats part of most users mental model.

First you see a logo and value prop, then you see the benefits broken down, you scroll to the bottom of the site to a big f*cked off CTA and buy a product, it just works.

I actually thought to myself that my portfolio is very similar to this *guilty*.

Dave:
24 Feb 2015 15:25:11

Hi Pete, thanks for the comment.

Yeah I don't doubt that it works for some businesses and that it might be the right approach at times. For the amount of times you see it though, it can't be the best way for everyone in every industry. I feel like the trending nature of web design is playing a massive part in this too.

Tony Mosley:
25 Feb 2015 13:07:01

Fir years web designers have cried out for the same flexibility in layout and fonts as the print world.

Now they have them, and they are emulating those high end fashion magazines that are absolutely vacuous.

A screen is a tricky format, you can only be sure there are 5 locations and the safest to ensure your clients money isn't pissed down the drain is the centre. So you work from the centre outwards.

Dave:
25 Feb 2015 21:07:26

Hi Tony, I get your point but can that be the reason why almost every site you see these days follows that form? I think it could be a contributing reason, like some of the ones that I've mentioned.

Ian P:
09 Mar 2015 10:03:22

> Design agencies don't need to use Wordpress themes to create their websites.

This isn't necessarily always true :)

Monirom:
17 Mar 2015 15:29:40

The only thing limiting our designs right now are:

1. The need to be responsive.
2. The need to work on all devices.
3. Not knowing just how our audience will be consuming our content (desktop? mobile?) and on what type of connection (3G, 4G, wifi?) and on what sized screen.
4. Add to that the levels of complexity when it comes to the number of browsers that need to be supported and the variations in our audiences operating systems.

Essentially when you take away the ability to define the canvas, one has a hard time painting the desired picture.

When clients were willing to pay for dedicated mobile sites that were different from their desktop experiences it was easier on everyone. Then tablets became a thing and the cost of maintaining (on the client side) and designing (on the designers side) three experiences just didn't make sense when it comes to financial outlaw. (Dont even get me started on apps).

Jamie:
19 Jul 2015 19:00:09

I've noticed many websites today all seem to have a similar appearance, light background with large text and pictures. It's supposed to be more "friendly" and clean, according to developers. Personally, I don't like it. I understand that times change, and trends come and go, that's not a problem, but it can only go so far. I think todays websites lack diversity and eccentricity.

Since many people now use smartphones and tablets to go online, developers are focusing on mobilization, and that's the main reason why so many websites are almost identical. This is where I think it becomes a problem. Despite the growing number of people who use handheld devices, there are still some people who use PCs, and I don't think smartphones will replace desktops/laptops, not completely anyway. Maybe one day along the line we'll reach a stage where desktops and laptops will no longer be necessary, but I don't see it happening anytime soon. Each device has it's own purpose. I think there should be different versions of websites for different devices.

Craig:
26 Aug 2015 16:39:20

Frameworks and mobile are largely responsible I think. If your site needs to be mobile friendly, and they all do in 2015, then that generally means a responsive design, which is very time consuming to build from scratch, sans framework, with all the media queries, etc. Also, when designing one site that works on desktop, tables and phone, your design options are limited. So, mobile framework + responsive has a tendency to standardize design.

The good thing about standardized design is that it helps usability, because things end up in the sale locations on websites, and people become accustomed to that, making the sites easier to navigate.

David Emery:
26 Aug 2015 16:40:51

Yesterday we got a paper ad in the mail for a closet arranger company that had a very similar graphic style. My wife held this up and said, "So they want my company's* website to look like an ad from a closet company?"

* wife works for a tech company you've definitely heard of. Name withheld to protect the guilty

**dan t.:**
26 Aug 2015 16:47:16

That's a great point, that RWD probably contributes to this, or that considering RWD constraints can lead to this as a solution. We do have to think in terms of blocks of content, and how do the natures of these blocks change from a narrow, small device to a (generally) wider-aspect-ratio, larger screen? They get wider… . And that's often where the thinking stops.

FULL DISCLOSURE: I've made quick Bootstrap sites for hackathon and academic projects that kinda sorta look like the template above. Have I had a brilliant insight, or a solution? No. No, I have not.

At the very least, this template, annoying as it may be in its ubiquity (and in how startup founders seem to think "this is elegant, so do that"), forces some thinking about structuring the information in the message and an information hierarchy which, if done even marginally well, is awesome. If there were two hero units splitting the screen vertically, how would users read it? Would right-to-left language users take away a different conception than left-to-right readers?

That said, enough already with the autoload and autoplay video backgrounds in the hero area! I'm looking at you, Invision. Especially when that tab is partially obscured in the background, it adds nothing but a "what the hell just moved?" reaction.

Francis Lukesh:
26 Aug 2015 16:47:28

I kind of like not having to learn a new interface for every damn marketing website. It's analogous to if you picked up a magazine, and the cover was all origami'd up and the content was buried in little flip-up post-it notes. Interesting? Maybe. But there's something to be said about some standards in a content medium. The beauty of the web,

however, is that if you want to create a statement piece, you totally can. But not everything needs to be user interface statement piece.

