

Beware user-uploaded content

When you're depending on user-uploaded images, you don't have the luxury of fine-tuning contrast, carefully adjusting colors, or cropping the perfect frame.

While you'll always be at your users' mercy to some extent, there are a few things you can do to make sure their content doesn't completely undermine your design.

Control the shape and size

Displaying user-uploaded images at their intrinsic aspect ratio can really throw off a layout, especially if there are a lot of images on the screen at once.



pleasing backyard barbecue...

By Hank Douglas

All-American Cheese Burger

★★★★★

The All-American Cheeseburger has certain...

By Kevin Francis



Helen's Healthy Beef Burger

★★★★★

This burger is not only good for you, but it's actually quite...

By Helen Pearson

Ultimate Double-Decker Burger

Southern Fried Chicken Sandwich

★★★★★

Try our quick and easy buttermilk chicken...

By Nicholas Denver



Homemade Cheese Fatburger

★★★★★

Is there such thing as too much beef? If you think the answer...

By Stefan Hagon

Vegan Mushroom Bean Burger

★★★★★

Mushrooms are surprisingly similar in taste and texture...

By Lily Hart

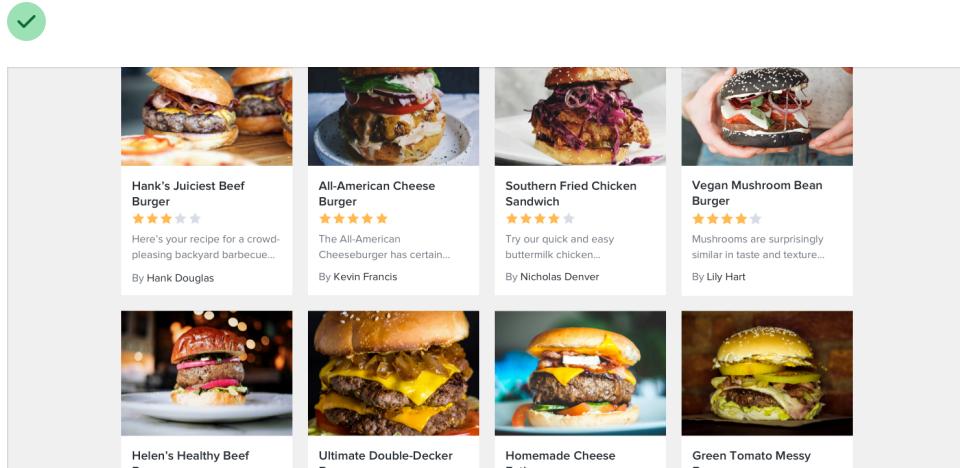


Green Tomato Messy Burger

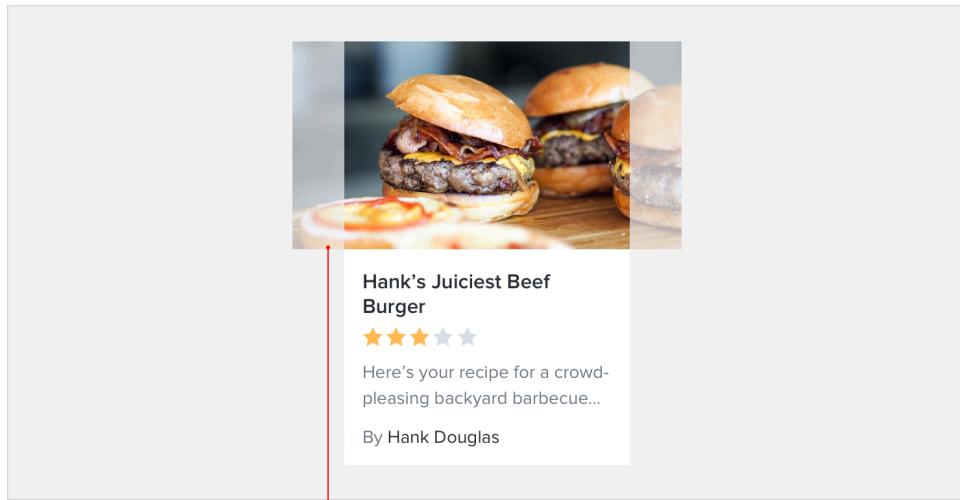
★★★★★

Green Tomatoes on a burger? What is this nonsense...

Instead of letting users wreak havoc on your page structure, center their images inside fixed containers, cropping out anything that doesn't fit.



This is really easy to do with CSS these days by making the image a background image, and setting the `background-size` property to `cover`.



`background-size: cover;`

Prevent background bleed

When a user provides an image with a background color that's similar to the background in your UI, the image and the background can bleed together, causing the image to lose its shape.

×

 Kyle Rivera 6:42 PM Sure! 8:30pm works great	 Laura Matthews But fleece is what I am after A pull over is nice. I don't know if they have any nice v I didn't really look but I can
 Rose Peterson ✓ Sun That's really funny! Did you see the photo of Matt?	 Michael Henry They only have large sizes available I'm pretty sure you're a medium? Amirite? Did you like that one vest I showed you?
 Will Pearson Wed What was the name of that song you played the other night?	 Laura Matthews

Poor Contrast

Instead of trying to solve this with a border, try using a subtle inner box shadow:

✗ ✓

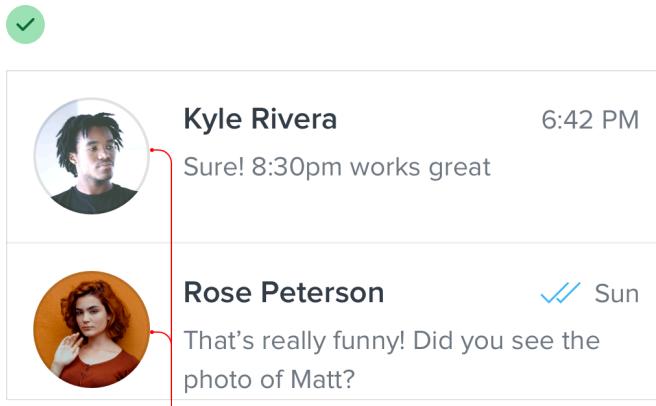
 Kyle Rivera Sure! 8:30pm works great	 Kyle Rivera Sure! 8:30pm works great
 Rose Peterson That's really funny! Did y photo of Matt?	 Rose Peterson That's really funny! Did y photo of Matt?

`border: 2px solid hsl(212, 12%, 72%);`

`border: 2px solid hsl(212, 12%, 72%);`

Borders will often clash with the colors in the image, while most people will barely even realize the shadow is there.

