UXPin

Winning Over Users With Attractive UI Design

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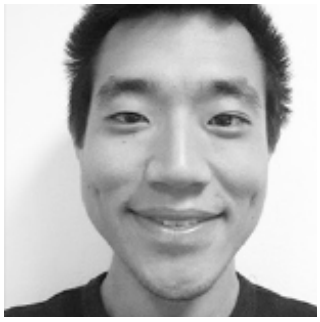


Jerry Cao is a content strategist at UXPin where he gets to put his overly active imagination to paper every day. In a past life, he developed content strategies for clients at Brafton and worked in traditional advertising at DDB San Francisco. In his spare time he enjoys playing electric guitar, watching foreign horror films, and expanding his knowledge of random facts.
Follow me on Twitter

With a passion for writing and an interest in everything anything related to design or technology, Matt Ellis found freelance writing best suited his skills and allowed him to be paid for his curiosity. Having worked with various design and tech companies in the past, he feels quite at home at UXPin as the go-to writer, researcher, and editor. When he's not writing, Matt loves to travel, another byproduct of curiosity.

Co-founder and head of product, Kamil previously worked as a UX/UI Designer at Grupa Nokaut. He studied software engineering in university, but design and psychology have always been his greatest passions.
Follow me on Twitter @ziebak

A Few Quick Words

There's no denying that visuals are important to interaction design, but exactly *how* important may surprise you.

While visual representation is often listed as the second dimension of interaction design (the others being words, space, time, and behavior), in many ways it is the first.

Photo credits: Ava Session via awwwards

As visual mediums, sites and apps communicate primarily in visuals, and even written language must be presented in fonts, size, etc. Perhaps even more important, as sight-based creatures, humans are

accustomed to making split-second decisions on appearance alone. These instantaneous responses are deeply linked with emotions, and so your interface's look will directly and immediately affect how your user feels about the site – the key to a successful UX.

In this pocket guide, we'll explain how and why an interface's effectiveness really is only skin-deep. We hope this guide will help you better understand the functional power of aesthetics.

For the love of UI design,
Jerry Cao, Matt Ellis, Kamil Zieba

More than Meets the Eye

We can easily notice when we see something we like (and something we don't), but on a subconscious level there's so much more at play. When scientists say humans are sight-based creatures, it's not just a casual comment – there's a surprising amount of data showing that a large portion of the human brain is devoted to sight alone, especially in comparison to the other senses.

But, because you're a sight-based human, we'll make our point better *showing* rather than *telling*. Read the word below:

WHITE

For most people, the brain comprehends only the color green, even though the word represents a different color. The word itself is basic enough that any first-grader can recognize, yet still the sight of the color green dominates the communication of the color white.

In an eye-opening TED Talk, data journalist and infographic expert David McCandless points out the sheer depth visuals have on our

brains, most of which is subconscious. He conveys his point with an analogy to computer processing:.

> *Your sense of sight is the fastest. It has the same bandwidth as a computer network. Then you have touch, which is about the speed of a USB key. And then you have hearing and smell, which has the throughput of a hard disk. And then you have poor old taste, which is like barely the throughput of a pocket calculator. And that little square in the corner, a naught .7 percent, that's the amount we're actually aware of. So a lot of your vision – the bulk of it is visual, and it's pouring in – it's unconscious.*

Think of the impact this will have on interface design. Your users will notice the eye-catching elements of course, but every choice of color, font, icon symbol, layout location – every pixel on the screen – is being processed on a level that your user doesn't even realize.

Photo credit: Allan Ajifo. Creative Commons.

As we first described in the free e-book Web UI Design for the Human Eye, appearance even goes as far as to affect the perception of how well a product functions.

When it comes to entering our credit card info online, trust always becomes a factor. A fascinating Stanford study on how users access website credibility revealed that almost half of all users, 46.1%, determined if a site was trustworthy based on looks alone. Such visual minutiae as layout, typography, font size, and even color scheme were all pivotal factors.

Other studies provide similar evidence on the power of aesthetics on a product's perceived value. An experiment by Masaaki Kurosu and Kaori Kashimura tested two ATMs in which the only difference was the aesthetic placement of the screen and buttons. Users reported that the more visually attractive one worked better, even though the functionality was the same.

In the digital realm, designer Keith Lang connected aesthetics with functionality through his "realizations of rounded rectangles". He found that soft-edged interface objects were more usable because they were more visually appealing. Hard edged objects (like squares and rectangles) disrupted eye movement, which explains why many companies like Apple opted for the "rounded rectangle" style of interface design.

The role of aesthetics goes far beyond "looking nice." We put our faith in aesthetics and gravitate to products that are polished. Aesthetic consequences are massive, both conscious and unconscious, real and perceived.

Not Just a Pretty Face: The Functional Role of Visuals

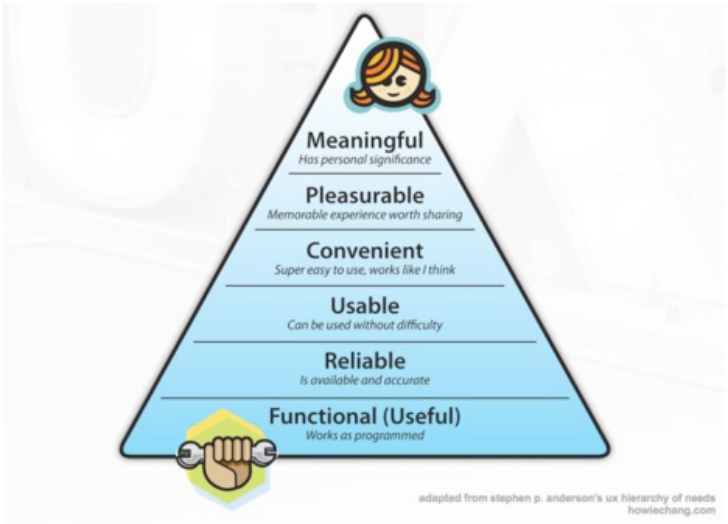


Photo credit: "UX Hierarchy of Needs," Rob Enslin, Creative Commons 2.0

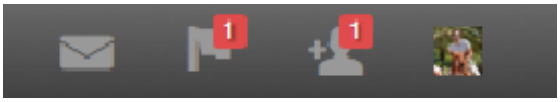
Visuals can serve many different functions in an interface, but carry the most weight in the following areas.

Navigation

If your site's navigational system is simple and its pages basic, you can get away with a completely visual navigation bar. Your users will inherently prefer this, as it requires less effort than reading words – of

course its a miniscule difference in brainpower, but the golden rule of IxD is making the user think as little as possible. A strictly visual navigational system will feel easier and more intuitive to the user.

Facebook and LinkedIn take advantage of this when they can, with their icon-based navigation bars for managing accounts:



Source: LinkedIn

Of course, you can't use symbols to represent every type of page, and both Facebook and LinkedIn fall back on words for more complex navigational options.

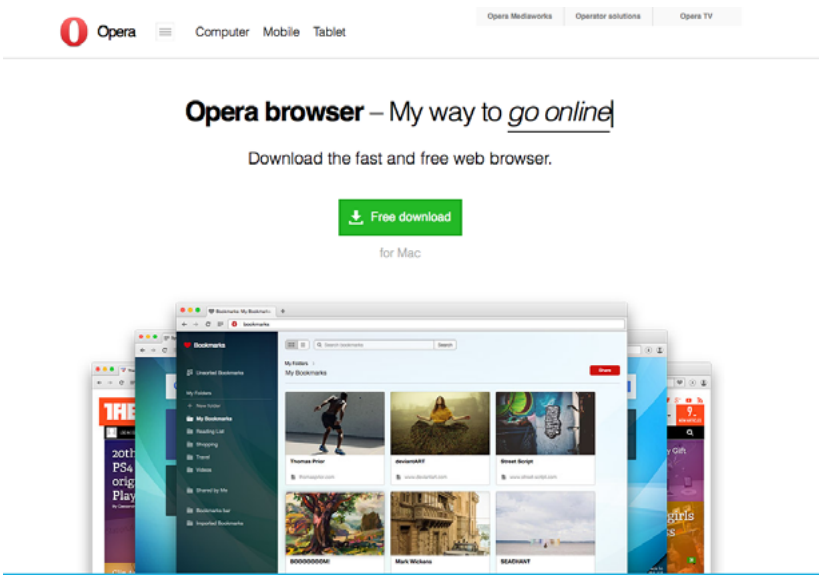
Drawing Attention

Even when relying on words and other methods of communication, visuals will still complement and influence the message. What this means for interaction design is that visuals draw attention to the items that your users should interact with.

