Consistency in UI Design

Creativity Without Confusion

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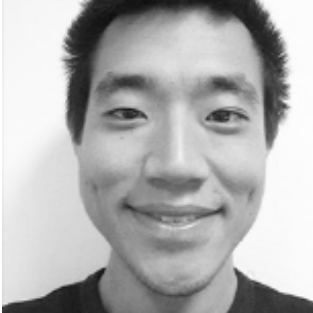
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Introduction

Consistency creates familiarity, and familiar interfaces are naturally more usable.

Imagine the frustration of finding the perfect car, only to discover that the accelerator is on the right and the brake on the left. Or, in a digital context, if you're breezing through a web form and come across a "Delete" button highlighted in green.

While design inconsistencies are usually never that dramatic, even seemingly insignificant deviations create friction for users. If the search box appears on the top right on the homepage, but appears on the top left for other pages, then the user must expend unnecessary energy relearning the interface on every page.

Consistency, however, does not equal uniformity. Design shouldn't just be a game of templates, but should reflect the usability advantages of existing patterns. Understand why certain interaction design patterns are effective, then use them as a foundation for your

creativity. Over time, you might even develop even better patterns.

Our goal with this book is to help you strike the right balance between consistency and creativity. To help illustrate our points, we've analyzed visual best practices from companies like **Reddit**, **Jawbone**, **Dolce & Gabbana**, and **Amazon**. To keep you on the right track, we'll also explore examples of what *not* to do.

We've written the book to be as practical as possible. If you find it helpful, feel free to share with anyone else who might enjoy it!

For the love of consistent design,

Jerry Cao

co-written by Kamil Zieba, Krzysiek Stryjewski, and Matt Ellis

A Consistent Definition
for Consistency

What Is It and Why Is It Important?

Consistency is essential to reducing the cognitive load of your interface. When your design is consistent, every interaction feels smooth and frictionless. When it is too inconsistent, the user must expend unnecessary effort.

But consistency in interaction design is a little more specific than simply doing the same things over and over – there are particular kinds of consistency, and particular fields in which consistency is more important than others.

On top of that, doing the same things over and over will yield boring, uniform designs. You need to know when to break the consistency without leading to design chaos. The key, as is most often the case in design, is balance.

Source: Species in Pieces via awwwards.com

In this chapter, we'll go into details about what consistency means for interaction design, why it's important, and describe the two types of consistency and how they should influence your design.

> **tweet this**
>
> Too much consistency creates boredom.
> Not enough leads to chaos. Balance is the key.

Why Consistency Matters for UI Design

Interaction design relies on the learnability of your system.

To put it simply, when a UI works in a consistent manner, it becomes predictable (in a good way), which means users can understand how to use certain functions intuitively and without instruction. This makes the product easier to use, which is a stepping stone to making it more desirable. Conversely, when a UI is inconsistent, it hinders learnability, provoking frustration in the user and leading to a bad experience.

Source: UXPin

But consistency is not limited just to your interface's appearance and behavior.

Your users don't spend all their time just with your product – the majority of their time is on other products, and all the while they are generating ideas and expectations from these other experiences. So if you're consistent with these outside experiences, your UI's learnability will increase without any extra work on your part.

When in doubt, refer to the Principle of Least Astonishment. Delightful surprises are fine (like how **Mailchimp** surprises users with humor and fun), but your core functions should not stray far from the norm. *Review* doesn't mean the same thing as *Verify*. Videos shouldn't be mistaken for images. Don't make buttons for primary actions appear only on hover.

In fact, if you're still questioning the nature of consistency in digital design, Apple's iOS Human Guidelines do a pretty good job of summarizing standards for consistency for their apps:

Is the app consistent with iOS standards? Does it use system-provided controls, views, and icons correctly? Does it incorporate device features in ways that users expect?

Is the app consistent within itself? Does the text use uniform terminology and style? Do the same icons always mean the same thing? Can people predict what will happen when they perform the same action in different places? Do custom UI elements look and behave the same throughout the app?

Within reason, is the app consistent with its earlier versions? Have the terms and meanings remained the same? Are the fundamental concepts and primary functionality essentially unchanged?"

From what we've discussed above, we can divide design consistency into two categories: external and internal consistency. External refers to your UI's consistency with other products, while internal is its consistency within itself. Let's take a look at the best practices for both.

External Consistency

External consistency is not only how consistent your product is with other similar products, it can refer to its consistency to all products on your platform, all software in general, and even non-digital interactions throughout the real world. We'll explain why external consistency matters, and provide a cautionary tale of what happens if you don't follow the guidelines.