If you don't like the slight "Inset" look you get from using a box shadow, a semi-transparent inner border works great, too.



```
box-shadow: inset 0 0 0 1px hsla(0,0%,0%,.1);
```


Finishing Touches

Supercharge the defaults

You don't always have to add new elements to a design to add flare — there are a lot of ways to liven up a page by "supercharging" what's already there.

For example, if your design includes a bulleted list, try replacing the bullets with icons:



Everything you need in one place

- Create your own online presence
- Manage all of your products and inventory
- Effortlessly complete order fulfillment



Everything you need in one place

- ✓ Create your own online presence
- ✓ Manage all of your products and inventory
- ✓ Effortlessly complete order fulfillment

Checkmarks and arrows are great generic choices for a lot of situations, but you can also use something more specific to your content, like a padlock icon for a list of security-related features:



Protecting your customers and income

- Machine learning monitors suspicious transactions
- No fee when your customer disputes a payment



Protecting your customers and income

- 🔒 Machine learning monitors suspicious transactions
- 🔒 No fee when your customer disputes a payment

Similarly, if you're working on a testimonial try "promoting" the quotes into visual elements by increasing the size and changing the color:



"This app does for me in seconds what used to be a full day of work. Now I can spend more time meeting with my customers and focus on my sales."

— Daniel Bowen, Founder of Bowen Group



“ *This app does for me in seconds what used to be a full day of work. Now I can spend more time meeting with my customers and focus on my sales.* **”**

— Daniel Bowen, Founder of Bowen Group

Links are another great candidate for special styling. You can do something as simple as changing the color and font weight, or something as fancy as a thick and colorful custom underline that partially overlaps the text:



Schedule a consultation

Visit our [locations page](#) to find the nearest distributor and schedule a consultation today!



Schedule a consultation

Visit our [locations page](#) to find the nearest distributor and schedule a consultation today!



Schedule a consultation

Visit our [locations page](#) to find the nearest distributor and schedule a consultation today!

If you're working on a form, using custom checkboxes and radio buttons is an easy way to add some color to the design:

The image shows two side-by-side form snippets. The left snippet is marked with a red 'X' in a circle at the top left, indicating it's incorrect or undesirable. The right snippet is marked with a green checkmark in a circle at the top left, indicating it's correct or desirable.

Left Snippet (Incorrect):

- Do you own a business?
- What type of business to you run?**
- Service Business**
The products you provide are intangible (*no physical form*).
- Merchandising Business**
You buy products at wholesale price and sell them at retail price.
- Manufacturing Business**

Right Snippet (Correct):

- Do you own a business?
- What type of business to you run?**
- Service Business**
The products you provide are intangible (*no physical form*).
- Merchandising Business**
You buy products at wholesale price and sell them at retail price.
- Manufacturing Business**

Just using one of your brand colors for the selected states instead of the browser defaults is often enough to take something from feeling boring to feeling polished and well-designed.

Add color with accent borders

If you're not a graphic designer, how do you add that dash of visual flair to your UI that other designs get from beautiful photography or colorful illustrations?

One simple trick that can make a big difference is to add colorful accent borders to parts of your interface that would otherwise feel a bit bland.

For example, across the top of a card:

The image displays two side-by-side user interface cards for comparison. The left card, marked with a red 'X', has a thin grey border around its entire perimeter. The right card, marked with a green checkmark, features a thin blue horizontal bar at the very top of the card, which serves as an accent border. Both cards contain identical content: a title 'FREELANCER', a description 'Perfect for independent designers for prototyping and demonstrations', a price '\$12' with a note 'Per month billed annually or \$14 month to month', a list of four features with checkmarks, and a 'GET STARTED' button at the bottom.

FREELANCER
Perfect for independent designers for prototyping and demonstrations

\$12 Per month billed annually or \$14 month to month

- ✓ 1 Users
- ✓ 5 Projects
- ✓ Download prototypes
- ✓ Password protected prototypes

GET STARTED

FREELANCER
Perfect for independent designers for prototyping and demonstrations

\$12 Per month billed annually or \$14 month to month

- ✓ 1 Users
- ✓ 5 Projects
- ✓ Download prototypes
- ✓ Password protected prototypes

GET STARTED

...or to highlight active navigation items:



The screenshot shows a horizontal navigation bar with four items: "Dashboard", "Orders", "Products", and "Discounts". The "Products" item is highlighted with a blue underline, indicating it is the active or selected item. The other items are in a standard grey font.



This screenshot is identical to the one above, showing the same navigation bar with the "Products" item highlighted by a blue underline.

...or along the side of an alert message:



The screenshot shows an alert message box with a red border and a red circular icon with a white X in the top-left corner. The message text reads: "Pro user feature: This is a feature available to Pro users at an additional cost. Check out our [pricing information](#) to learn more and activate a free trial."



This screenshot is identical to the one above, showing the same alert message box with a green border and a green circular icon with a white checkmark in the top-left corner.

...or as a short accent underneath a headline:



Here to help every step of the way

Think of us as your very own help desk, with free, around-the-clock support. Contact us anytime, we're here to help 24 hours, 7 days a week.



Here to help every step of the way

Think of us as your very own help desk, with free, around-the-clock support. Contact us anytime, we're here to help 24 hours, 7 days a week.

...or even across the top of your entire layout:



FutureWeb is a conference that explores some of the new ideas tools, and technologies are happening in web design. This 2 day event features amazing workshops and sessions led by the best in the business covering topics including HTML/CSS, Javascript, UI/UX Design, and much, much



FutureWeb is a conference that explores some of the new ideas tools, and technologies are happening in web design. This 2 day event features amazing workshops and sessions led by the best in the business covering topics including HTML/CSS, Javascript, UI/UX Design, and much, much

It doesn't take any graphic design talent to add a colored rectangle to your UI, and it can go a long way towards making something feel more "designed."