In the above LinkedIn example, just look how the red squares around the "1" stand out against the gray tones behind it. This ensures that users notice these new messages or alerts.

Attention-drawing visuals are essential for notifications and navigational elements that are necessary for your user to see in order

to properly interact with the interface. However, drawing attention also has a strategic use, for example, promoting calls-to-action.



Source: Opera

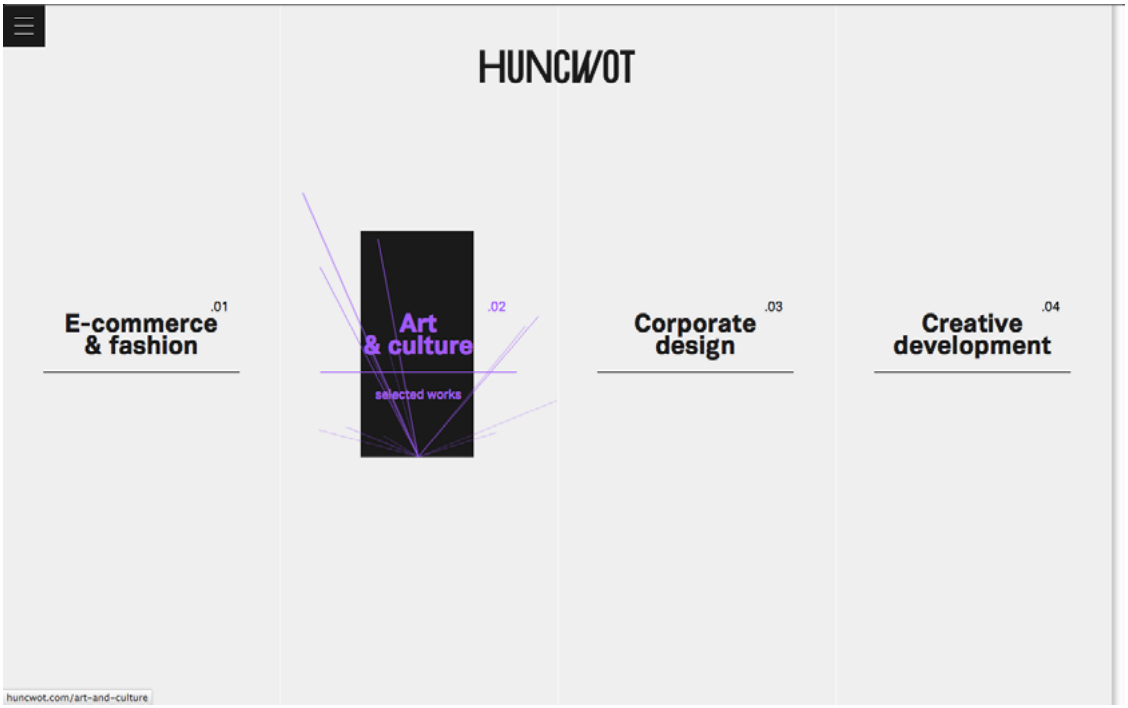
In the Opera example above, the call-to-action button is displayed predominantly in the center of the screen, and given a vibrant green color to make it stand out against the white background. It's likely one of the first things the user will see on the page.

Feedback

Feedback is a fundamental part of any interaction – it is, after all, the difference between one-sided and two-sided communication. But while feedback might make you think of wordy error messages or pop-up windows, visual feedback can be much more subtle.

The appeal is that visual feedback gives the user the same security and sometimes enjoyment of confirming their interactions are suc-

cessfully registered, but without the somewhat involved cognitive processes as reading a block of text or the distraction of an unexpected pop-up window.



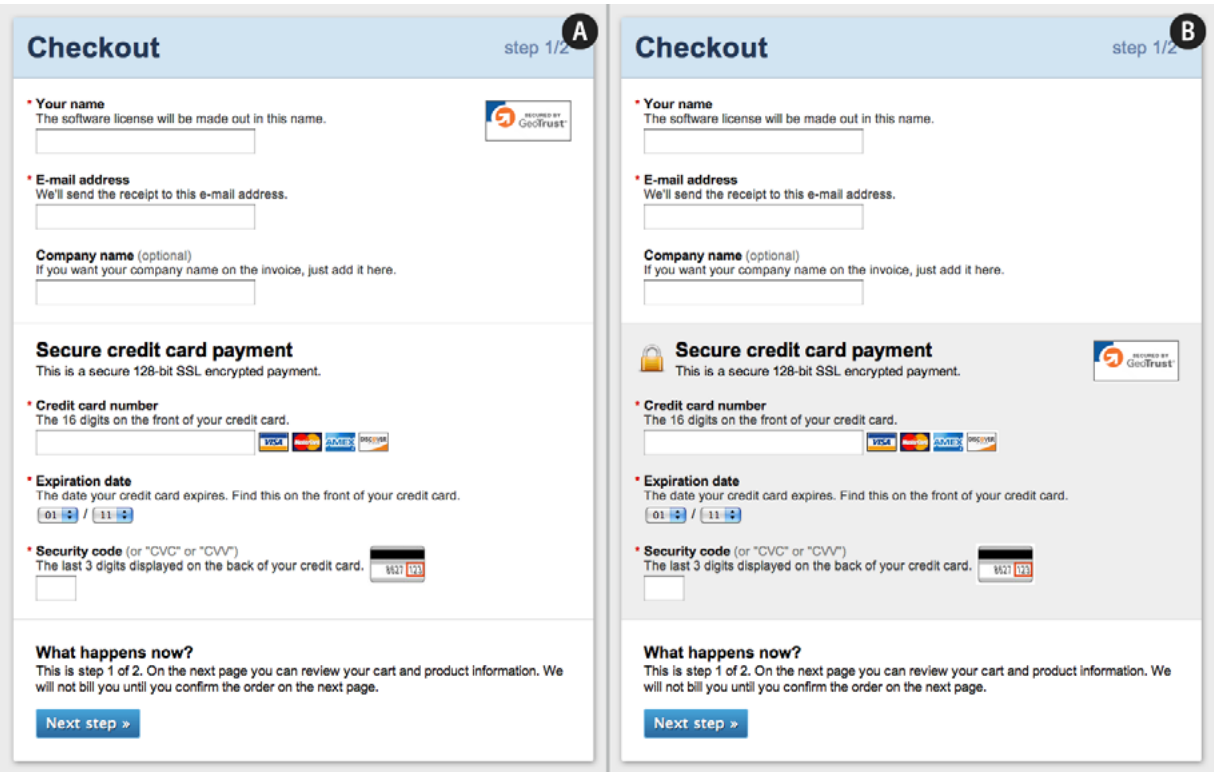
Source: Huncwot

The homepage for Huncwot uses this well.

The four navigational choices are displayed simply enough, but when each one is hovered over, a visual appears behind it and the text changes color. First, this signals to the user that their input was registered, but on a deeper level, this also adds fun and excitement to the navigation process. Even though the user may already know where they want to go, they will still probably hover over all four choices just to see what the visuals are like.