1. **Why External Consistency Matters**

    To sum it up, external consistency is about meeting user expectations. In order to create a design that coincides with what your user is expecting, you must first understand what ideas they are bringing with them before they even use your site or app. This is a concept that usability expert Jared Spool refers to as current knowledge.
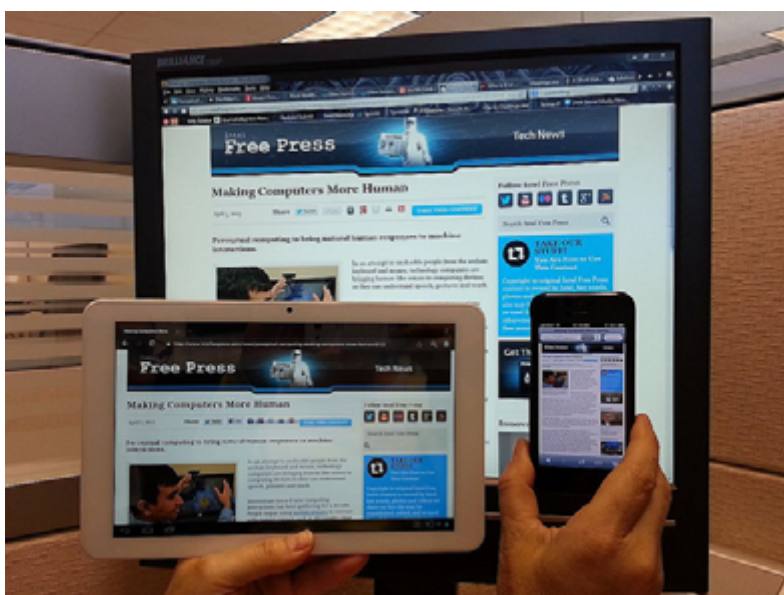
Source: "Consistent Experience Across Multiple Screen Sizes."
Intel Free Press. Creative Commons.

Your users' current knowledge is influenced by many external factors, anything from the last site they used to a far-fetched expectation from their favorite sci-fi movie. Don't worry though – for the most part, your users' expectations will be reasonable.

Designing based on what your users already know is not a new concept. This idea has been in place for years, evolving into the common design conventions you'll see today in just about any app or website. The image carousel, an envelope icon representing email, clicking on the site logo to return to the homepage... these are all referred to as UI patterns.

UI patterns are design solutions to common usability problems. Patterns benefit everyone – users already recognize how to use them from previous exposure, and designers don't need to reinvent the wheel.

Our free ebooks *Web UI Design Patterns 2014* and *Mobile UI Design Patterns 2014* cover the most conventional and useful patterns available, but for now all we'll say is that they're the simplest way to incorporate external consistency.

But external consistency isn't limited just to sites or apps with visually rich designs. For example, users of Google Docs will find the top menu bars fairly familiar since we've all used Microsoft Word before. The menu options for Word are so firmly ingrained in frequent users of text editors, it just seems natural to see them

again. It gets to the point where we take them for granted – we only notice when they're not there.
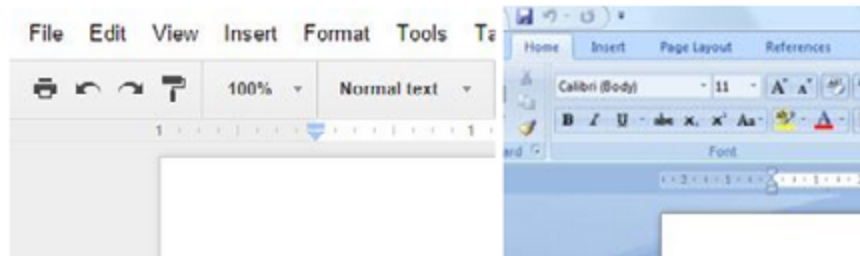
Source: *UXPin*

External consistency can be taken a step further to apply to human perceptions. For example, as Quora's design director David Cole suggests, think about how most volume controls are presented as sliders. The slider is popular because it matches how people perceive volume. With the exception of specialists like sound technicians, we don't think of it on a scale of 0 to 100, it's purely relative to us. We either want sound to be louder, or quieter, not to go from 30% to 28%. The slider format became popular (and thus a standard of external consistency) because it matches our mental models.

Source: *iTunes*

So after all this talk about doing what everyone else is doing, what does that say about being different, standing out, and setting yourself apart from the competition?

These are all fine things – in fact, they're even recommended strategies – but you must be smart about where and how you stand

out. Offering a new design solution that your competitors haven't thought of will get you far. Going against a tried-and-true convention (that's actually useful) for the sake of being clever will only damage your design. We'll discuss this more in the next chapter.

2. **The Perils of External Inconsistency**

    A word to the wise for those of you fervent nonconformists. User expectations aren't merely preferences, sometimes they're habits.

    Take for example, the stand signup form. We're all aware of the UI pattern of the asterisk in form fields. Almost every user knows that an asterisk next to a field means that it's required before proceeding.

    Country *

    | United States (US) | ∨ |

    First Name *   Last Name *

    Company Name

    Address *

    Street address

    Apartment, suite, unit etc. (optional)

    Source: OverClothing

    But for a lot of signup forms, the necessary fields outnumber the optional ones. Wouldn't it be simpler, then, to mark the optional fields with the asterisk?

That was the thinking Avis had a few years ago when they deviated from external consistency (as Jared Spool points out UIE.com). You can see in this screenshot how they broke from convention. The only way you'd know the asterisks denoted optional fields was by reading the microcopy at the top of the form.

Never underestimate the laziness of users. When most people are faced with a form field, they start pumping out the information right away. The result is a design that essentially forces users to relearn how to read a form.

You can see in the new design that they've resigned themselves to using asterisks to indicate mandatory fields. It's more externally consistent than their previous design, but it's still incredibly visually obstructive. Now, it's externally consistent almost to a fault.