Chris:
26 Aug 2015 16:56:15

My thoughts follow most on the comments here about Mobile design. Unlike other fad design trends, flat design and these column layouts are most suited for easily scaling to mobile devices easily. When you shrink to an iPhone size it all the columns get stacked so there is only so much you can do to differentiate. Designing a completely custom desktop view greatly increases time, cost and maintenance. Which is why the majority of users have gone this direction. As mobile continues to rise I think these layouts and design styles will only continue to grow, until really everyones site looks the same and then at least companies with bigger budgets will pay more to have a different look and pay for the extra dev costs and maintenance costs associated with.

Jess Hardy:
26 Aug 2015 17:10:29

These sites have become the norm because of these huge theme networks where anyone and everyone can just go buy a design and plug it into Wordpress. A lot of design and development has been handed off to marketing companies who care more about "turn-n-burn" rather than being concerned about end user experience and if they are truly giving the client the best product they can. I have heard the line "we can save you $$$ if we just use this template" far to many times.

As for framework such as Bootstrap or Foundation, they have drastically morphed from their initial purpose, rapid prototyping. Developers, and I use that term loosely, are turn concerned about learning a tool, which these frameworks are, rather than really learning the craft behind design and development. A vast majority of developers would have a complete melt down if they were asked to write semantic, clean, original code without relying on thousands of div's and classes.

Brant Merryman:
26 Aug 2015 17:12:12

Pretty much all convenience stores look alike too. Maybe its because its easy to understand for the customers and makes them feel comfortable.

Maybe its easier to learn about what is actually unique about the company if you aren't trying to figure out their unique and quirky website. Unless you are prepared to delight people with your website, why not use an ordinary design that works well, looks nice, etc. and then concentrate on delighting your customers with your actual product.

Charles:
26 Aug 2015 17:18:05

It's a Wordpress theme called Virtue. Yes, design agencies use stock themes.

[Brandon Kelly:](#)
26 Aug 2015 17:27:37

This article by Travis Gertz is worth a read. It makes the same observation, and offers some suggestions on how we can make the web more interesting: "Design Machines: How to survive the digital apocalypse"
(**https://louderthanten.com/articles/story/design-machines**)

Danny:
26 Aug 2015 17:49:42

I once worked in IT for a company where one of my jobs was to support the email system. The company used, well, not Exchange/Outlook. A really large part of my time was spent talking users through tasks because "nothing is where it's supposed to be!"

Love or hate Outlook, it's still the accepted standard for how email is "supposed to look." I wonder if some of the same thing is at play with corporate websites. If a business's website seems unfamiliar or different to a user, that tab is getting closed and you lose that audience. But if it looks like all the other business sites, people know how to engage your site and will stay. I agree with you that it's lead to a lack of creativity, but I also sadly understand why it's probably that way.

NetOperator Wibby:
26 Aug 2015 17:50:08

I couldn't agree more. Lately, I've been thinking of how I could structure my portfolio so it makes sense with what I use it for (mostly, blog posts). I had a hard time trying to come up with something I knew wasn't going to bore me in a few months time.

Then, I came across this post (**http://www.jonikorpi.com/zoomable-ui-for-the-web**) yesterday. I think I have my answer! ;) While Joni's site (and work.co's) certainly breaks the mold, I'm not sure how corporate and hospital sites could adapt. That's another story though.

Bob Gair:
26 Aug 2015 17:52:27

I think it's budgets too. Many site budgets don't allow for much experimentation. People used to pour a lot of money into print because you had huge printing costs and the design portion was just a fraction of that but still substantial. Expectations now are to reach even more people on much smaller budgets. Small agencies are just cranking out sites and it's quantity over quality to make ends meet.

Clients are more worried about getting clicks than getting great design. I'm sure there will be a resurgence of emphasis on design once the tools allow it to be simpler and quicker to produce an interesting site that works for all formats.

Andrew Kasian:
26 Aug 2015 17:58:59

The question I keep coming back to – are web sites still that relevant? Or…how important are they now with Facebook, twitter, Pinterest etc.? Do more people visit a company's social media presence than their website these days? Comments?

Gregg Sewell:
26 Aug 2015 18:05:13

Good observations, Dave. I'm a non-designer, a layperson who depends on options like Squarespace, which certainly conforms to what you say here. What can people like me do about this without hiring a designer? Anything at all?

scottbp:
26 Aug 2015 18:13:50

I think web design is maturing and part of what we are seeing is the fact that creating a unique experience is actually not the right thing to do for many types of website. The pattern you are discussing here does its job well for many cases, and does still allow some amount of good design work to come through. But most importantly it allows users to quickly access the information that the business (or person/website owner) want to impart.

There are still way too many overly complex but unique websites out there. This pattern works very well for a subset of website owner's and user's needs.

It does mean that the web starts to look a little boring for designers, but most users have a very different experience and may not even experience the overload of this pattern that designers will, as they don't visit so many sites.