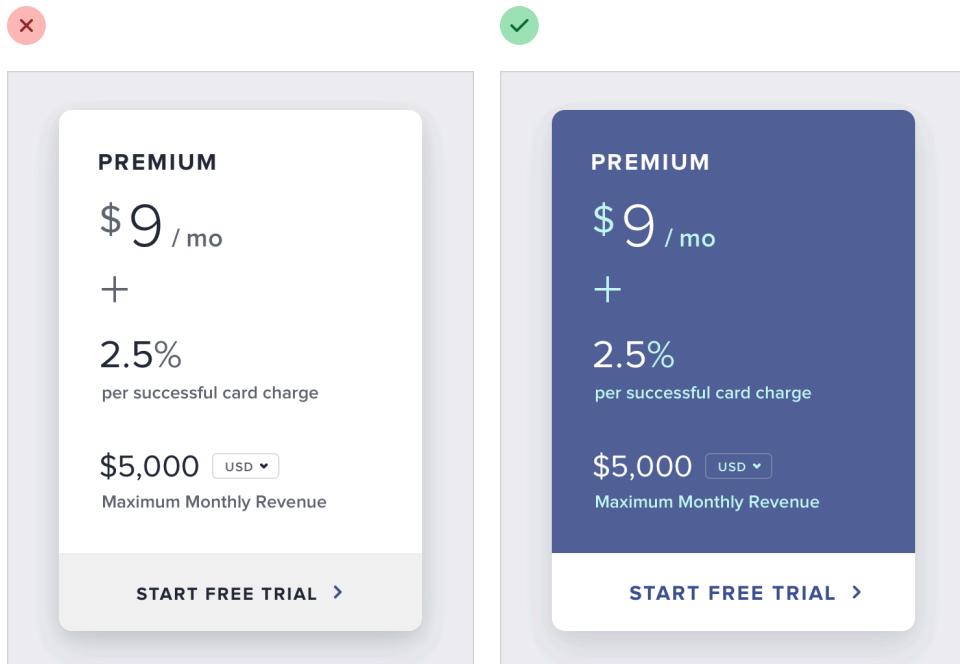
Decorate your backgrounds

Even if you do a great job with hierarchy, spacing, and typography, sometimes a design will still feel a little bit plain.

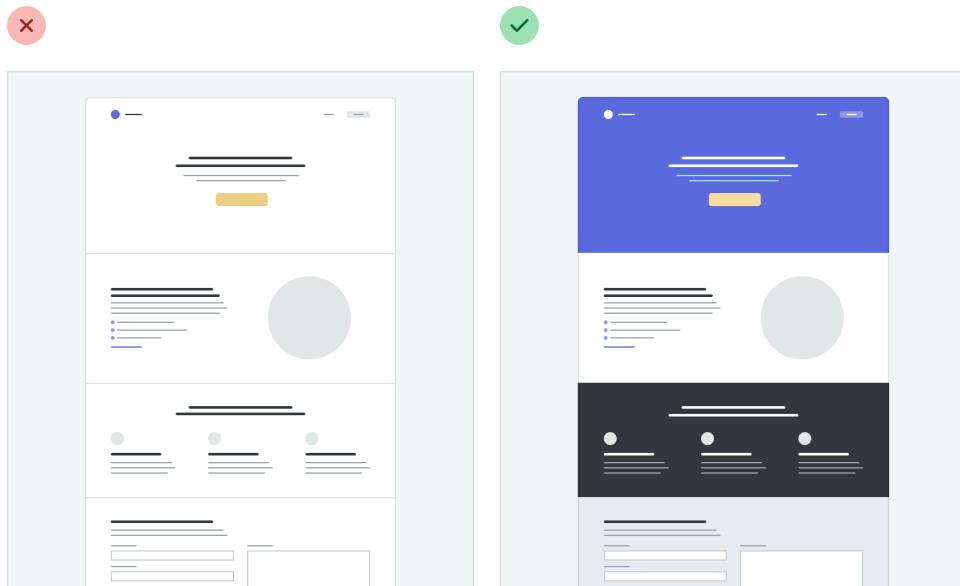
A great way to break up some of the monotony without drastically altering the design is to add some excitement to a few of your backgrounds.

Change the background color

One way to add some excitement to a background is to simply change the color.



This works great for emphasizing an individual panel, as well as for adding some distinction between entire page sections.



For a more energetic look, you could even use a slight gradient:

Details we're sweating

Full-time control for two
Seamless mouse and keyboard control for both parties.

Snappy intera...
An obsession w...
(extra not easy,

Command-line friendly

Pluginability

For best results, use two hues that are no more than about 30° apart.

Use a repeating pattern

Another approach is to add a subtle repeatable pattern, like this one from Hero Patterns:



Hi, I'm Paul! I'm a web designer from Halifax, Nova Scotia. I've been designing websites for over 10 years working with small startups and large corporations.

You don't have to necessarily repeat it across the entire background, either — a pattern designed to repeat along a single edge can look great, too.

Locations	Careers	Referral Program	Newsletter
Plans & Pricing	Press	CoSpace Magazine	Sign up for our newsletter every week.
Mission	Blog	Terms of Service	
Enterprise	FAQ		Enter your email
Events	Broker Partnership		

A dark gray footer with a light gray dotted pattern at the bottom. A white input field with rounded corners is positioned on the right side of the footer, containing the placeholder text "Enter your email".

Keep the contrast between the background and the pattern pretty low to ensure readability.

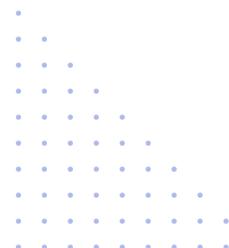
Add a simple shape or illustration

Instead of decorating an entire background, you can also try including an individual graphic or two in specific positions.

Simple geometric shapes work well for this:

Choosing the Perfect Tech Stack

ng quite compares to greenfield software development. The canvas is blank and you finally have the opportunity to do it “The Right Way” from the ground up. If you’ve been building web apps for a while, you’ve undoubtedly found yourself working with technologies that you’ll never use again, given the luxury of a blank canvas. And if you’re exploring the open source world, there’s probably a brand-spanking-new framework you’ve been itching to take for a spin.



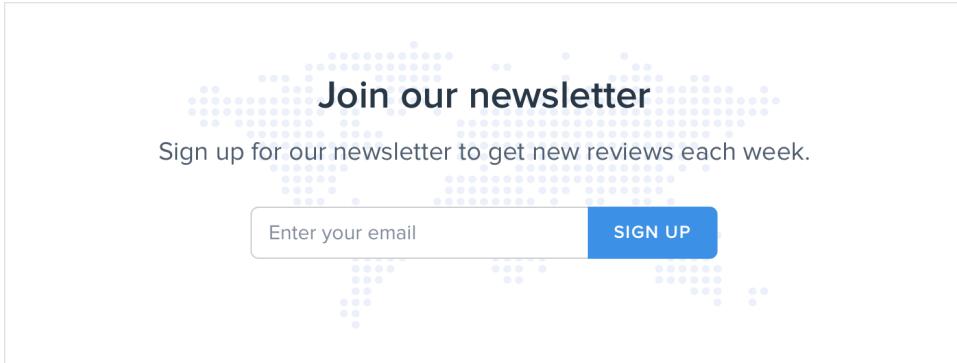
...as do small chunks of a repeatable pattern:

The screenshot shows a landing page with a wavy grey background on the left. The main title is "Simple Pricing". Below it, a subtext reads: "Our plans are designed to save you thousands of dollars compared to a traditional mutual fund." The central part of the page features three data points in a grid:

ACCOUNT BALANCE	25 YEAR SAVINGS	OUR FEE
\$65,000	\$25,000	0.4%

Below the grid is a horizontal slider with a green progress bar, a circular arrow icon, and two labels: "Starter Plan" on the left and "Advanced Plan" on the right.