Source: Avis

At first glance, the strongest impression is that everything is mandatory. The bright red asterisks instantly tells the user that a ton of work lies ahead. If asterisks are to be used, they could instead make them black instead of red – the meaning is retained, minus the visual overload.

Alternatively, they could also label which fields are optional with an "(Optional)" tag. Such a treatment removes the need for asterisks, and the user could still understand that a lack of "(Optional)" implies that it's mandatory. This design strays a bit from users may expect, but still feels more natural than putting asterisks next to optional fields.

It's true that the old and new form present only a minor setback. But a few milliseconds of confusion increases cognitive load, which forces the user to think. Remember as we discussed in *Interaction Design Best Practices* that digital time is not human time. When visual interactions happen in the blink of an eye, your interface can't hold the user back by a couple milliseconds.

Internal Consistency

While external consistency can enhance your UI design through meeting user expectations, internal consistency is seen as more of a requirement, and failing to meet it will most likely harm the user experience. Internal inconsistencies are usually only applied to distinguish differences in content or user actions (for instance, different layouts for different forms of content).

tweet this   External consistency helps you meet user expectations. Internal consistency prevents design contradictions.

Let's look at an example of internal consistency and review a quick checklist.

1. **A Closer Look at Internal Consistency**
   Consistency within your site or app covers both aesthetics and functionality – especially when both are the same. Let's examine the "front page of the Internet," Reddit.

Source: Reddit

For starters, all of Reddit's links that lead to outside sites are in blue and in the same big font. This repeated consistency lets users know exactly what they can click on and what will happen when they do. It also takes advantage of external consistency with one of the most well-known web patterns: putting links in blue.

But Reddit's internal consistency goes deeper. Moving your mouse across the page, all internal links (comments, subcategories, users, and share options) will gain an underline when the cursor hovers over them. Thus, the user gets immediate feedback that secondary links are clickable, while some other text is not. While subtle, this consistent use of visuals saves time in explaining the interactions.

2. **How to Check for Internal Consistency**

   Internal consistency is a thankless feature. Only its absence is noticed.

   For example, changing the location of a button on different pages: a user gets used to the *Sign In* option being in the top right corner, and then they can't find it on a page where it's in the bottom right. Another is the interchanging of *Save* and *Submit* – both represent two different functions. One more is certain functionalities only being available on certain pages: if the home page utilizes a drag--and-drop feature, the user will expect all pages to use it.

   As a general checklist, try to cover all these bases when dealing with internal consistency:

1. **Color** – An obvious visual cue, keep colors consistent with their function (i.e., green always means *Accept* and red *Reject*). A site's overall color scheme as well should not deviate too much from page to page.

2. **Typography** – As with the Reddit example, fonts and flourishes can all be used as visual signals, but only if used consistently. Set apart your headlines, bodies, and secondary texts by giving them each a distinct typography.

3. **Language** – For simplicity's sake, don't change your word selections. If you give the user a choice between *Yes* and *No* for one task, don't change that to *Accept* and *Reject* for another.

4. **General visuals** – Features like icon sets, buttons, and even clickable links must be consistent to express their function – using two different types of buttons will confuse the user.

5. **Layout and location** – A consistent layout across pages is necessary for users to navigate properly. Inconsistency is acceptable when you're trying to call out different types of content or user actions.

6. **Interactions** – While they may seem like minor details, any inconsistencies among form elements, dialogue boxes, animations, transitions, etc. will feel jarring. One bad interaction can ruin all the prior delightful ones.

If you think all these details are difficult to keep track of, you're right.

That's why many companies – even outside of digital design – use style guides for internal consistency. A style guide is a formalized document that keeps track of the company's proper policies for handling these details. For example, "all headlines should be 12 pt., Arial black, and bolded," or "the company logo must always appear in a 4cm x 4cm box in the upper left-hand corner."
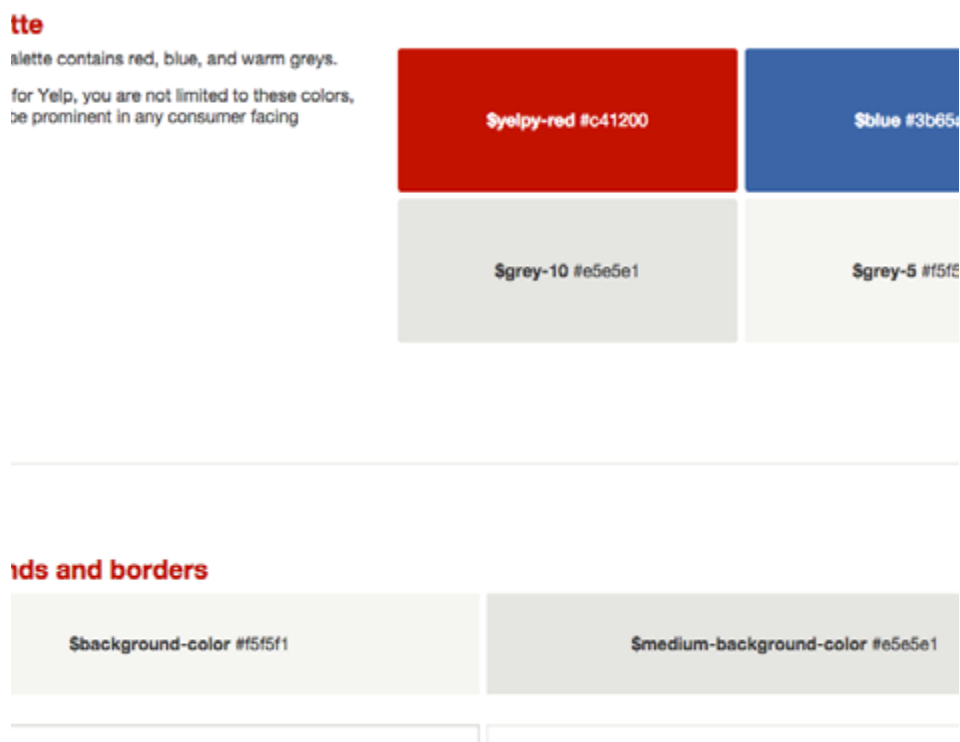
Source: Yelp