Affecting Behavior

More and more studies are showing how an interface's visuals can affect the user's behavior, especially in the realm of ecommerce with closing a sale. As this Smashing Magazine article points out, proper visuals can literally make you more money.



Source: Christian Holst via Smashing Magazine

Amongst other things (read the article for the full list of tips), a company's sales rate increases when the secure areas of the form are set apart, in the above example with a different background and icons denoting security like the lock.

When it comes to the checkout process, even the slightest IxD misstep will scare off a sale. Details like this one add up to put the user at ease enough to follow through.

Not Just Physical: The Emotional Connection of Visuals

Writing for UX Mag, Morgan Brown and Chuck Longanecker describe what they call “designing for the gut.”

This refers to the emotional connection formed between a user and the product, built upon their continued satisfaction, enough to keep them *wanting* to use the product. It’s this “gut” reaction that is at the core of a good UX, moreso even than a logical acknowledgement that the product serves its function well.

What does this gut reaction have to do with visuals?

As Don Norman explains in *Emotion & Design: Attractive Things Work Better*, millions of years of evolution have created in humans (and most of the animal kingdom) split-second decision-making instincts formed largely from immediate emotional responses. In the life-or-death situations of our prehistory, we and our animal brethren didn't have time to logically deduce the pros and cons of different tactics – we simply acted to save our lives.

Years later, the life-or-death situation have mostly vanished, but the gut instincts remains. And these, you might have guess, are greatly influenced by sight.

Take, for example, that feeling of fear and exhilaration that comes from staring down from a great height. That sight alone induces an adrenaline spike, a rush that sparked our fascination with extreme sports. Another example is the joy that comes from the sight of delicious food, the reason behind the food television trend. We know the food on TV is not available to be eaten, that it's just an image – but this image is enough to evoke an emotional response in us.

In interaction design, we can categorize the influence of visuals into three primary categories: first impressions, identity, and the improvement of usability through relaxation.

First Impressions

In the beginning, we mentioned how certain usability studies determined that appearance both (A.) was the main factor most users considered when deciding trustability, and (B.) that users perceived more aesthetic products as more functional. These are the results of how a product's appearance forms its first impression.

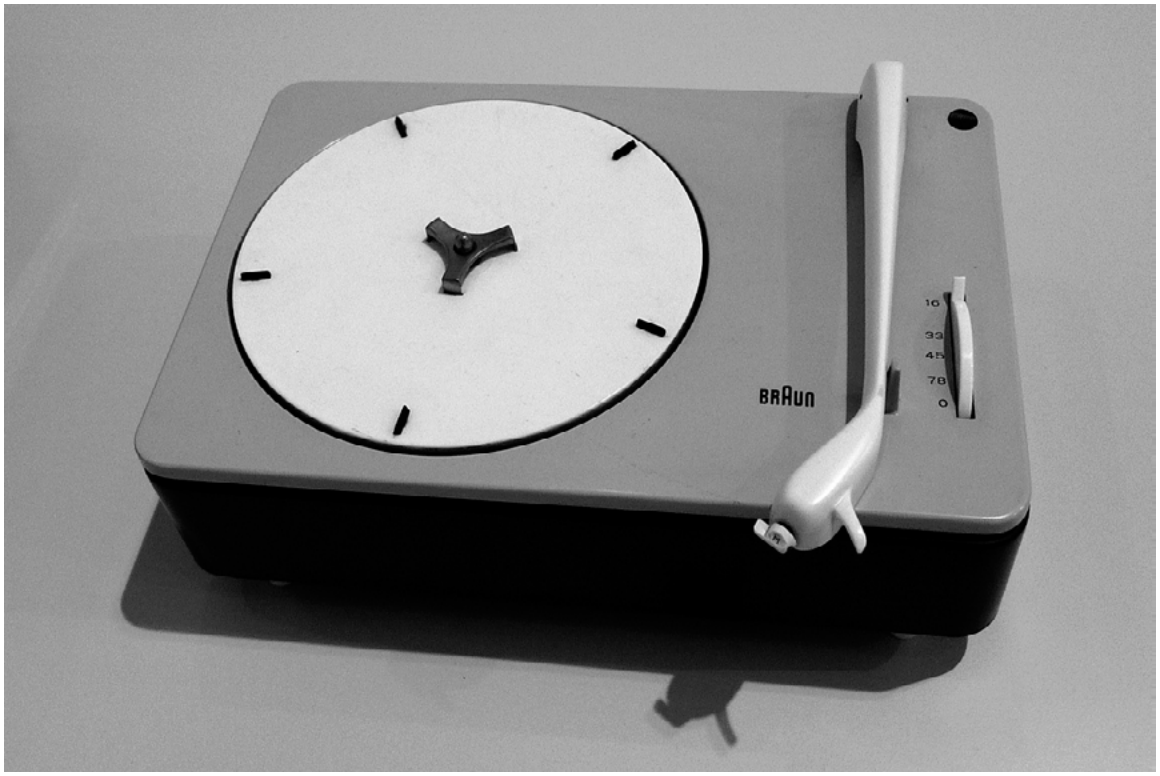


Photo credit: Nick Wade. Creative Commons.

Because our instincts have evolved such that we make quick decisions based on what we see, first impressions can make or break a site or app. First impressions always tend to rely on sight; sight is most often the first way we experience a product, and interacting with it on a substantial enough level to form an educated opinion takes time and effort we don't always have. An initial impression based on sight, however, is both quick and easy.

Studies show that users will judge the value of the site most critically within the first 10 seconds. This, alone, proves the importance of a first impression. In order to hold your user's attention and prove your worth, you must visually establish an emotional connection that appeals to their gut responses.

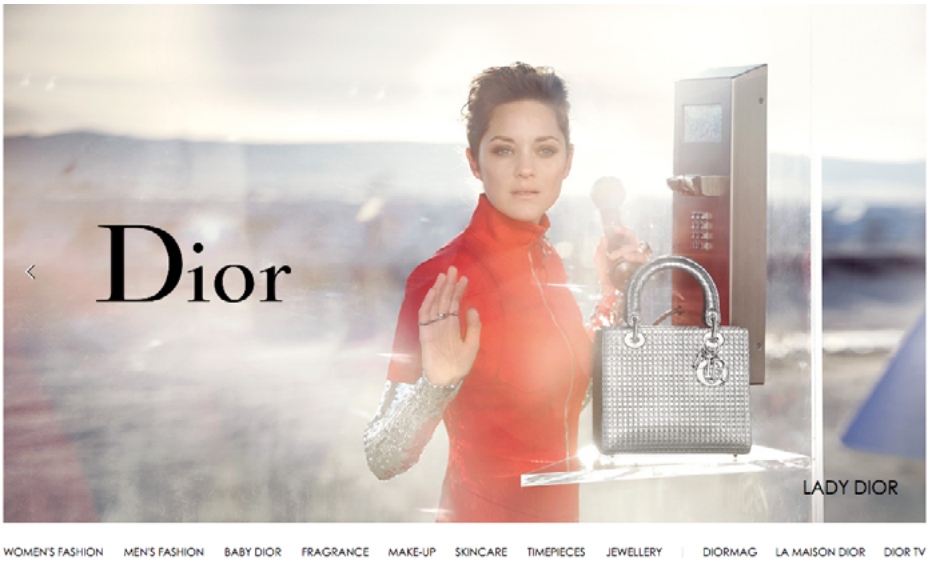
Identity

The history of marketing shows us one of the most effective ways to establish an emotional connection is appeal to the identity of the user.

This means people who view themselves as "traditional" will want to use products that look "traditional," people who view themselves as "cutting edge" will want to use "cutting edge" products, and so on. This also means, all other things being equal, a "cutting edge" person will not want to use a product that looks "traditional," not matter what it's usability is like.