You can even do something more complex, like a simplified world map:

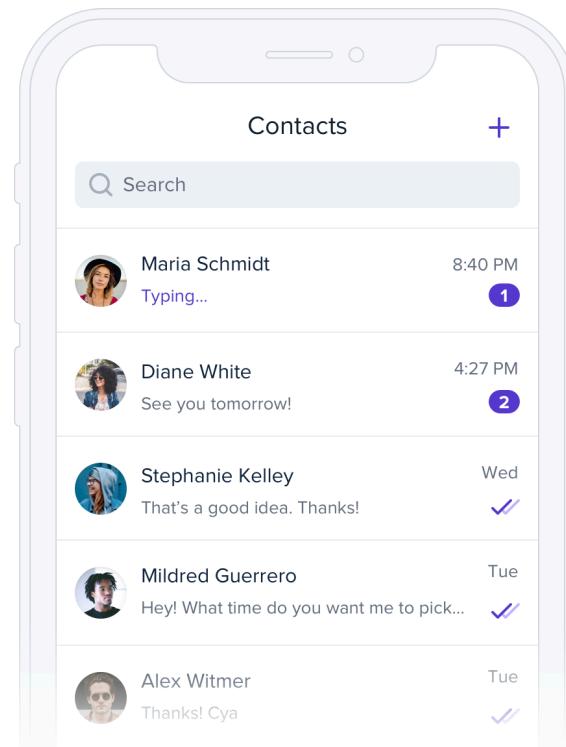


Just like with a full background pattern, it's best to keep the contrast low so nothing interferes with the content.

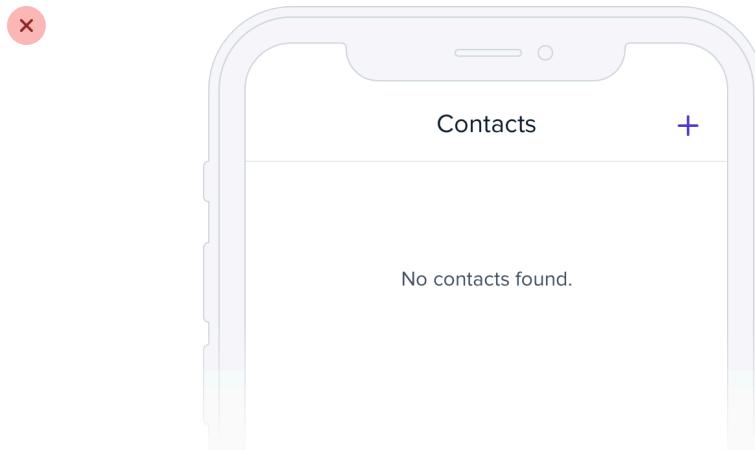
Don't overlook empty states

Imagine you're designing a new feature for an app you're working on.

You've spent a ton of time crafting the perfect realistic sample data, picking out usernames and avatars, and putting together a beautiful and electrifying screen.

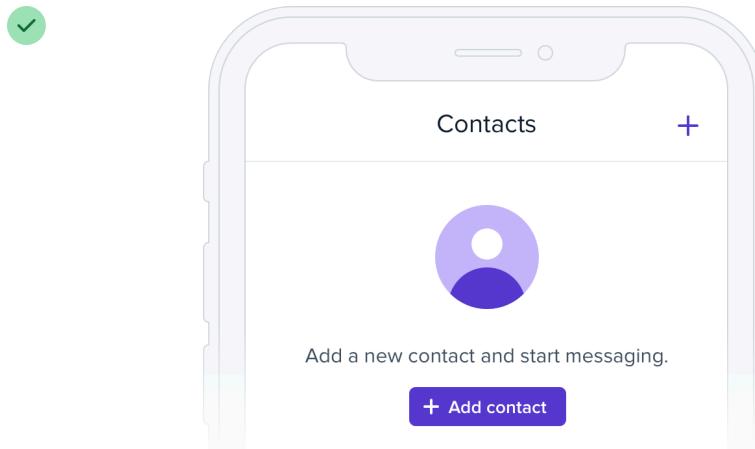


You code it all up and deploy it to production. But when an excited user clicks the new item in the nav, they see this:

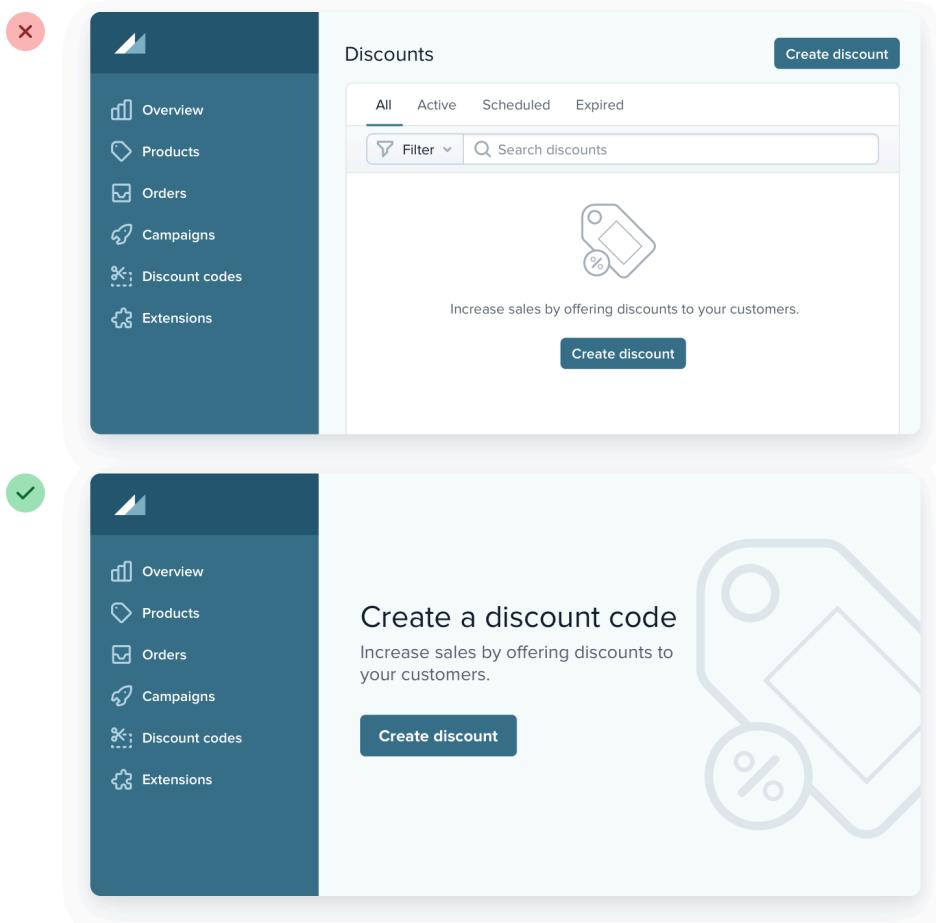


If you're designing something that depends on user-generated content, the empty state should be a priority, not an afterthought.

