

# Are Visual Design & Usability Soulmates?

Why one shouldn't live  
without the other.

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It's interesting to note the different trends that occur in language, not just in the colloquial conversations between teenagers but also in industries in general. Over the last five years I have noticed a proliferation of 'cool words' or popular terms that have become exceptionally overused in the vocabulary of design and marketing fields.

I think it all started with the word 'branding' or at least that's when I first became aware of this vocabulary phenomenon. Overnight the word branding became something that everyone had to have and suddenly every advertising agency and design studio became experts in the area. The funny thing is that even to this day many people in particular clients are still not entirely sure how to define branding. A common misconception is that branding represents a logo and company name and perhaps a tag line, few realise that it extends way beyond a logo and is also something intangible that exists in customers minds.

Another term that has become ever so popular is the term 'user-centered', also known as experience design, customer-centred, or usability design just to name a few. Ever since Jacob Nielsen the pre-Madonna of usability appeared on the scene, the term user-centered design has become synonymous with good website design.

Prior to this, web design was predominantly dominated by graphic designers and developers, within a short period of time information architects emerged on the scene followed by experience strategists as well as a few other roles. The introduction of these new positions has been extremely beneficial to the digital design industry however somewhere along the line, some graphic designers have been pushed to the side and in some cases have even been thought of as hindrances in the creation of websites. Why did this happen you ask? Ignorance is my answer.

There is a common misconception that I've had to struggle with for the last ten years of my career; that designers simply make things look pretty. Yes designers make things aesthetically pleasing but it is a result of good visual communication. Design is about solving visually challenging problems, it's about making things clear and legible and it's about representing a brand effectively and it's also about challenging the visual nature of things with the use of emotive techniques that spark interest and create differentiation amongst this visually cluttered world that we live in.

The very nature of websites has dramatically evolved since the start of the internet revolution, they have become much more complex and increasingly richer in functionality. As the value of digital interfaces increases in the business and retail world, consumers also demand more from their online experiences.



Some usability experts falsely believe that aesthetics get in the way of a good user interface and often see graphic design as an unnecessary garnish. What they fail to comprehend is that a great user-experience is not just about functionality and ease of use. It's also about providing a unique and compelling experience that is visually appealing.

It seems that the fundamentals of digital visual design are not considered or even appreciated.

Elements such as:

- > Creating a well balanced visual hierarchy
- > Guiding the users eyes to different areas within a screen
- > Using colour to attract attention and add more prominence to different areas
- > Communicating with the target audience effectively through the use of imagery, shape and colour
- > Effectively using white space to decongest a layout
- > Selecting the right typeface with the appropriate personality
- > Representing the online brand consistently with the offline brand

Most of these fundamental elements of design are not considered by purist usability experts, and as a result the interfaces that they create are not as effective as they could be.

You only have to take a look at Jakob Nielsens website [www.useit.com](http://www.useit.com) to see what I mean. The man who is renown for being a usability guru has a website which not only looks unprofessional, but features no visual hierarchy what so ever. His site is a good source for articles however they are not easy to read online and they are also not easy to find.

I'd be the first to admit that Jakob has mad a significant contribution to the world of website creation, but I also acknowledge that he has also done a lot of harm. Usability purists which claim that design pollutes the experience are doing their users an injustice, and their ignorance is costing their clients more than just money.

If we want to create websites that are truly 'user-centered' then visual designers, information architects, experience strategists, content writers, developers and clients need to work seamlessly together.

There's no point in just focusing on creating great information architecture if the content doesn't address the users requirements or doesn't speak to them in their own language.



The complete user experience should address all of the following in order to be successful:

- > Easy to use
- > Makes the user feel smart
- > Information is easy to find
- > Functionality adds value for the user
- > Content addresses the users needs
- > Content is well organised and readable online
- > The appearance of the site is on brand and appeals to the target market
- > The content speaks to the users in the brands voice
- > The aesthetic appearance of the interface is appealing and connects with the user
- > Provides the client with a competitive advantage

For many years now I have been trying to get the message to clients that usability and visual design need to work seamlessly together in order to create a successful user-centered experience. It's extremely rewarding when clients are in fact enlightened to this fact and appreciate visual design as a vehicle of communication and not just lipstick.

Aesthetics are becoming increasingly important. The visual landscape is saturated with advertisements, endorsements and information, and as a result brands are becoming ferociously competitive towards one another.

Visual designs role has become more vital now than ever because companies are relying on it as a point of difference against competitors and as a means of attracting consumers' attention.

Consumers have become more demanding and their loyalty is fickle.

According to Virginia Postrel the author of 'The Substance of Style' there are three factors that define the value of a designed object, these are: function, meaning and pleasure. Users want a site that functions that has the content that they require and that is a visually pleasurable.

There has been a long-running visual design v usability debate, it's time to end this feud and to acknowledge that the two must not work as opposing forces but become soulmates in order to enhance the users experience. ●