Photo credit: Christopher Michel. Creative Commons.

Visuals give off a personality just as a person exhibits their own personality. Your interface's visual representation will attract, and be attractive to, those with the same personality type.



Source: Dior

Take the website for the fashion brand Dior. The most prominent visual is the large-spread fashion photograph, with all the luxury and sex appeal you'd expect from a fashion brand. This appeals to users who consider themselves fashionable… such a strategy on, say, a site promoting a monster truck rally would not go over so well.

Relaxation Improves Usability

As Norman continues to explain in his article, visually appealing products put us at ease.

This relaxation impacts how our brains and bodies function, which could possibly explain why, in the Japanese ATM study, users had less

difficulties with the attractive ATMs. The theory holds that, because the users were more "taken" by the attractive ATMs, they were more relaxed and thus were able to use the interface with less stress.

Photo credit: megawatts86. Creative Commons.

If this theory holds true, then establishing an emotional connection through visuals not only increases the perceived usability, but the actual usability. Designers, then, should dedicate equal time and energy to optimizing their interface's appearance as they do it's functionality – the two are one-in-the-same.

Attractive design helps to capture and hold the user's attention. Usable and useful design then helps to deliver upon your initial promise for an overall satisfying experience.

Applying What You've Learned: Best Practices for Attractive Interaction Design

By now, we've made our case for the importance of visual aesthetics. ... But so what? How does all this matter if you don't know how to apply it? In this chapter we'll explain 7 practical ways to make sure function matches form.

1. **Follow Hick's Law (Don't Clutter Interfaces)**

   In the 1950s, British psychologist William Edmund Hick proved through experimentation that decisionmaking time was proportionately affected by the number of available options.The more options on the screen, the greater the cognitive load.

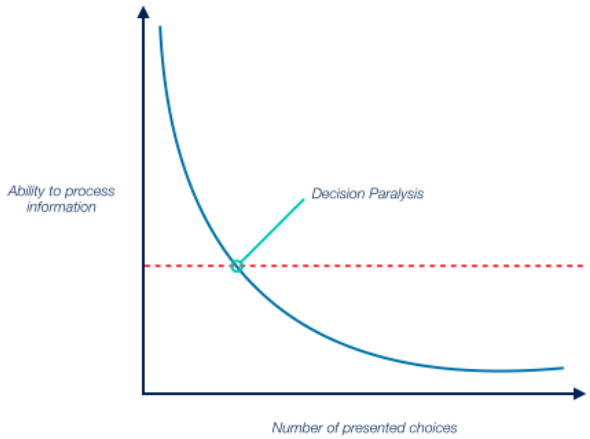
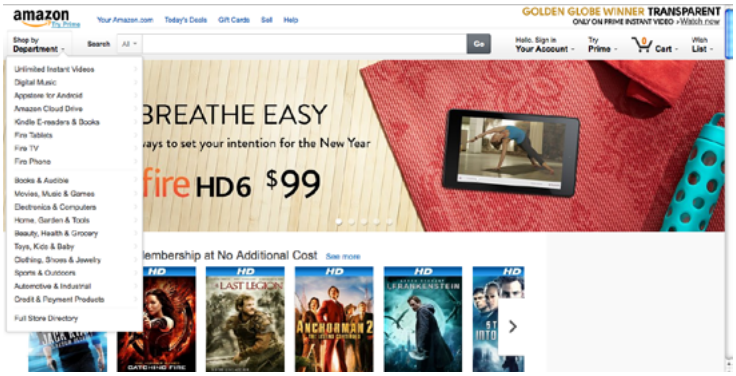


Photo credit: Marcin Treder, UXPin, based on:
Shake, Rattle & Roll to my Magic Number: 7 +/-2 by Kate Simpson

Provide too many options and users will even experience decision paralysis.

The tricky part is, your users want options... just not too many. Apply Hick's Law to your interface to strike that perfect balance, giving your users enough freedom and choices, but without overwhelming them with a cluttered interface.



Source: Amazon

For example, take a look at Amazon. The default page has only a few navigational buttons at the top, and fills the rest of the screen with attractive pictures, all of which promoting – even suggesting – their products.

Notice how submenus are hidden until you first trigger the "Shop by Department" menu. If submenus and main menu items were both visible, users would feel overloaded. Hiding controls until needed controls not just a simpler site, but a more visually appealing one as well.

For more guidelines on how to apply Hick's Law, read our free *Interaction Design Best Practices, Book 2*.

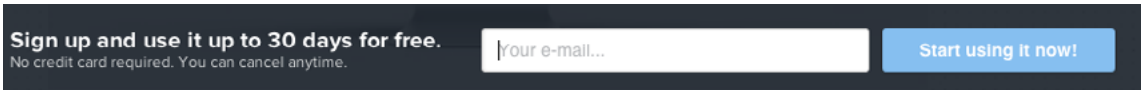
2. Use the Right Signifiers

Signifiers can be your best friend, if you know how to use them.

What qualifies as a signifier is any visual cue that suggests, or "signals," an element's function to the user. This could be a pattern icon, such as a magnifying glass meaning "search," to something more explicit, such as clickable text that reads, "Post Your Comment."

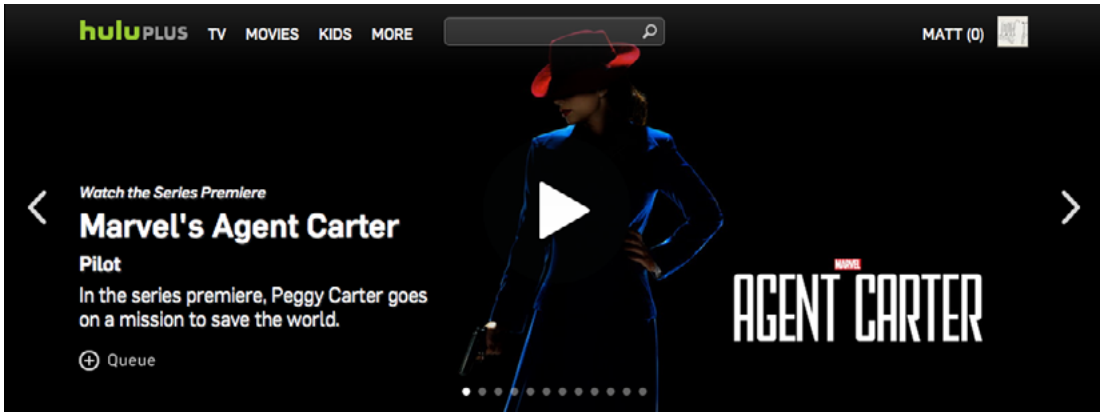
We can categorize signifiers into 5 types based on Natasha Postolovski's excellent Smashing Magazine piece:

- **Explicit** – Obvious signifiers, such as words or pictures showing the function. Frequently applies to calls to action.