If you'd like to know more about style guides, check out *Web UI Best Practices*. For quicker, more general references, check out these other online articles:

- *Creating Style Guides* by Susan Robertson
- *Create a Website Style Guide* by Steve Fisher
- *Writing an Interface Style Guide* by Jina Bolton

You can also get started with a beginner's style guide using Medialoot's free UI Style Guide template – fill out what works and tweak the rest.

tweet this   Internal consistency is a thankless feature. Only its absence is noticed.

Takeaway

It's not so much that you're consistent, but how and where you're consistent.

Remember that patterns can save a lot of time because they work off of your users' previous knowledge, so use them every chance you get. If you're entering unchartered territory, try to enlist methods that are intuitively human – understanding the mind of your user will help across the board.

Your users are also expecting your site or app to maintain its own internal consistency, so don't break the rhythm of the experience. Consider the key categories of internal consistency – color, typography, language, general visuals, layout, and interactions – and keep them all in line with a style guide.

Be Consistent, Not Boring

Know the Rules So You Know When to Break Them

In the last chapter we explained the importance of consistency and how it's necessary for successful interaction design. Here we're going to tag on a little footnote: consistency is advisable *most*, but not *all*, of the time.

Source: *White Frontier Beer* via *awwwards*

Absolute consistency is repetitive to the point of boredom. In order to mine its benefits without putting your users to sleep, you need to know when to break the monotony. For example, you can see above how the light graphic background immediately draws attention to

the beer compared to the black-and-white photo backgrounds in the other grid blocks.

In this chapter we'll point out the circumstances around when inconsistency can work for your designs, then show you some real-world examples.

When to be Inconsistent

Don't get us wrong: we stand by the significance of consistency. What we're saying is that, when applying consistency in interaction design, it's important to break up the tedium occasionally. There are specific times to do this, and don't misconstrue this as a license to break the rules whenever you'd like. In other words, be consistent with when to be inconsistent.
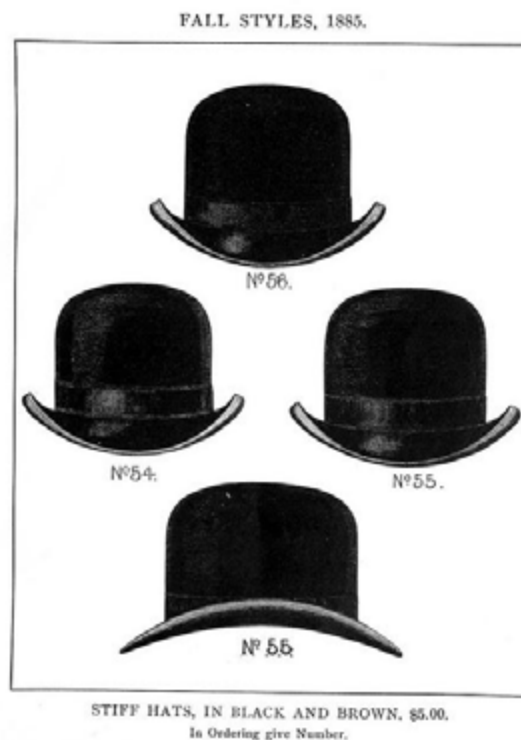
1. **Draw Attention**
   The most common and effective way to use inconsistency is **to draw attention to a single, specific element**. Imagine a man wearing black pants, black shoes, a black shirt, a black jacket, a black hat... and a white tie. Where are people's eyes going to be drawn? If you want something particular in your interface to stand out, make it different. If the stylish man wanted people to notice his head instead, he'd wear a black tie and a white hat.

   The golden rule with inconsistency is **moderation**.

The reason it works so well is its exceptionality. Every other element within your design creates a pattern (consistency) so that, when the pattern is broken (inconsistency), it stands out. If you implement too much inconsistency, all patterns dissolve into chaos. Overall, the more inconsistency you apply, the less each individual occurrence draws attention. Save inconsistency for when you *really* need it so that it delivers the strongest punch.

tweet this — Inconsistency is a potent spice. Just a pinch is enough, while too much will spoil the design.

FALL STYLES, 1885.

Nº 56.

Nº 54.   Nº 55.

Nº 55.

STIFF HATS, IN BLACK AND BROWN, $5.00.
In Ordering give Number.

Source: "A short treatise on head wear, ancient and modern (1885)." CircaSassy. Creative Commons.