Tom:
26 Aug 2015 18:28:14

Well, it's not too surprising…We know that the viewer is always looking at a box (the screen) and we can't change. We can't die-cut their monitors. We can't change the material of the screen to adjust brightness, contrast, or reflectiveness. People don't touch their screens (typically) and even on mobile devices where they do we can't change the texture.

However, print design teaches us so much more and part of that is layout. We do learn how to use a grid and then break the rules. We should see more of it on the web. It's sad we don't, but at the same time there's so many variables out of our control unlike with printed materials.

The number one thing for me that needs to change on the web is typography. Even with webfonts, we have such little control over creativity here and the legibility on the web often isn't great. We need better type. I think, perhaps, more than we need more varied layouts and more than creative ways to break a grid.

Jason Pelker:
26 Aug 2015 18:38:17

And why is this bad?

"Don't make me think", right?

https://www.sensible.com/dmmt.html

AJ:
26 Aug 2015 18:59:05

And this is a problem, why?

Standardization of layout is good for the user. Unless I'm going to some "art site" a website should be as familiar as a book is.

Russell Uresti:
26 Aug 2015 19:18:39

"Flash sites rarely looked the same."

I have a long rant about how Flash sites weren't usable or accessible and all this other junk, and that usable layouts trump pretty or unique ones because sites are supposed to be for the users and not an ego stroke for the designer, but screw it.

Julian:
26 Aug 2015 19:25:04

This has haunted me for quite some time.

"If we look at the web as a material and not as a canvas, how do its affordances guide a designer's hand?"
— Frank Chimero (**https://vimeo.com/122880890**)

I'm beginning to wonder if the modern and mobile web have forced us to honor the innate qualities of the web, revealing this common format.

There are still, of course, interesting designs emerging. Joni Korpi (**http://www.jonikorpi.com/**) has experimented with a hub-and-spoke UI design he calls "Zoomable UI". It's unique and fun, but constraining and arguably favors mobile UX. He has some other interesting experiments as well, but they remain experiments.

Personally, I think content and tone are the biggest differentiators in web design today, which I believe is one of the reasons web typography has gained so much attention. When typography, content and tone are executed well, it becomes a narrative, and that story-telling resonates with people. (Even through cookie-cutter styling.)

Taking this a step farther, the underlining values of those creating the content, become the primordial ooze that make the difference—are you just looking to get it done, and do it safe? Or are you willing to take a risk for what you believe in, and stand behind your message? I think that distinction shows, whether or not you go cookie-cutter or avant garde.

Kurt Zenisek:
26 Aug 2015 19:32:12

To those asking why this is bad…

I agree that things should be familiar, and websites shouldn't be obtuse or obfuscate what the visitor expects or is looking for. However, that doesn't mean that everything needs to look the same.

There are certainly established conventions & UX principles that should be followed, but you'll find that there is plenty of freedom in being able to give your website a unique look; an identity.

"Oh, we need a third thing to be placed below our homepage slider" or "We need something else to go into the slider" have probably been said when working with this boilerplate layout, and that's a situation where they aren't in control of what they're actually offering to people, or they just don't care.

This layout is like a 2003 Toyota Camry. It's certainly a functional & well built car that anyone can use, but it's the most generic one you can get. Are people confused when they

get into a VW Beetle, BMW, etc.? Of course not. The automotive designers put things where people expect & make thing work how you'd want, but they still give their cars an identity that people can (and do) love. Sure, people have made cars where the steering wheel was in the middle, the window controls were in the center console, etc. but those were simply counter intuitive/bad designs. What I'm saying is that you can avoid those pitfalls while still making a unique website people can love.

Sean Birdsell:
26 Aug 2015 19:40:14

I blame Apple. Example from 17 October, 2000:
http://web.archive.org/web/20001017104100/http://www.apple.com/

And it's only gotten sleeker over time.

Anand Madhvani:
26 Aug 2015 20:05:13

lowest common denominator:

makes sense for most users immediately

+

gets through inevitable differences of opinion

=

appropriate for most functional websites

if someone hit on a better standard, would be adopted

I find it hard to imagine something 'better'

given odd requirements, screen constraints etc.

same reason most typeface letters similar

we are out of the Cambrian Explosion – except for exotics!

desires of designers, clients and customers hard to align…

Anonymous:
26 Aug 2015 20:28:14

This is why you can have Startup Generator: **http://tiffzhang.com/startup/**

Julian:
26 Aug 2015 20:29:42

I think it's a scared and weak stance to justify homogeny in design as a means to leverage a what users have already learned.

Confront the reality of your self and your work. If you design different, and it's confusing, don't resort to what everyone else does, but push through the problems to a better design. Humans are excellent at learning, and will take the time if they believe there is value.

The problem is that the signal-to-noise is horrible (**http://deathtobullshit.com**), so attention spans and effort are in short supply. This is a problem with designers and content providers, not users being stupid.