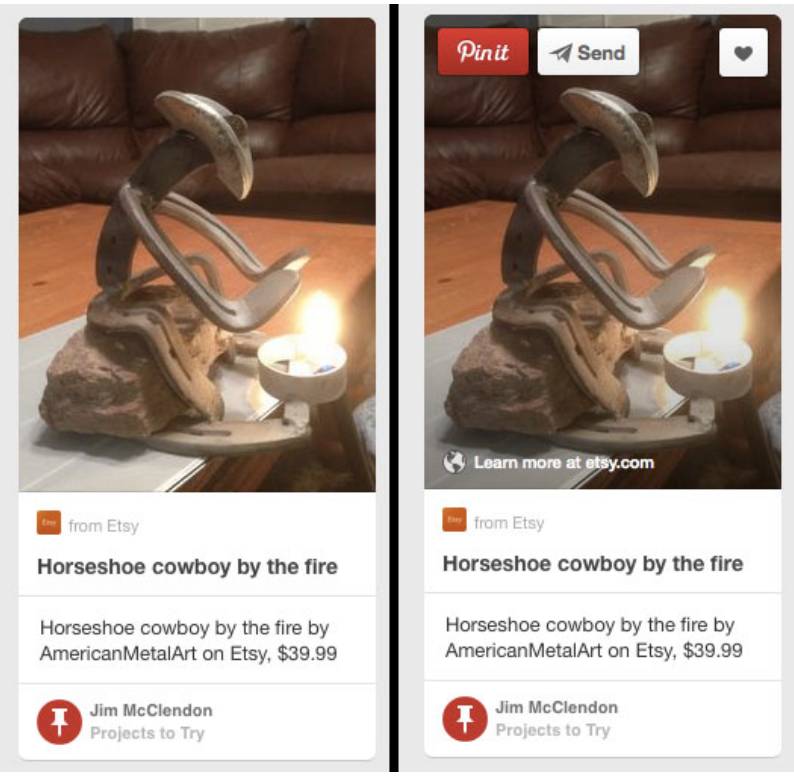
Source: UXPin

- **Pattern** – These are like Internet shorthand, used on so many sites, their meaning is common knowledge. If you see a sideways triangle icon, you know it means the media is playable.



Source: Hulu

- **Hidden** – Signifiers that come into view under certain conditions, such as dropdown menus or hover controls (like with Pinterest).



Source: Pinterest

- **Metaphorical** – Often combined with other types of signifiers, these are images that suggest function by metaphor, such as a pen icon signifying you can enter text.

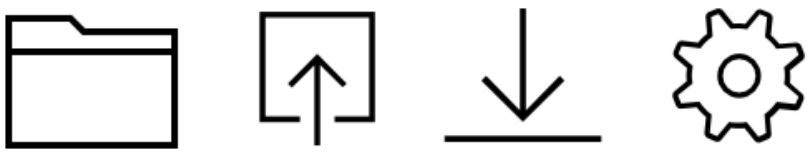


Photo credit: UXPin

- **Negative** – As the name suggests, these signifiers show that something is not available, the most popular being grayed out text.

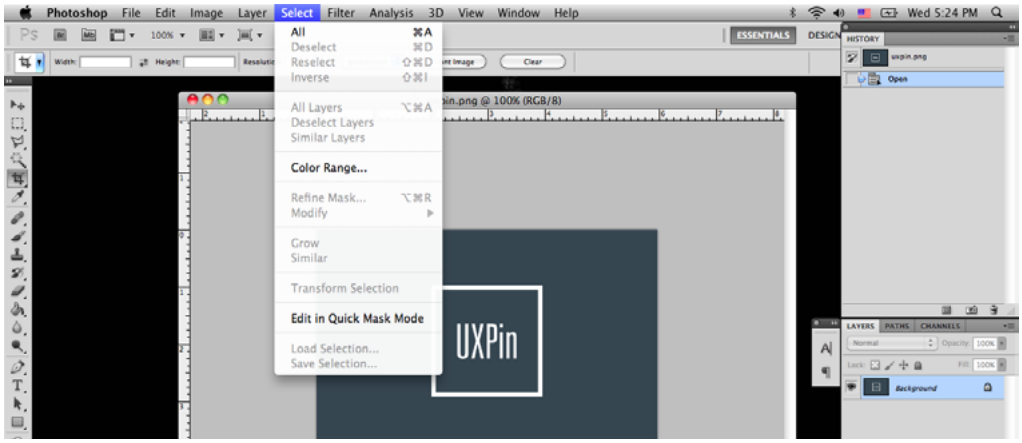


Photo credit: UXPin via Photoshop

Signifiers make your website feel intuitive and easy-to-use, relying on existing knowledge and common sense to bypass the learning curve of a new system. They are a powerful tool in optimizing your interface, but also in creating a more aesthetic site.

For starters, signifiers helps reduce clutter. Familiar symbols bypass the need for explanations, and can often be minimized and placed out of the way (as with social media menus tucked into the corner). Additionally, each signifier is an opportunity to showcase your unique artistic style.

A magnifying glass is enough to show a search bar – but the look of the magnifying glass is up to you.

For a more thorough explanation of signifiers, read our free *Interaction Design Best Practices, Book 1*.

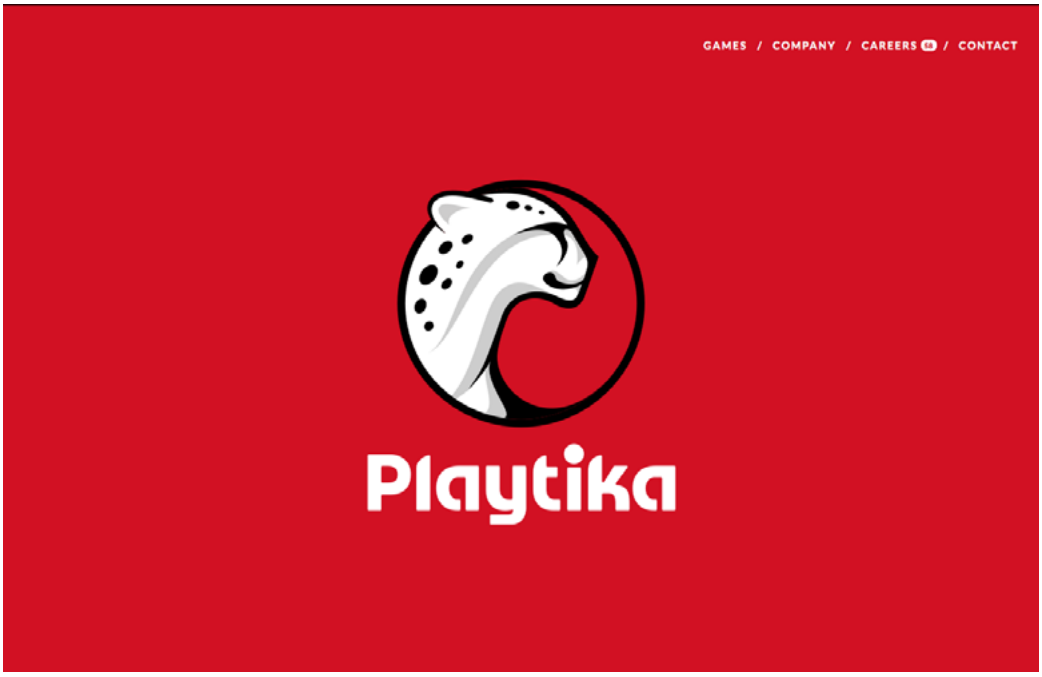
3. Know Which Colors Evoke Which Moods

Ever wonder why most bank logos are blue or why warning signs use red?

These are no accidents, but conscious decisions by people who know the impact the right color can make.

While each color produces subtle psychological effects that can even vary based on the hue, here we'll give just a basic overview of only the primary colors:

- **Red** – *alertiveness, power, passion* – actually stimulates blood flow looking at it.