Try incorporating an image or illustration to grab the user's attention, and emphasizing the call-to-action to encourage them to take the next step:



If you're working on something that has a bunch of supporting UI like tabs or filters, consider hiding that stuff entirely. There's no point in presenting a bunch of actions that don't do anything until the user has created some content.



Empty states are a user's first interaction with a new product or feature. Use them as an opportunity to be interesting and exciting — don't settle for plain and boring.

Use fewer borders

When you need to create separation between two elements, try to resist immediately reaching for a border.

Contacts

Search teams or members

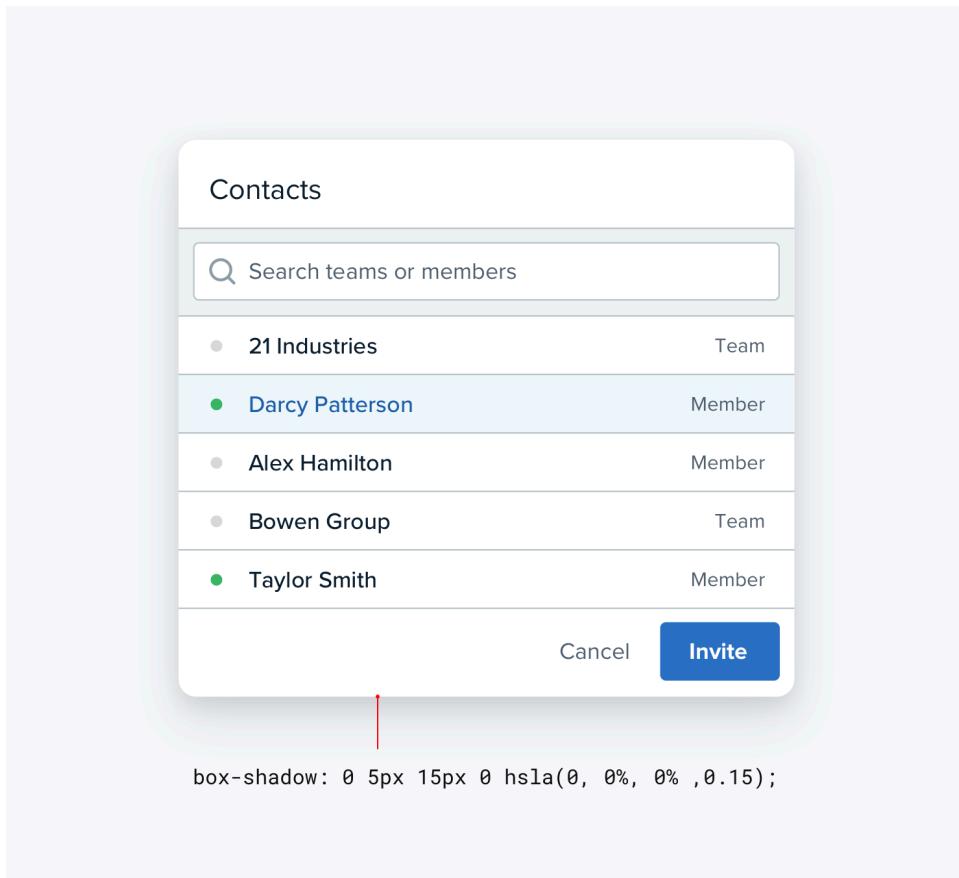
● 21 Industries	Team
● Darcy Patterson	Member
● Alex Hamilton	Member
● Bowen Group	Team
● Taylor Smith	Member

Cancel **Invite**

While borders are a great way to distinguish two elements from one another, they aren't the only way, and using too many of them can make your design feel busy and cluttered.

Use a box shadow

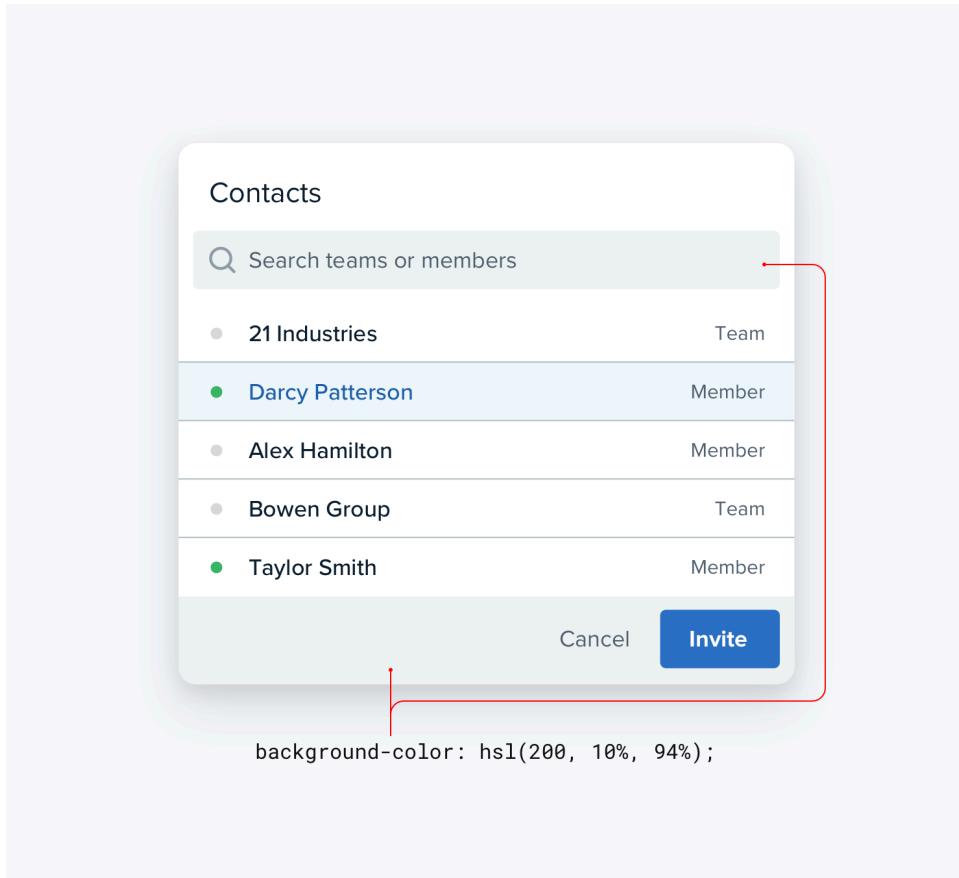
Box shadows do a great job of outlining an element like a border would, but can be more subtle and accomplish the same goal without being as distracting.