Juan Carlos H.:
26 Aug 2015 21:04:48

Well, I think web design has matured. It is content which is taking the front seat, as it should be, not the user interface. As such, you start to see standards. The burger menu on the upper right hand, the logo on the upper-left or center, etc.

Take the printed book for instance. Most books are portrait. The cover is always on the

same face. The book's summary is on the opposite one. If you wanted to know about the author you'd know where to look. You know where it begins and where it ends. If there was an index or a glossary you would have a good guess. Etcetera. Of course you can break rules in terms of your UI but for a content-first strategy it is a risk I'd say is not worth taking.

This blog, for instance, it is pretty standard. Not surprising at all. But exactly for that reason we all focused on content. We all knew were to comment and what to do. The era of "surprising UIs" was an era of discovering standards. We have most of them. Some others will come up. But I am pretty happy where this is going.

Another example is the blog I read about this article, "Daring Fireball" is horrible in terms of readibility both on Desktop (we all have higher resolution screens now) and mobile (no mobile version/adaptation at all). I only read its great content because of his standard RSS format via Feedly. Otherwise I would probably wouldn't read it as much.

—-
Disclaimer: I own a UX design firm in Mexico which has a pretty standard website for Desktop, Tablet and Mobile (**http://www.hint.mx**) and I'm perfectly OK with that. Sorry for the broken English.

MartinX:
26 Aug 2015 22:14:26

Skip Intro, that's why.

In the Olden Days, every designer managed to convince some plucky business they had to have a Flash intro, because it's JUST LIKE TV but cheaper and you can force people to see what you want them to see. Yeah, no. People complained. People left. And remember, these were the early adopters of the w-w-web; they wanted to see new and exciting things. But no. After a while, the web surfers really wanted to see what they wanted to see. So skip intro. It should be taped to the top of every iMac in every web

design office as an admonishment of designers past, and a warning to designers future.

Fast forward to now, everyone is on the web – including computer novices who really don't seem to be able to navigate anything slightly abstract successfully. I don't know how they manage to use an ATM. But they are potential customers, and you don't want to lose them. There's a reason Amazon patented one-click buying – even web carts were too complex, people abandoned them. There's a reason supermarkets are laid out in much the same way, and don't carry customers along the corridor on a conveyor belt in extreme comfort and past murals depicting Mediterranean scenes, towards the rotating knives (apologies to Monty Python). Customers customers customers. Sell sell sell.

If you want to be artistic, design something for a website that will attract that audience – the curious and the patient, not the impatient Gumby.

Kris Hunt:
26 Aug 2015 23:30:48

Seriously, "when was the last time"? Uh… 30 seconds ago?

bloodnok:
26 Aug 2015 23:46:14

"For all it's downfalls …" for all it is downfalls? hmmm ….

Roy Stock:
27 Aug 2015 00:05:05

This has been driving my nuts for awhile. I believe it comes down to two things: 1) Customers like the way it looks. They see a site with edge-to-edge imagery and want the same. Most people haven't seen that many yet in the real world or from competitor sites 2) Once you build a few of these sites you realize how easy they are to create so designers

become more than happy to say, sure I'll build you one of those. Even going so far as to show potential customers these types of designs hoping they'll go for it.

Ryan Cannon:
27 Aug 2015 03:46:45

Practically every book is I have is the same, too. Title on the outer cover as big text overlaying a photo or flat color; author's name is slightly smaller near it. Inside page has copyright information; table of contents is at the front, index at the end. Page numbers? Opposing outer page corners. Text? Justified serif typeface.

Rather than attribute this to greed or laziness, I'd probably attribute it to optimization. People have data and expertise that tells them what works. Those flash web sites from back in the day? They were about the designer and the engineer that made them, not what the user actually needed.

Zac Rolland:
27 Aug 2015 05:23:59

Hi, great article.
At Junior, we launched our website a couple weeks ago and really tried to mix things up. Not being able to show client work as restriction, forced us to rely on our principles and we used that as positive force. We explored motion a lot in both the animations and the UX, and even the url structure. A lot of people have said it reminds them of the flash days. We are really proud of that. Take a look, we would love to hear your feedback.
http://www.junior.io/
-z

Rob Ford:
27 Aug 2015 06:02:10

We're still showcasing some pretty creative stuff over at FWA.

Examples:

http://animade.tv/frankensim/
http://kitasenjudesign.com/
https://crazyskills.panasonic.com/en/
http://cabbi.bo/enough/
https://howchinaareyou.org/en/
http://www.musclesurprise.com/ (Flash FTW!)

Ian G:
27 Aug 2015 06:36:44

All good until the erroneous "it's" in the final paragraph. And wouldn't "downsides" be more appropriate?

Chris:
27 Aug 2015 07:49:29

Not sure there is a problem here.

This approach is one that works for most clients that have it. Its clean, clear and possibly converts well for them, usually all for a price they are willing to pay. Its like every other commodity in life – there a the vast majority that are happy to conform (and I don't mean that in an disrepective way) and you'll always get people outside of that majority that want to experiment and push the envelope more – some of which end in failures some of which take off spectacularly.