If our stylish man wore black pants, a black shirt, and a black jacket, but a white hat, white shoes, and a white tie, then none of those in particular would stand out. He'd be a walking fashion nightmare.

As a UI designer, the use of inconsistency can be a great tool. This can be used to lure your users' eyes where you want, whether a call-to-action, a new feature, or even a product that could be selling better.

2. The Sake of Usability

Another less common but nonetheless appropriate scenario for inconsistency is simple usability concerns – if maintaining consistency will get in the way of usability, break the rule for that one instance (or, if it happens too often, change the rule).

Brendon Cornwell, UX Designer at Captech Consulting, points out a perfect example of this in *Making and Breaking UX Best Practices*. Like most companies, US Airways states that its logo should appear in the upper lefthand corner of its site. This was fine, until it came time to design their mobile app. Their logo, which consists of a series of horizontal gray bars mimicking the American flag, looked like the hamburger icon when shrunk down and placed in an upper corner, confusing the users. The problem was solved by removing the logo on their secondary screens, inconsistent to the styling format, but a smart choice for usability.

Use common sense about it – as beneficial as consistency is, you shouldn't force it at the cost of the user experience.

Inconsistency With a Purpose

Let's take a look at inconsistency done right. The following examples know when to conform, and when to break the mold.

1. **Jawbone**

   Jawbone is a consumer tech company that specializes in wearable devices and wireless speakers. Their website showcases many of their products, though some pages tend to deviate in consistency – but for the right reasons.

   Below are two screenshots for two different products:

   ### UP 3
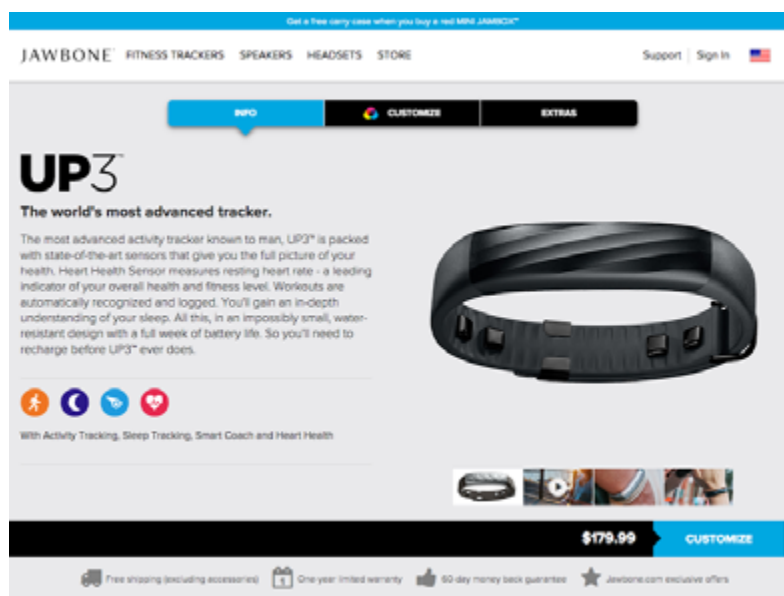
   Source: Jawbone UP3

   The UP3 a fairly straightforward fitness device, so the copy on the page and three tabs at the top are enough. Users wear the bracelet constantly, and as a result, get updates that form a complete

picture of their health. Once the users understand this benefit, they'll likely want to play around with some features, which is easily accessible through the tabbed layout.