This approach works best when the element you are applying the box shadow to is not the same color as the background.

Use two different background colors

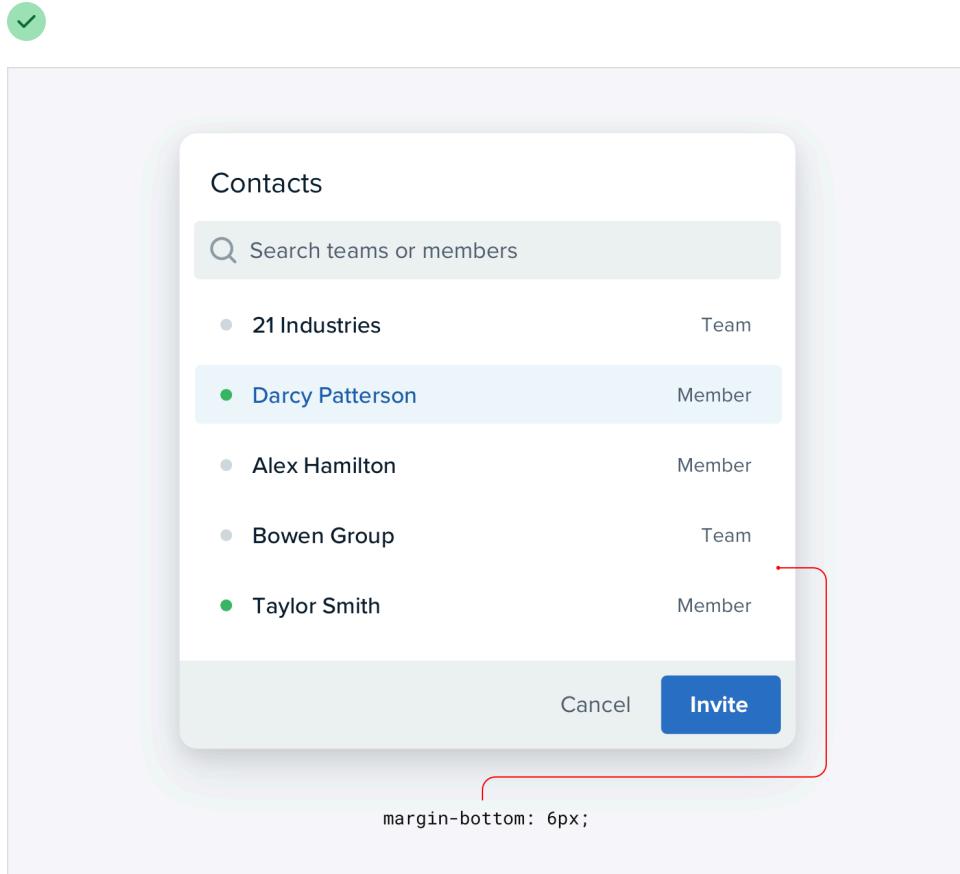
Giving adjacent elements slightly different background colors is usually all you need to create distinction between them.



If you're already using different background colors in addition to a border, try removing the border; you might not need it.

Add extra spacing

What better way to create separation between elements than to simply increase the separation?

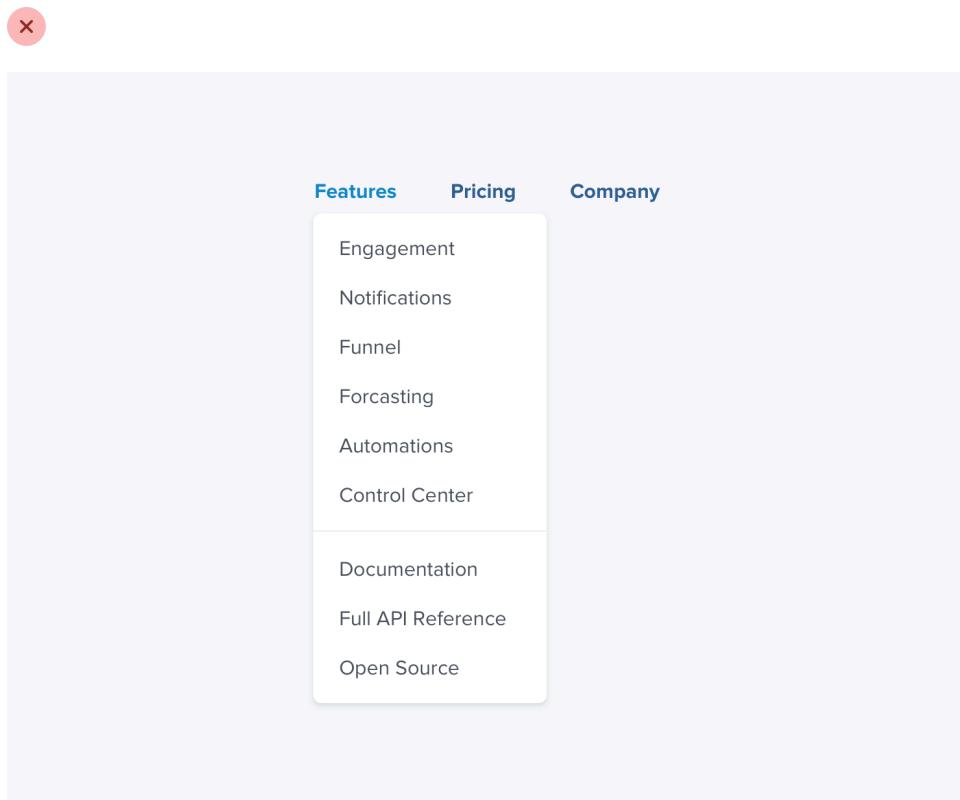


Spacing things further apart is a great way to create distinction between groups of elements without introducing any new UI at all.