I think the key skill for us designers is just trying to find the clients you want to work with and then delivering the best site for the client, not the designer, that works for them at all levels. If you are happy producing these sites and the clients are happy then thats

not really a problem. It feels to me like this article is more just highlighting how as designers sometimes we want to try other more experimental/creative things. Thats not an issue with design, the web, clients or frameworks. Thats just an issue with us.

I actually think part of the problem is 'the design community' – its very incestuous and its not the clients that need to look outside the community, its the designers.

The Internet is big and we've probably seen 0.00001% of websites out there (#madeupstat) but as designers we are still happy to make sweeping statements about it even though we probably all follow the same 100 people on twitter and visit the same same 50 websites.

WE need to get out more.

Pascal Verstegen:
27 Aug 2015 08:15:19

Was linked here by our commander-in-chief,

The perfect example of why is this very website, you have a scroll hack on your front page that makes it go left-to-right, and disables OSX's native left-to-right scrolling, making it jittery and clumsy. It's also unclear that this is the interaction that's required, so there's a 'Scroll' popup on the side to point this out.

Same with your blog, there are gigantic back and forth buttons on the right-hand side, they add very little to usability, websites aren't magazines and go from top to bottom, a better approach to have people keep reading is to add the next article at the end of the page using AJAX.

But alas, the main point is that design is a solution to a problem, not to make things pretty, and convention means sticking to things that come natural and are taught to users,

to make sure the threshold for people using your site is as low as possible.

In marketing sites (front pages) this is especially important, and it's why books, magazines, newspapers and even flyers all have the same basic shapes and sizes: it's the expected layout for a user, as to not get in the way of what's important: the content!

My favorite quote always: Cut the Crap, Content is King

Haseeb Ahmad Ayazi:
27 Aug 2015 09:07:46

So what do you suggest to have a website that don't look like others… ?

AirdropUX:
27 Aug 2015 09:11:43

In my experience it's clients who want their sites to follow this template and not the designer (me). There are all sorts of creative ways of presenting information on the web, but clients seem fixated on their website conforming to this particular pattern.

Most of them haven't got a clue that this layout lends itself to responsive design, or that it's cheap and quick to build. They're just evaluating it on what it looks like on a large-screen device, and they prefer it to other designs.

It's not necessarily a bad thing. When done properly, it can be the perfect alignment of business needs (the site tells the visitor exactly what they do in the first content block), the client's preference, and the need for a responsive layout.

What irritates me more is when it's done badly: where design elements scale inappropriately for each device, or you still can't divine exactly what the business/product is or does because it's all about the design and not the content, or the

latest trend (parallax scrolling?) has also been squeezed in to look cool but isn't at the service of the content.

Brendon Carr:
27 Aug 2015 13:40:33

Many of my apps "look the same" and that is a benefit, because the consistency and predictability enable quick discovery of it functions and features. Think of the website as an app to deliver information to a user, and you'll find your perspective changes.

Lizzy:
27 Aug 2015 13:54:39

I work for a design focused firm. I love to present unique concepts to clients. I love to go outside the norm and create something that is truly theirs, something that helps them stand out.

The problem is no one wants to stand out. No matter how hard we try to convince clients that different is better, no one wants to be different.

Fred:
27 Aug 2015 14:18:25

Frankly, I dislike them. I like uniqueness and taseful sophistication, but maybe I'm just an odd ball. It does not necessarily mean more money (from me)… I only feel the need to escape the site as soon as possible.

Robyn:
27 Aug 2015 14:24:38

This is nothing new. 15 years ago websites were all about having a left-hand navigation

column, usually in yellow. Designs change, but uniformity remains, just as it is with other fashions.

Kieran McMillan:
27 Aug 2015 15:40:46

Web design is dead, didn't you know? **http://mashable.com/2015/07/06/why-web-design-dead/**

Moeskido:
27 Aug 2015 17:00:14

Flash-developed sites rarely looked the same because too many of them required the user to play "Where's Waldo" with fussy, area-mapped content. That's was fun for some folks, but not for people who need to find information efficiently and move on. Or preserve a device's battery life, for that matter.

Put me on the list of those advocating for the user. The site style you're discussing works well for a lot of companies because it presents a brief, attractive narrative as a façade, and offers the opportunity to drill down for details. Like other "standardized" website designs before it (side-nav, top-nav, etc.), it has become what many users expect, and makes it easy for them to find what they want to know.

By all means, we should try to find new ways to serve the client, but at the end of the day, your unique, custom-size business card might not fit in my wallet.

Chris:
27 Aug 2015 19:27:03

I once asked the Headmaster at a private school why they still required kids to wear uniforms. The answer was that if everyone looked the same they'd be judged on what

they said and did instead.

We'll never have 1 standard like in the beginning (blue links, grey background) but some consistency does allow content to be more easily differentiated.

Now the big question… Should "About" remain the second item in the main menu or should it continue on its rightward creep towards the "Contact" menu item which is usually last?