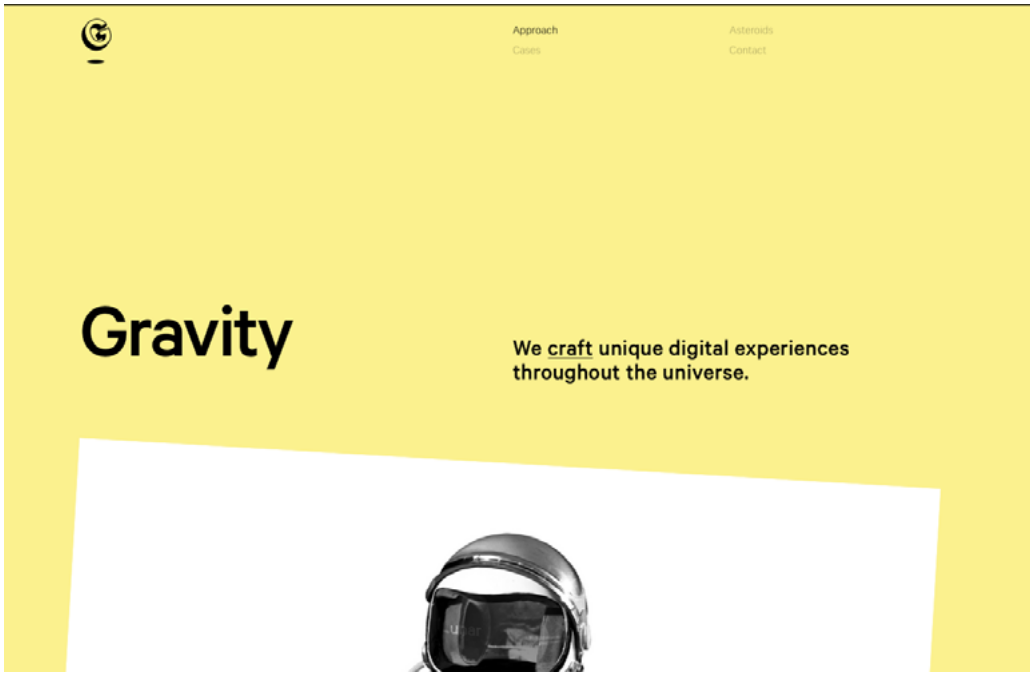


Source: Playtika

- **Orange** – *playfulness, friendliness, affordability* – less stimulating than red, but still energetic.

Source: Epic Creative Agency

- **Yellow** – *happy, anxious, energetic* – also used in warning signs because it catches attention.

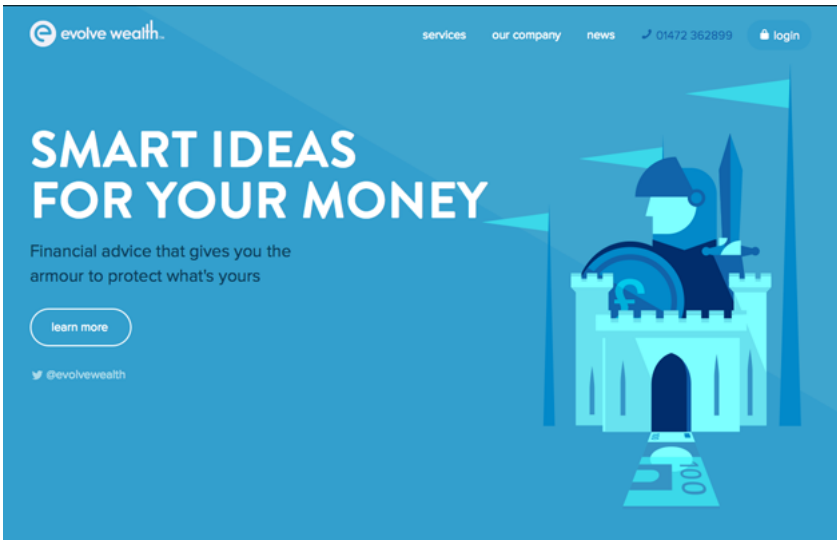


Source: Lunar Gravity

- **Green** – *growth, balance, wealth (U.S.)* – the middle color of the rainbow accurately represents a nice balance.

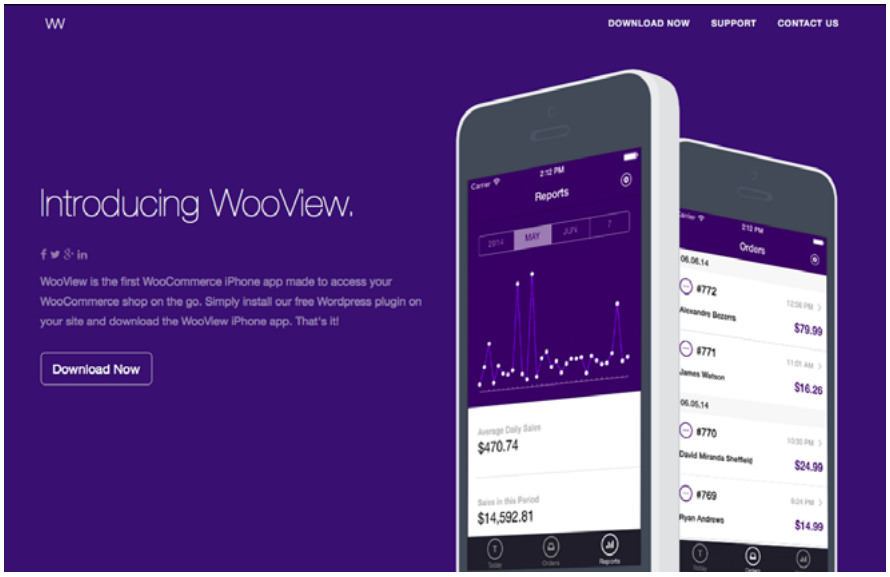
Source: Massis Tea

- **Blue** – *trustworthy, inviting, calm* – the most popular color on the Internet, it's trustworthy and calming attributes make it attractive to both financial and social media companies.



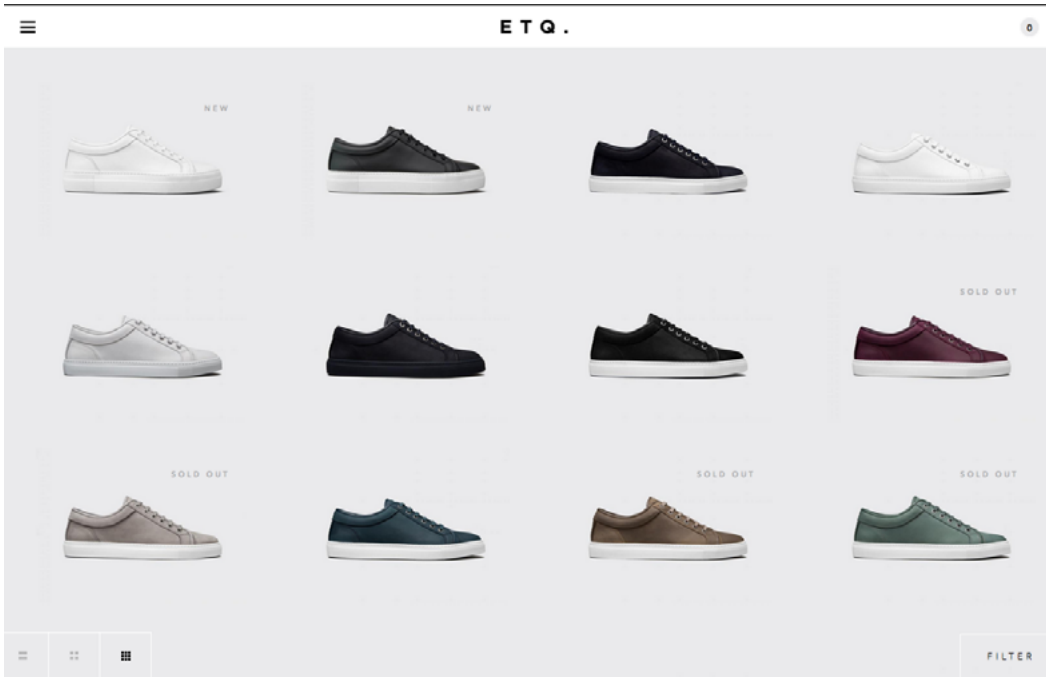
Source: Evolve Wealth

- **Purple** – *mysterious, luxury, creativity* – the color of royalty still holds an air of decadence.