Think outside the box

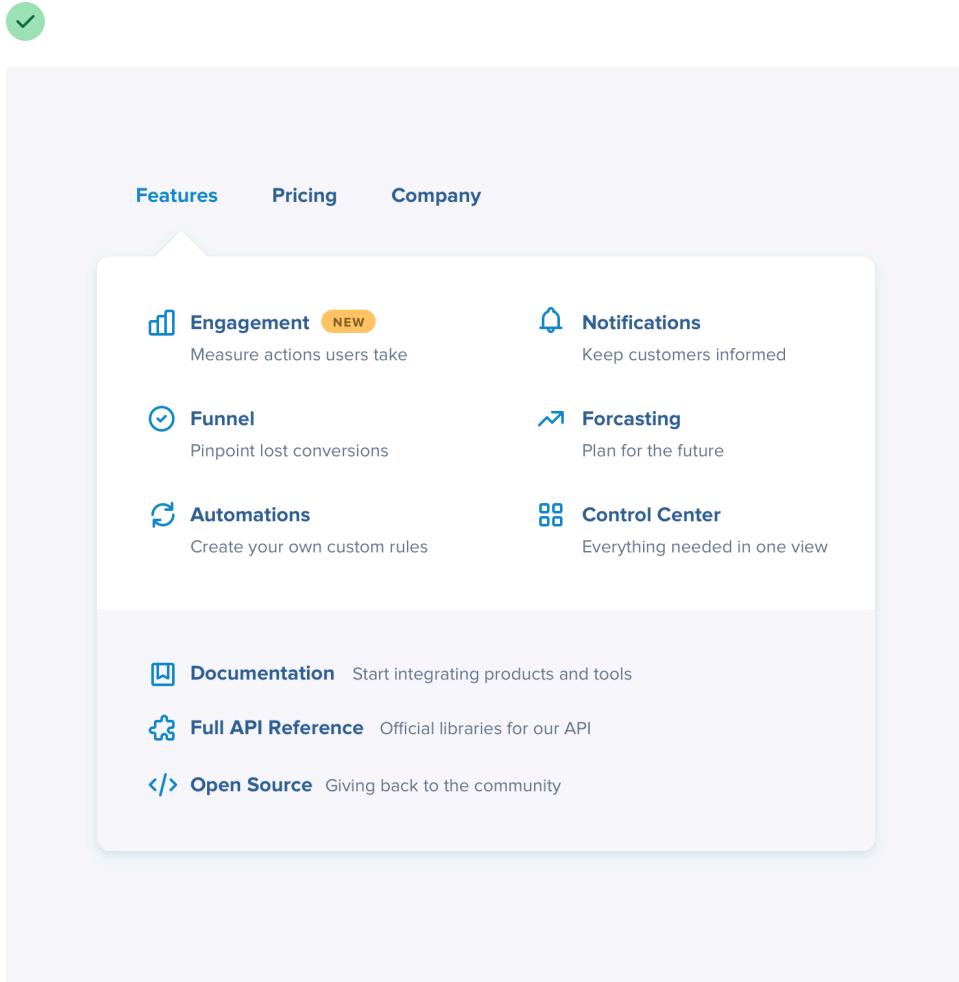
Most people have a lot of preconceived notions about how certain components are supposed to look. But just because we've been conditioned to believe that there's only one way to design a particular component, doesn't mean it's true.

For example, picture a dropdown menu. You're probably picturing a white box with a bit of a drop shadow and a list of links stacked inside of it:



But who says a dropdown needs to be a boring list of links? It's just a floating box on the screen, you can do anything you want with it.

Break it into sections, use multiple columns, add supporting text or colorful icons — do something fun with it!



And don't just stop at dropdowns; what about something like a table?

When you imagine a table, you probably think of columns that each contain one specific piece of data:



NAME	ROLE	POLICY	POLICY TYPE	LOCATION	STATUS	⋮ ⋮ ⋮
Molly Sanders	VP of Sales	\$20,000	All-inclusive Policy	Denver, CO	Approved	⋮ ⋮ ⋮
Michael Roberts	Advisory Board	\$5,000	Basic Policy	New York, NY	Approved	⋮ ⋮ ⋮
Devin Childs	Marketing Manager	\$5,000	Basic Policy	Chicago, IL	Awaiting Approval	⋮ ⋮ ⋮

Tables don't have to work this way, though — if a column doesn't need to be sortable, there's no reason you can't combine it with a related column and introduce some interesting hierarchy:



NAME	POLICY	LOCATION	STATUS	⋮ ⋮ ⋮
Molly Sanders VP of Sales	\$20,000 All-inclusive Policy	Denver, CO	Approved	⋮ ⋮ ⋮
Michael Roberts Advisory Board	\$5,000 Basic Policy	New York, NY	Approved	⋮ ⋮ ⋮
Devin Childs Marketing Manager	\$5,000 Basic Policy	Chicago, IL	Awaiting Approval	⋮ ⋮ ⋮

Table content doesn't have to be plain text, either. Add images if it makes sense, or introduce some color to enrich the existing data:



NAME	POLICY	LOCATION	STATUS	
Molly Sanders VP of Sales	\$20,000 All-inclusive Policy	Denver, CO	Approved	• • •
Michael Roberts Advisory Board	\$5,000 Basic Policy	New York, NY	Approved	• • •
Devin Childs Marketing Manager	\$5,000 Basic Policy	Chicago, IL	Awaiting Approval	• • •

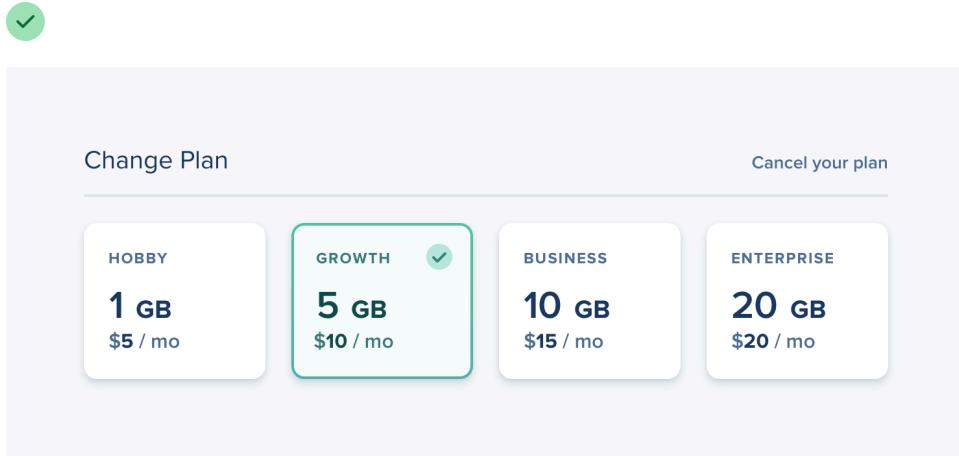
How about radio buttons? There's nothing more boring than a stack of labels with little circles next to them.



Change Plan Cancel your plan

- Hobby - 1 GB (\$5/mo)
- Growth - 5 GB (\$10/mo)
- Business - 10 GB (\$15/mo)
- Enterprise - 20 GB (\$20/mo)

If a set of radio buttons are an important part of the UI you're designing, try something like selectable cards instead:



Don't let your existing beliefs hold back your designs — constraints are powerful but sometimes a bit of freedom is just what you need to take an interface to the next level.

Leveling Up

Leveling up

Hopefully after reading this book you feel much more confident in your ability to make something look awesome, without relying on a designer. But even though we've tried our best to cram in every good idea we could possibly think of, there will always be more out there to learn.