Jambox
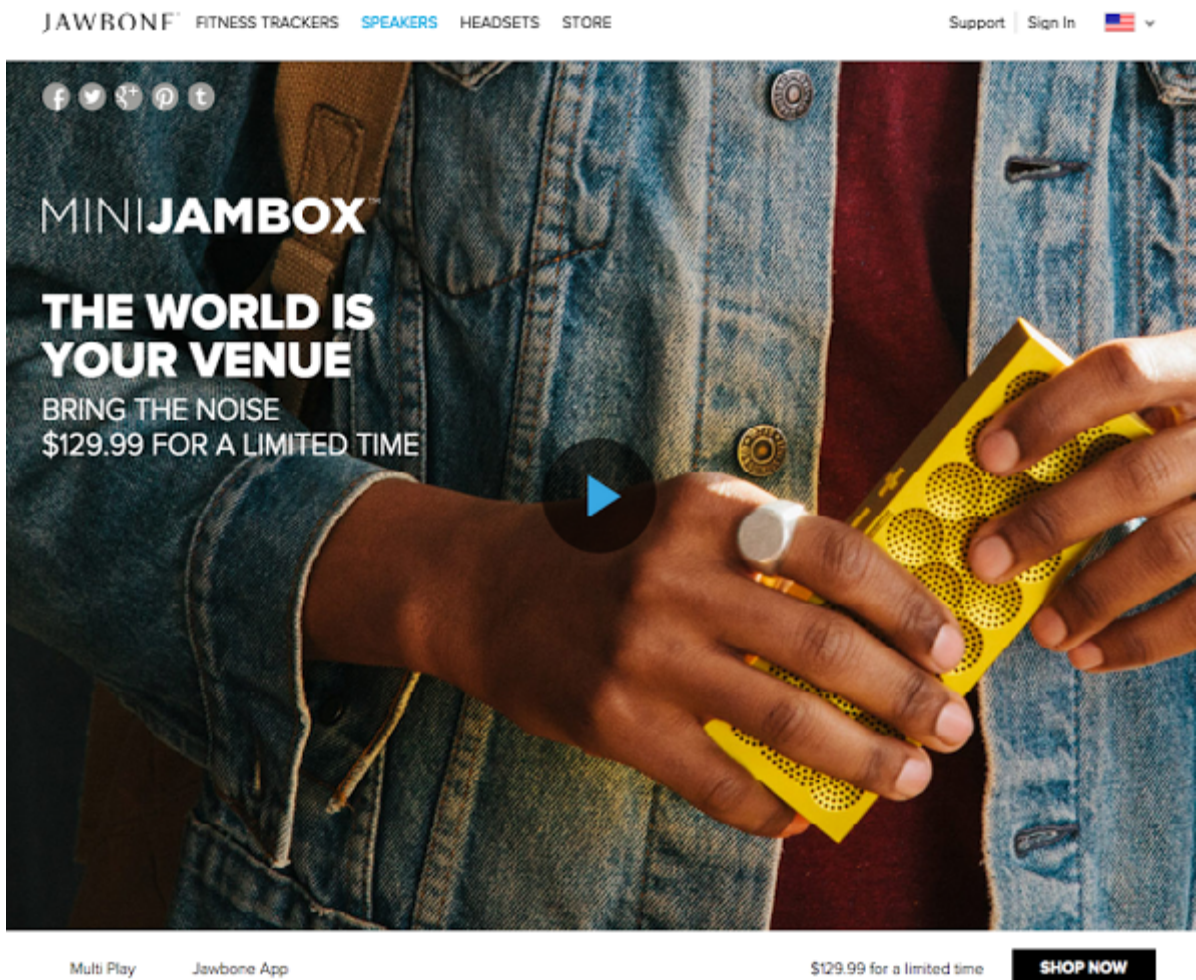
Source: Jawbone Jambox

On the other hand, the Jambox page is more experimental, showcasing a video as the default image, and foregoing the typical descriptions to promote the limited time offer. Because the Jambox is a livelier product, with a different set of user benefits, this inconsistency makes sense.

The important thing is that Jawbone maintains consistency where it counts. The top navigation bar remains the same, including the upper righthand *Support*/*Sign In*/*Language* options. Navigation is one area that should be consistent throughout the entire site or app, as orientation is a top priority in interaction design and making the user comfortable. Likewise, the bottom righthand corner is consistently occupied by the price and a call-to-action, both important pieces of information that shouldn't demand too much thought.

2. Miranda July

Now let's take a look at a more surreal and unconventional website, brought to our attention by Visual Swirl's excellent article on rule-breaking websites. Author Miranda July's website for her book *No One Belongs Here More Than You* is totally linear (like the book it promote), yet strangely addictive and fun.
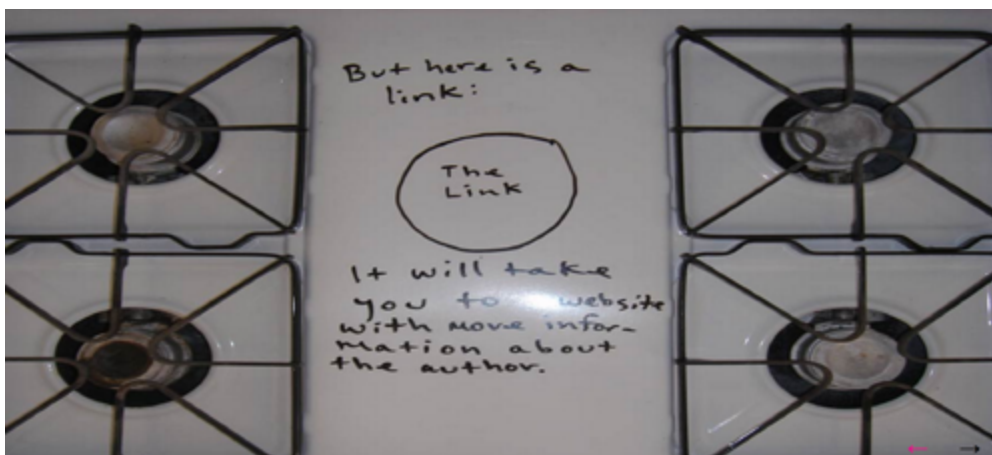
Source: No One Belongs Here More Than You

The website is externally inconsistent compared to similar sites and user expectations. After all, not many of us have encountered a site with only a forward or backward navigation option,

where the narrative is told purely on a stove-top in black marker. But the design works because the purpose is pure storytelling. The author wants to tell a whimsical story about the book, so the form matches function. Each page remains engaging because it feels like a conversation. As you click forward, the site loads a new stovetop message, which feels like it's talking to you.

The trick to making this work, however, is keeping the content simple and bite-sized. Chunking out content helps to reduce cognitive strain and create a snappier experience. Imagine how the interaction design on the page would work if all the messages were connected in a scroll, and flanked by a navigation menu and sidebar. The site would feel tedious instead of lighthearted and enticing.

tweet this   Chunk out your content for less cognitive strain and a snappier experience.