Ralph:
28 Aug 2015 00:56:15

I'm torn, because—though I understand the points about sameness and lack of creativity—I quite like those sites. Even though the content may not always be so good, as others have said, the predictability factor can help guide you around. I just want to get the message quickly, from something that looks nice and clear, and this kind of layout delivers that for me. I feel the web industry gets a bit too caught up in looks and effects, forgetting that the end user just wants to get something done.

The layout for printed novels hasn't changed in centuries. Is anyone complaining? You just want to see a clear title on the cover, and a nice image is a bonus, but not essential. Then you want to open the cover get to Chapter 1 and read. Do you want to be delighted by unique designs? Do you want to have to explore to find Chapter one? Maybe be surprised by some kind of popup artwork? I don't think so. Do you reject the book because of the boring, same-ol' column layout? No, because the content is the important thing.

Dave:
28 Aug 2015 15:34:44

Firstly let me say that I'm totally stunned by the response to this post. For 6 months it largely went unnoticed in the community but it all blew up over the past few days when I

was actually on holiday. I tried to approve everything as quickly as I could whilst I was away.

Clearly it provoked a huge reaction, I've had all kinds of comments both here and on social media from people agreeing, disagreeing, correcting my English and criticising my own website (believe me, I know it has flaws).

It's been great to read the comments and there's been a lot that I agree with and some that I don't. The biggest response has probably been about conventions and it helping users – to a point I think there's something in that, but I also thing its possible to follow a lot of conventions yet still achieve something unique. Ultimately I'm a designer that prefers to work on projects that are a little different – I think that's what sparked the post with me in the first place.

Renee:
28 Aug 2015 16:09:07

In this layout you would also have to have a slow motion video playing in the background of the header. Why? Because you can and because it is cool.

Bob:
28 Aug 2015 20:51:18

Why one giant box at the top with one call to action? Why three columns and not four? Why everything? Because it has all been A/B tested over the last several years and this is what works best.

At the end of the day the website either achieves its goal or it doesn't. If it doesn't do that it doesn't matter how pretty it looks. Familiarity/Sameness = No training the visitor required.

Andre:
29 Aug 2015 21:52:44

"When was the last time you saw a website that didn't have a huge image fitting to the screen with some giant text overlaid on it?"

I discovered and navigated to this post from Pinboard, which has no screen-spanning image or giant text.

My problem with the design pattern under discussion is how it blurs the distinction between a home page and a landing page. I keep running into sites that are front-loaded with CTAs and virtually no information about the product or service to be acted on. I'm not going to click a Sign Up button on a site that gives me no compelling reason to sign up.

At least Twitter has finally figured out that putting new tweets on the home page for non-signed-in users (non-account holders) gives those users some idea of what to expect. Twitter wasted years on a home page with nothing but a hero image and a signup form.

What do you want your home page to do, and who is it for? Is it a brochure? Does it need to function identically for new visitors and repeat visitors? Does it need to convert paid traffic? It seems that the "masthead + CTA + 3 column copy" convention is largely becoming an exercise in function following form.

tom:
30 Aug 2015 02:39:01

Why should websites be any different? Are we going to have five-wheeled cars because four wheels are too mainstream?

Tim:
31 Aug 2015 03:08:44

I think the reason sites are starting to gravitate towards this design is simply because it works. Design is supposed to cater to the users, not the other way around.

Users don't see websites as art, they're informational and practical.

So for a UX Designer, your job IMO is not to necessarily push the boundaries of technology, but to help the users best achieve what they're there for in the first place.

If the user is there to buy something, the UX designer should make it as sime as possible to buy something. If the user wants to find a phone number, make it as sime as possible to find the phone number. That's what good design is all about!

ERBrains:
31 Aug 2015 06:55:00

Most of them look for the content not the design

yhl:
31 Aug 2015 08:04:47

I think it has all started with the huge consumption of iPhone (mobile) that provides browsing experience on mobile. Since then all website needs to be displayed properly on mobile to attract audience as majority audience of them has shifted to mobile from desktop – easy and convenient. In order to serve your website well to your market, simpler the better – neat and grid base website serves better experience on small screen. Responsive website has been essential.

paslanmaz saç:

31 Aug 2015 08:21:09

It's a Wordpress theme called Virtue. Yes, design agencies use stock themes.

Chris Lalonde:
31 Aug 2015 12:29:45

I think the format discussed works well for the mobile site compatibiity and continuation of a consistent brand. I can say though in terms of using new technology, it can limit search indexing ability greatly as Google does not yet understand how to index content on Ajax type applications yet. Not sure when they will either? We had a designer who wrote the whole website, as it was image heavy, to speed rendering using Ajax and made a separate content management system for it. This hampered our ability to index greatly! We have had to try work arounds like Brombone to take snapshots of the pages for indexing. Our Blognet blog indexes way better, as Wordpress did not play nice with this Ajax built site. Be careful what you wish for is guess… any one else have any input or suggestions about this issue?

Andy McIlwain:
31 Aug 2015 15:26:14

Originality isn't the objective for every website.