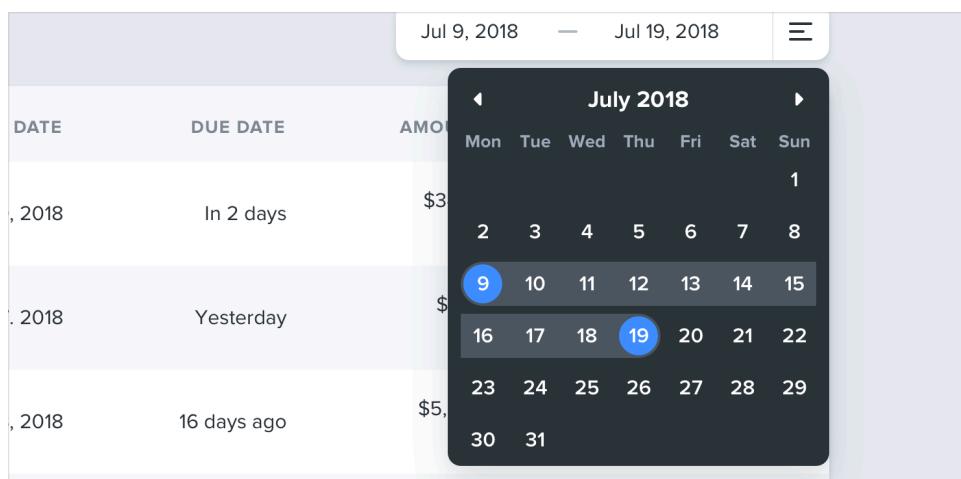
Here are two of the best ways you can continue to hone your skills, and add new tools to your toolbelt.

Look for decisions you wouldn't have made

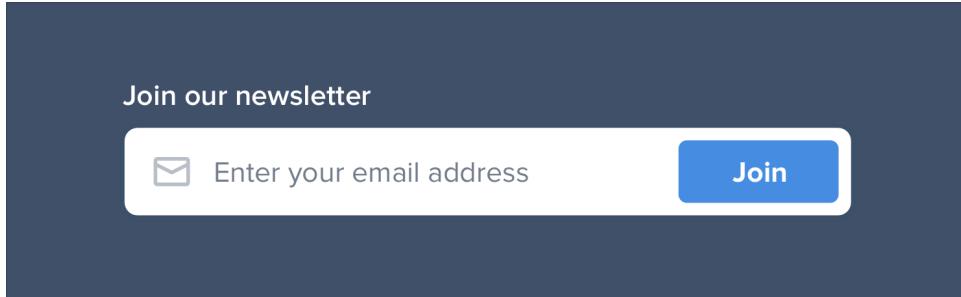
Whenever you stumble across a design you really like, ask yourself:

"Did the designer do anything here that I never would have thought to do?"

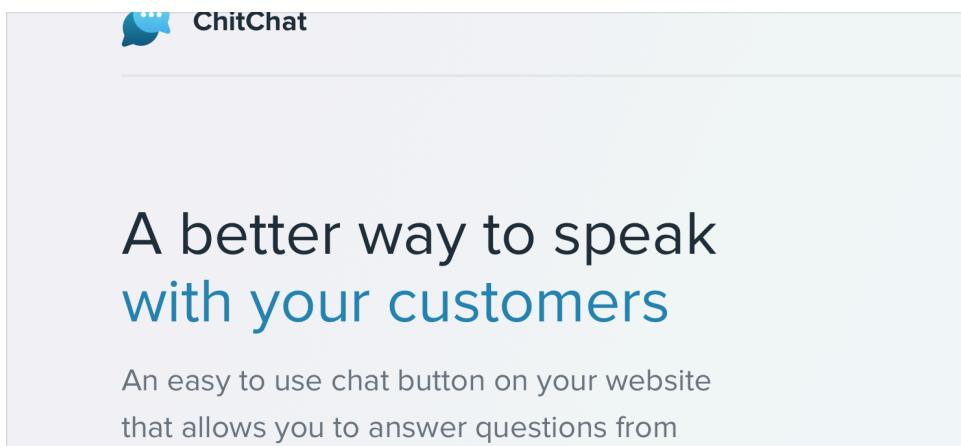
Maybe it's the way they inverted the background color on a datepicker:



...or the way they positioned a button within a text input instead of on the outside:



...or something as simple as using two different font colors for a headline:



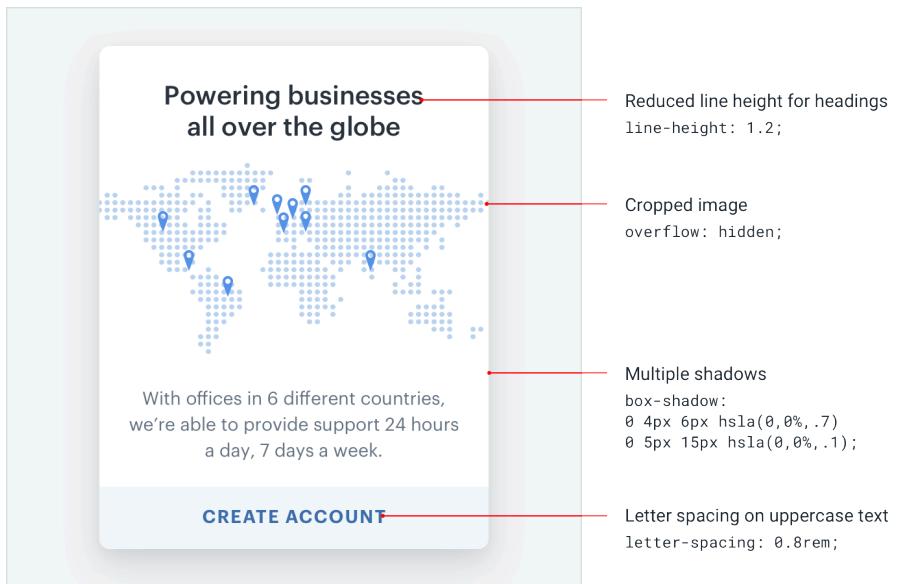
Paying attention to these sorts of unintuitive decisions is a great way to discover new ideas that you can apply to your own designs.

Rebuild your favorite interfaces

The absolute best way to notice the little details that make a design look

really polished is to recreate that design from scratch, *without peeking at the developer tools*.

When you're trying to figure out why your version looks different than the original, you'll discover tricks like "reduce your line height for headings", "add letter-spacing to uppercase text", or "combine multiple shadows" all on your own.



By continually studying the work that inspires you with a careful eye, you'll be picking up design tricks for years to come.

— Adam Wathan & Steve Schoger