While the site refuses to be externally inconsistent, it dutifully remains internally consistent. The navigation arrows appear on the same location on each page, and the primary content is always the stovetop message. If they broke internal consistency by having some pages in a standard layout, the design would collapse.

 As we've mentioned before, success lies in moderation.

3. Dolce & Gabbana

Another example of external inconsistency, Dolce & Gabbana deviates from the norm not to be showy, but for the sake of usability. We came across this site after reading Jason Gross' interesting article on breaking design principles on purpose.

As we explained in our ebook *Interaction Design Best Practices*, related actions should be placed close together to communicate similarity, in accordance to Fitts's Law. But when you reach the shopping cart, the links for *Back to Shopping* and *Proceed with Order* are on opposite ends of the page.
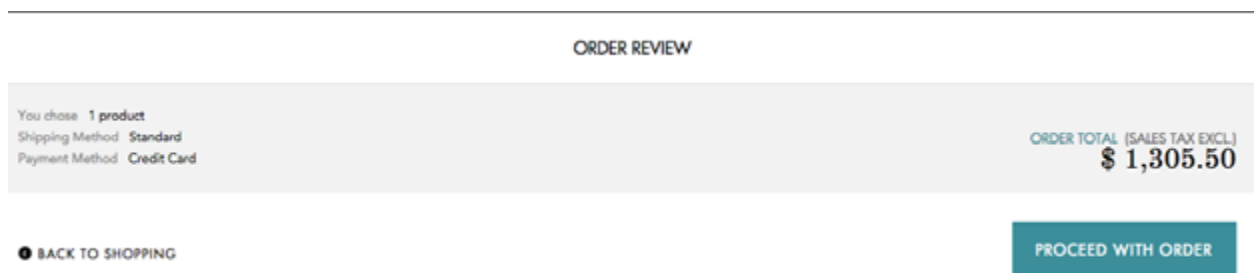
Source: Dolce & Gabbana

Why put such distance between them?

Having the two options side-by-side increases the likelihood of the user accidentally hitting the one when they wanted the other. Dolce & Gabbana's slight increase in friction is worth preventing a couple unintentional (and bad) experiences. The design choice does not totally abandon the best practices of interaction design, though. Because the two options are on the same horizontal plane, the user understands the two choices are related.

4. Amazon

So far we've outlined two fundamental UX design principles:

- Usability trumps consistency.
- Consistency in navigation is essential for orientation.

But what happens if these two come into conflict? Amazon – and many others – enter the gray zone of UI patterns with their disappearing navigation bar.


Source: Amazon

When you're ready to check out, the standard navigation is suddenly replaced with a progress bar indicating your location in the purchase process. You could argue they did this to increase friction in backing out of a purchase, or they're simply stripping away any interface objects that don't assist the user in finishing the purchase. With less distractions, the checkout process can be completed faster, which is good for business.

Inconsistency That Requires Improvement

Now that you've seen a few examples of acceptable inconsistency, let's look at the other end of the spectrum.

1. Xfinity

Xfinity's navigation design is a shining example of bad internal inconsistency. The secondary navigation on the main Xfinity pages is inconsistent with the secondary navigation on the Xfinity TV pages.
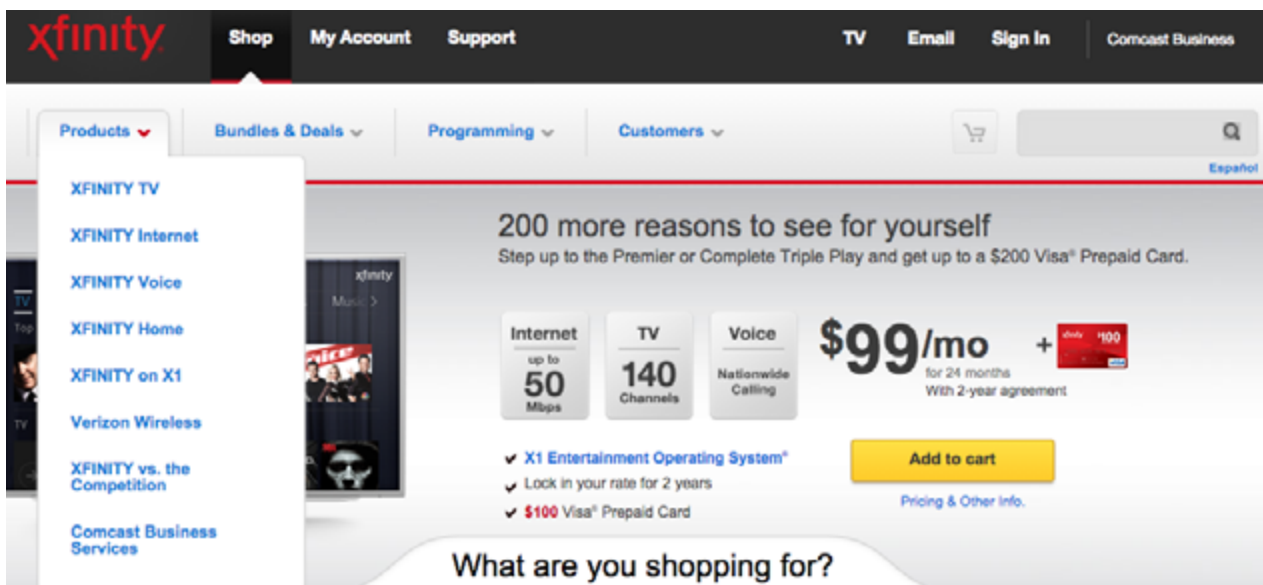
Xfinity Main Pages

On the main pages, the secondary navigation is presented as a dropdown menu that takes you to subpages.