Sometimes utility is the priority, especially with business sites. The layout presented above is conventional, sure, but it works. Users can focus on the information that's being conveyed rather than how it's being conveyed.

There's still plenty of room for creativity and experimentation in site design/UI. New form factors demand it (wearables, VR, large touch surfaces, and whatever comes in the future).

Jonathan Holborn:
31 Aug 2015 17:03:55

I think it started when "Don't Make Me Think" was published. A much needed book in 2005!

SamuraiArtGuy:
01 Sep 2015 02:42:40

I'll get on the train too, and complain that it's almost entirely due to the ascendancy of moibile, which seems to not only overtake, but dominate web browsing in the not-too-distant future. The need to develop responsive sites have had a funnel effect in the type of things that survive. Only a rather limited set of layouts and design solutions seem to work AT ALL, much less effectively on a 320px canvas. Even THIS site, has to collapse, gracefully, if at all possible, to a single column – and it looks really quite similar to everyone else's.

When one has to account for bandwidth, legibility, and ease of use and navigation. Your ability to experiment and be Avant Garde becomes, to say the least, constrained. Then the need to turn sides around at a speed and cost that clients will accept – does often have developers and designers reaching for the Themes and Frameworks. And you pray their logo is at least distinctive, and looks good in white over a tinted full screen background.

I've designed responsive sites from bare code, and I'm getting better at it as I learn more. But it is still a HUGE time-eating pain in the ASS. Alas, few clients are willing to put up with our artsy fartsy codey wodey indulgences, and let us come up with distinctive and unique sites.

Susanta Kumar Sahoo:
01 Sep 2015 10:03:01

Pretty interesting insight into the website design art. Indeed, we are beginning to see a

flurry of similar designs to the extent that every next website has become an eyesore, bereft of any creativity, looking like a copycat. But on the other hand, websites are becoming more usable and user-friendly. It's up to the theme designers to come up with really innovative design model so they stand out creatively without compromising the business goals.

Daniel Lord:
02 Sep 2015 14:58:17

Or maybe, after all the above is considered, the old adage (rule?) that form follows function dominates. Perhaps the design has gradually coalesced around the one that the most visitors find easiest to understand and use in a market-tested evolution. Just like a water bottle: there is one form that became standard because it is superior in simplicity and functionality for the majority of the people that use it. The objective is commerce or communication first, art second. Perhaps it is because the uniqueness is in the product, service, or communication, not how you "message" it or you risk not being heard or understood?

Darvydas Šilkus:
04 Sep 2015 08:05:37

Well basically all websites will look like this when it comes to mobile devices.

In my country (Lithuania) there are some that wants a different design, but mostly not because of the price.

When unique design starts from 1k EUR (with all great ideas), and similar website (without uniques design and with responsice included) ends to 1k EUR everything is decided upon small-medium businesses.

Jose M Estrada:

04 Sep 2015 12:39:24

Well, this is a very interesting subject without doubts. I remember when impressive background image or video based sites started to appear on the Web; it was really amazing… How now a website really truly looked incredible on my also recent widescreen LCD display… Finally web designers had came up with a fantastic idea to make a website look amazing on these new – and everyday bigger – computer display… So long for tiny centered content with a lot of side empty spaces websites.

I think the web design will always respond to media devices, like it must be, in my opinion… Creators will always be at front line; once the media changes again, they will surely impress us with a new trend… I would do it if I was myself an art creator but for now I have to follow their tracks in order to satisfy customers' demand.

I came from the Dave Shea's CSS Zend Garden school, I like to create unique visual histories on every website but I am not graphic designer and I must admit that to follow the web visual trends make my everyday work more easy… I will probably keep on doing it this way.

Harris:
07 Sep 2015 06:28:20

Why do most newspaper layouts look the same? Over time, the market determined that this is what works best for the greatest number of consumers. Web design is not art, it's information design.

Miss Infinity:
07 Sep 2015 07:42:36

One characteristic of a layout template like this is that it is much easier to fill it with some content. Now the web author (whoever this is) has to come up with just a one-to-three-

liner for each of the big boxes and the columns. It is a perfect layout for people who don't have much to tell …

Tamim Swaid:
07 Sep 2015 07:47:47

a designer search for the different look.

things establish the same look, because they work well. that is the underlying principle. why do you have two pockets in a jeans and not three? why is the cut of the pocket nearly always the same?

the task as a designer is to distinguish within these constraints.

Prabhuram Baskaran:
07 Sep 2015 08:03:21

Our website design certainly looks different:
mockflow.com

If you see, even apps have a pattern

Brian Reich:
07 Sep 2015 11:59:21

I recently left a web developer job at an agency whose very much guilty using this design on essentially every website they produce. First off, I think it's about time and money. This design is very easy to customize for a new client because, essentially, most of your "above the fold" content is totally replaced by swapping images out of the slider. Second, I think this design has become so popular that clients expect and will be disappointed if they don't have a giant slider.

What's incredibly sad to me is that all of the above is true in spite of the fact that SEO experts and usability experts, and just plain common sense tells us that giant homepage sliders are terrible for both SEO and usability.