Source: WooView App

- **White** – *virtuous, sterile, simple* – associated with both doctors and holiness, white's also a go-to choice for unobtrusive backgrounds.



Source: ETQ Studios Amsterdam

- **Black** – *sophisticated, edgy, dominating* – the most powerful color will give your site an oppressive feelings if overused.

Source: Cartelle

For a more complete explanation of the emotional impact of colors, including more colors and real site examples of each, read our free e-book Color Theory in Web UI Design.

4. **Understand and Apply the Different Types of Symmetry**

   Symmetry is not that simple. Symmetry comes in different styles and degrees (including no symmetry at all), and each has different effects in their viewers.

   For web design, we can classify symmetry into 4 groups:

   - **Horizontal Symmetry** – The standard form of symmetry that is typically comes to mind. Both halves of the screen have equal weight and distribution of elements. A safe choice.

Photo credit: Hungcwot via awwwards

- **Approximate Symmetry** – Here's where it gets tricky. Approximate symmetry uses two halves with the same visual weight, but not necessarily the same layouts or distributions. Usually, this involves one large element next to a collection of multiple smaller elements, as with the example below.

Photo credit: Squarespace

- **Radial Symmetry** – Difficult to apply, but rewarding if you do, radial symmetry uses the center as a focal point and has all sections equal going outward, creating a circular pattern.

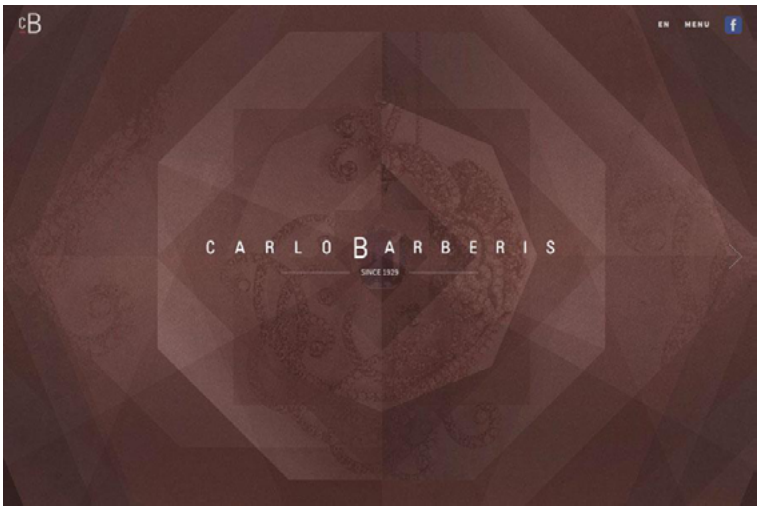


Photo credit: http://www.carlobarberis.com/en/

- **Asymmetry** – Purposefully avoiding symmetry. Objects are designed to purposefully counter one another on the screen with shapes, colors and sizes of contrasting styles. This is quite difficult to apply well, and works best for sites going for an edgy or unstable look.

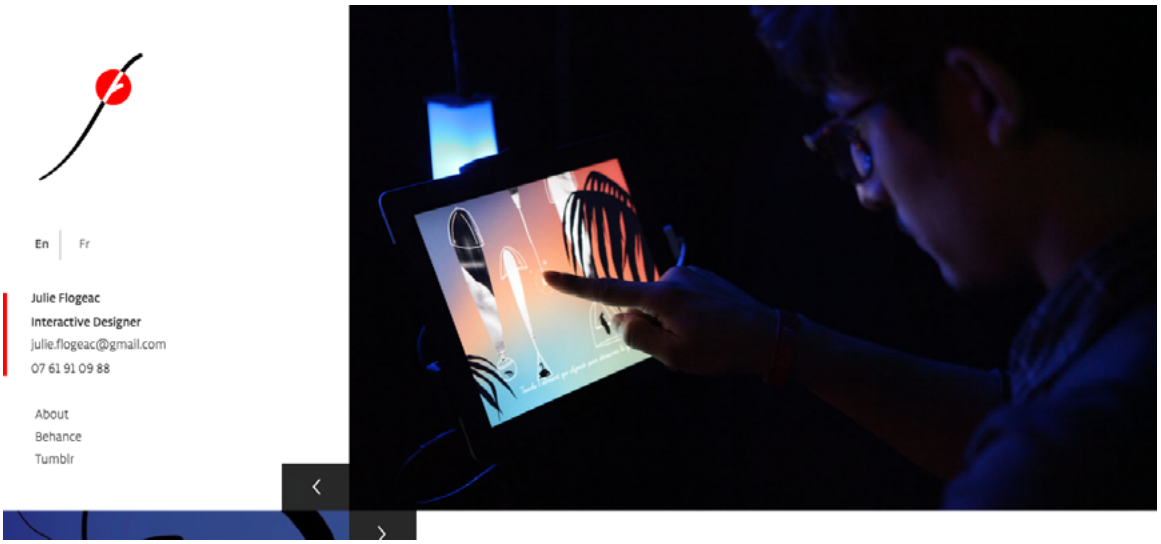


Photo credit: Julie Flogeac via awwwards

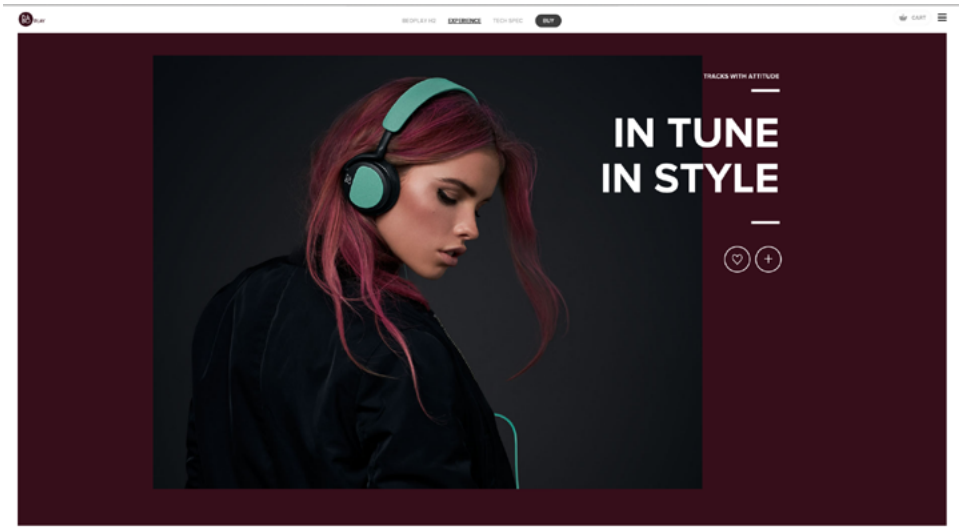
For more advice on how to apply symmetry – specifically to the minimalist style of design – read our free *Web UI Trends Present & Future: The Elegance of Minimalism*.

5. Use Photos of Real People

Usability studies show that people's eyes are drawn to real people.

In fact, photos of people more attention on websites than text, other elements, or photos of other objects.

There is a condition, though, and it's a big one. **The pictures must be of "real" people; they cannot appear to be stock**. Photos that appear to be generic (even if they're not) have the opposite effect – users tend to tune them out, and look everywhere but the picture.



Source: Beoplay

However, if you have authentic pictures of people the user can relate to, these will attract more attention than other images. (Alternatively, a well-chosen stock photo would work.)