Source: Xfinity TV

On the Xfinity TV page, however, the secondary navigation is tabbed. If Xfinity TV existed as a separate site (or even a subdomain), such a departure could be acceptable because users might expect different navigation on different properties. But since the TV page is on the same property as the main pages, users expect consistent navigation.

Because the Xfinity TV navigation tabs also look similar to the main page dropdown, you might at first glance think they function the same. Since they don't, this similarity only deepens the confusion. Jawbone is a much better example of the right approach to inconsistency: either use drastically different navigation for different content types, or keep the navigation identical. Anywhere in between will only result in confusion.

But there's more that needs fixing. Notice how the labelling of the tabbed categories is also internally inconsistent. *TV Shows* and *Family & Kids* are not perceived as the same level of information architecture, yet here they are presented as similar.
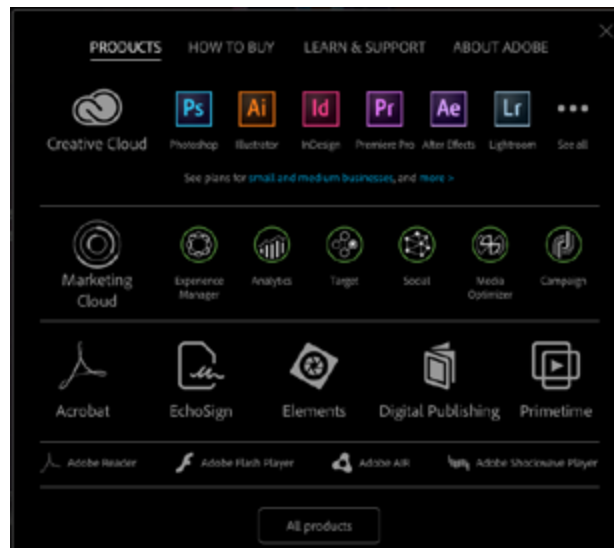

Source: *Xfinity TV*

Ultimately, these nuanced mistakes all stack up against the user, especially if they need to browse between the main pages and the Xfinity TV page.

2. Adobe

Adobe is a subtler example of internal inconsistency between icons in the navigation. After you click the hamburger icon, the following overlay menu appears.

Source: Adobe

At first glance, the menu doesn't look too bad. But look closely at the categorical meaning of the icon types. We are lead to believe that:

- **Large grey icons** – These represent product suite (like Creative Cloud)

- **Colored icons** – These represent individual products (like Photoshop)

Yet the design breaks this internal consistency by also making products like Acrobat and Echosign display as large gray icons. Because these products don't fall into any particular suite, perhaps a better treatment would be displaying them in a style different from colored icons or gray icons.

If we gave these "other" products their own icon style, we could immediately communicate the distinction. Otherwise, this interface breaks the rules it just established.

It may sound nitpicky, but think about the usability implications: the user may click on an "other" product icon thinking it leads to a suite of products, finds out that's not true, and now needs to resort to other menus or the search bar to find what they need.

Takeaway

Because of its powerful side effects, inconsistency is best used delicately. Keeping in mind the necessity of moderation, first isolate which elements you'd like to stand out *most*, then apply inconsistency *only* to them.

Take another glance at the examples of inconsistency done right – Jawbone, Miranda July, Dolce & Gabbana – if you are still confused about when to use it. Think about inconsistency as a very potent spice: just a pinch could mean the difference between a good and a great meal; too much (or the wrong spice) will ruin the food completely.

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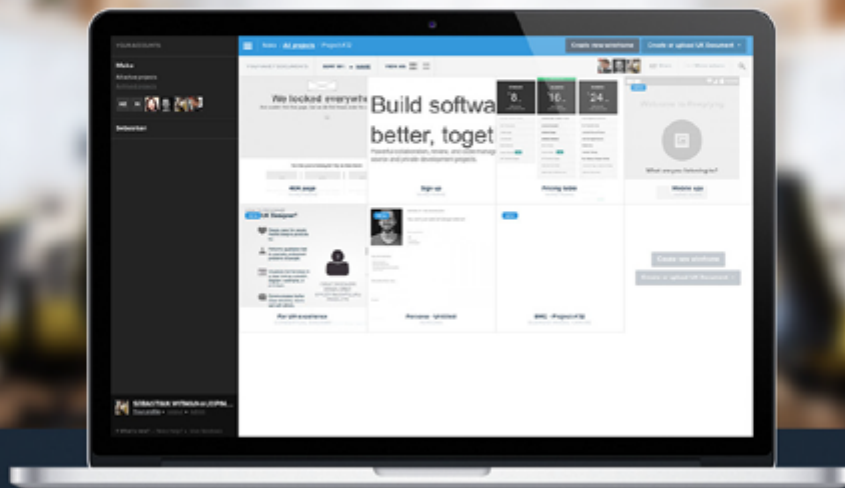
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