Leonardo Pereira:
07 Sep 2015 12:47:08

You forgot to mention how most websites fail to have any information about how unique something actually is.

When there were fewer websites on the web, there was more information per website on average. Now it's all about "having a website." Your company doesn't have a website? Well, you suck. I can't find anything about your company on your website? At least you have one!

Ben Myhre:
07 Sep 2015 14:57:59

> What baffles me though is that it's actually design and digital agencies that are the worst for over using the style for their own websites.

I feel that this is a double edged sword.

On one hand, an agency should be pushing the conversation forward. That means getting outside the norm and making things that are on the of what is currently popular. Mind you, sometimes this sparks BAD results, both in terms of design and business.

On the other, an agency needs to show that they are part of the conversation. If skinny jeans are in, you are going to be "in" if you wear skinny jeans. If scarfs are all the rage, wear a damn scarf. If you walk into a room of all the beautiful people wearing skinny

jeans and a scarf… you are going to, on first glance, look like the rest of the beautiful people.

If, however, you walk into the same room looking like a 70's David Bowie, you are certainly going to get looks. There might be a small percentage who love your take on Ziggy Stardust and how bold you are for dressing like him. Of those people, even a smaller percentage would consider hiring you as their fashion consultant… because no matter how much they admire you for taking a chance, what they really want is to look like all the people wearing skinny jeans and scarfs. There is, and should be, a place for the Ziggy Stardusts, but not everybody wants to invest in it.

I do believe there is a balance that can be achieved here, but the real magic is in finding it. Having a website that is the equivalent of skinny jeans and a scarf is safe and gives the feel that you are part of the conversation. That is why you see the main elements seeming to all look the same. I think it is a fair strategy for agencies.

Add some damn flair though. Put a Ziggy Stardust hair coloring or jacket on your website. Add some elements that help distinguish you from everybody else. Not only will this not leave you on the bleeding edge (which there is ABSOLUTELY a place for), but it helps move the entire conversation.

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07 Sep 2015 15:07:11

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Geoff:
07 Sep 2015 15:09:23

Lots of people have cited responsive design and mobile first as a reason for the rise of this standardised UI trend which I think is very true, simplification and flat design trends are also a by-product of this technology shift. To say a design trend that puts content front

and centre makes a site the same as all the rest is a macro view of the trend. People don't look at websites as UI patterns, only designers do that, normal consumers look at the content, which is totally unique to most of the sited designed in this style. This kind of commentary is industry naval gazing, if you're bored of designing effective websites that people actually want, try doing something else, maybe creating compelling content instead.

Michele Bonanno:
07 Sep 2015 15:41:53

Ok I am guilty. TOTALLY. The desktop version of my site, Thingser.com is exactly that. There is a BUT. Our mobile version works exactly like any native app. YES we are bootstrapped…we live in Europe (you know the drill, no money just hope).For the mobile vs (we have no app dev..so what you will see is the solution) we tried to make something nice. For me and my tiny (but tiny tiny..tiny team) content is king, so we made this website content centric. This helps our users (about 10k of them) to focus on what is important. The site builds their internet intellectual persona (long story etc etc). So what should I do for the desktop? I am building a video to replace the images, is that a good idea? What else? Please any comments are more then welcome…do drop me an email name **at** domain. cheers.

Vince:
07 Sep 2015 17:48:50

Well, we **are** working on our own responsive libraries, but in the mean time… I just thought I would point out that many doors look (and function) the same. Many doorknobs function exactly the same as their others. Many windows look the same, and most view ports are rectangular. Somebody design a steam punk computer already, so we can write CSS for for circular views. Also, for the money, I'm not going to lose sleep over using a template on your landing page.

Zach Shallbetter:
07 Sep 2015 17:52:08

It's a convent way to solve a content problem. Most clients do not have enough information to support a multi-page site. Adding a hero/cover image allows them to stretch what they have.

Lucian Marin:
08 Sep 2015 07:17:38

As a designer, I try to avoid this problem as much as possible. I even go as far as making sure Sublevel doesn't look anything like Facebook or Twitter.

Dave:
08 Sep 2015 08:47:43

There's been a lot more comments over the past few days so I'll give my opinion on a few things that keep cropping up…

Books and newspapers looking the same. Books and newspapers are both heavily constrained by printing costs, they cannot make use of animations, videos and other media that we have at our fingertips. Newspapers do look very similar but they're all dealing with the same content. The problem with the template I show in this post (in my opinion) is that it seems to be used whether the content fits or not – I see it used for design agencies, products, software, blogs, travel sites etc etc. The actual template I don't have a problem with, it's more just seeing it depended upon in any case that irks me.

The other big argument seems to be that it helps the user not have to work out a new way of navigating every time they come across a new site. To a degree I think there's something in this, but at the same time I think it's gone a little too far. You can still use a top nav bar and have 3 columns without it looking exactly the same as everyone else's website.

As much as conventions do form a lot of what we see you should never know the solution before you know what the actual problem is.

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