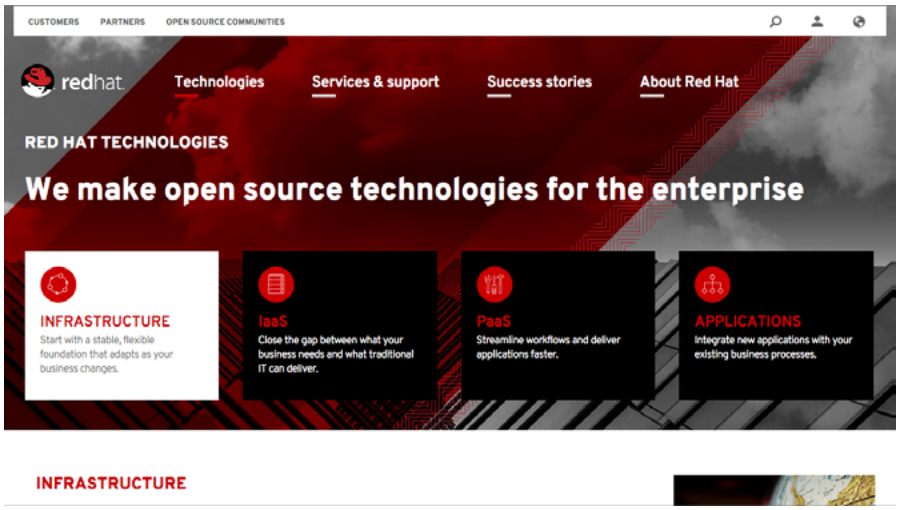
6. Maintain Consistency

It's not enough to build an attractive interface, you have to maintain it consistently across the entire site. Consistency is a thankless elements. Your users will only take notice when you're not consistent, and they won't be happy.

Inconsistent sites will only frustrate users since elements aren't where they're expected. They'll have to relearn the interface on every new page – if they even stick around that long.

For maintaining consistency within your site, pay special attention to these areas:

- **Typography** – Typefaces, sizes, spacing, etc. for each element (headings, subheadings, body, etc.).
- **UI Elements** – Unifying the use of your icons, images, and layouts in general will give your site a unique style and aid usability overall.



Source: RedHat

- **Color** – Assigning certain colors to certain topics or functions can "train" your user, but only if consistent.

Additionally, as we mentioned before with pattern signifiers, at times you should maintain consistency with *other* sites.

For example, nearly every site on the web places their logo in the upper left corner. Putting your logo in, say, the bottom right, will just confuse your user, and waste time for them if they want to return to the home page. It's better to draw on their preexisting expectations when you can to reduce your site's learnability.

For an in-depth guide to maintaining consistency, read our free e-books Consistency in UI Design and Principles of Visual Consistency.

7. Make a Bold Statement With White Space

It's an easy mistake to think creating a gorgeous interface involves filling up the screen with pretty images. But one of the most visually pleasing elements is nothing at all.

Source: Apple - iMac

White space – or "negative space" – is simply the absence of other elements. A staple of the minimalist style, white space embodies the minimalist principle of "less is more". As you subtract elements, you emphasize the beauty of what remains.

White space influences where your user's eyes go and better defines your visual hierarchy.

Here's some basic ways to take advantage of white space:

- **Attention** – The more white space around a single element, the more attention it will draw.

- **Typography** –Spacing creates a comprehensive hierarchy between headings, subheadings, body content, etc.

- **Readability** – Within blocks of text, proper spacing between paragraphs, lines, and even letters increases readability and therefore comfort.

- **Elegance** – White space adds an air of luxury and sophistication to your site.

- **Grouping Relationships** – Closer spacing around groups of elements suggest similar functionality, reducing user learnability.

White space is an element like any other, and must be used actively instead of as just an afterthought.

To learn the specifics of how to apply white space, including how to find the right balance between too much and too little, read our free ebooks Zen of White Space in Web UI Design Books 1 and 2.

A Final Note about Trust

This should go without saying, but if users don't trust you – i.e., product pictures don't match descriptions – they will turn off emotionally. Include logos of prominent clients, feature testimonials from happy clients, and show off your own team.

Like we previously discussed, personality and social proof are just some of the factors that build trust. After all, people are more likely to find your site attractive if others vouch for you.

Conclusion:
It's What's Outside that Counts

We've grown up thinking that passing judgements based on looks was superficial.

Snippets of wisdom like, "it's what's inside that counts," and "don't judge a book by it's cover," while well-intentioned, may have lead us astray. Modern science is painting quite a different picture – visuals are what counts. They are what formulates our opinions and our emotions, whether we like it or not.

Photo credit: Elite Model Management

In that case, we must throw out conventional wisdom and replace it with another, overlooked piece of traditional wisdom: "what you see is what you get."

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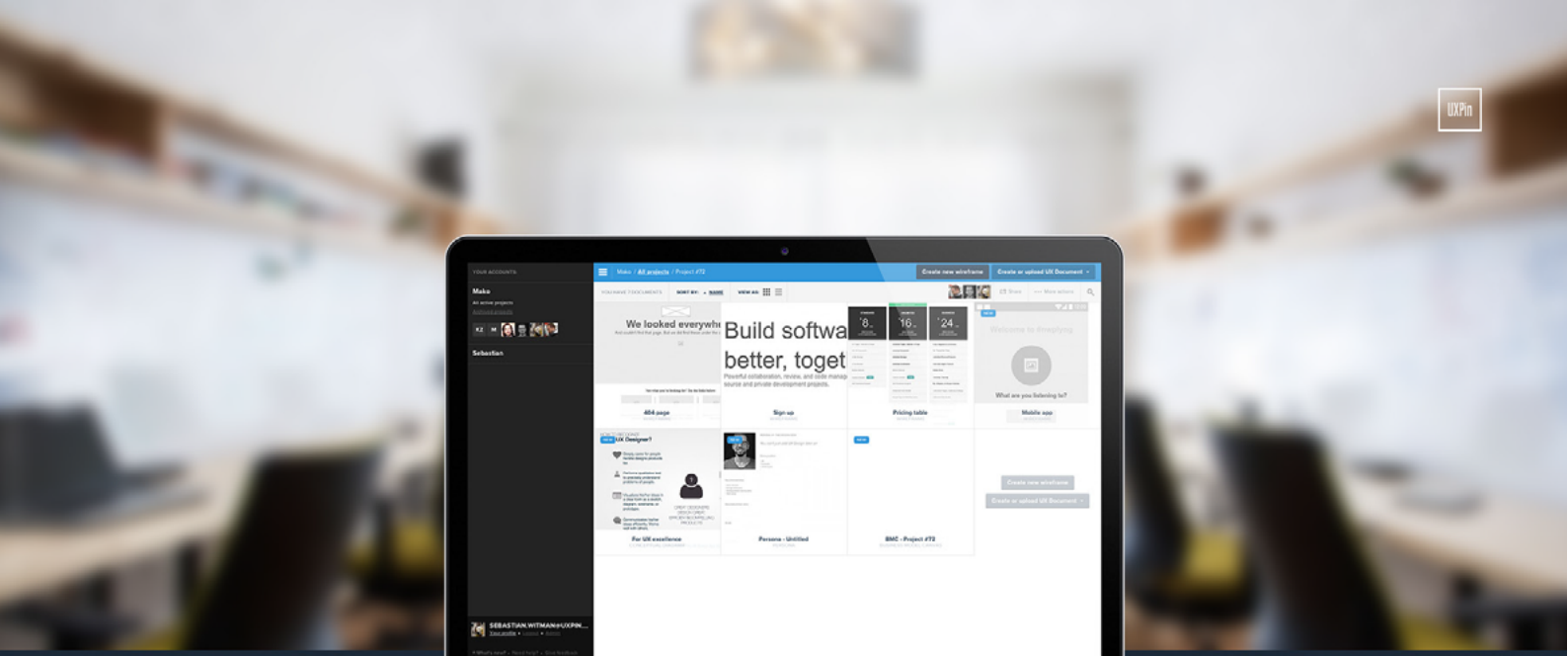

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