ROCKABLE*

WEB DESIGN CONFIDENTIAL

The Whole Truth on the State of Web Design



Amanda Hackwith

WEB DESIGN CONFIDENTIAL



ROCKABLE

Rockablepress.com
Envato.com

© Rockable Press 2012

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or redistributed in any form without the prior written permission of the publishers.

Contents

Introduction 6

Expert Interviews 9

Who's Designing Websites Anyway? 14

How We Work: Titles, Income, Perks 14
Age & Gender 17

Getting Started Right 21

Decide Where to Start 21
Valuing Your Skills: A Word for Students 25
Start with a Portfolio 26
Improve Your Skills 31
Develop a Style & Philosophy 32
Share Your Work & Stick With It 33

Your Say: What Web Designers Think About Web Design 37

Necessary Skills 37
Staying Current 40

The State of Web Design Trends: 2012 47

Responsive Web Design 47
Grid Systems 51
Typography 55
Technology Pushing Art 58
Scrolling, Vertical Narratives 60
Like it's 1983 66
Modular Interfaces 70
Themeforest 74

Making It Work: Reported Happiness in Web Design Careers 83

Increasing Happiness & Work Satisfaction 85

Conclusion 89

Appendix: Full Survey Results 92

Thank You 103

About The Author 104

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Let's get to the nut of the book: web design is not for cowards. It's a hard field, always changing and demanding more of you. There's no resting on your laurels, and there's no cushy job that never changes in web design. It's all in.

That said, it's an exciting time to be a web designer. With increased browser support and the proliferation of standards, the web has never been more receptive to innovations in design. We're seeing trends today that ignore previous limitations. There's a new focus on aesthetics and user experience that was not as widespread in the past. The advent of smartphones with powerful built-in browsers has challenged designers to rethink the way they conceive a design. It's not just the fact that we have more and better tools and toys to play with than ever before; as an industry, we're growing up.

Web Design Confidential isn't going to teach you to design. If you come looking for lessons on design or hacks for browsers, you're going to be disappointed. There are no tutorials or code snippets here. *Web Design Confidential* was written not so much to teach you about web design, but to share insights and bring clarity to the web design industry. There is already a plethora of books out there that describe how to design a website; I wanted to talk about how to design a career. You'll find some special advice in here for new designers just starting out, but you'll also find advice for anyone, at any point in their career, who wants to improve their skills.

Web Design Confidential is also a survey. We'll look at the results of the 2011 Web Design survey, hosted by WebDesignTuts+, which had more than 5,400 responses from professional web designers worldwide. We'll pick apart the data and see what it says about where our industry is going and what that means for a modern web designer. We'll look at characteristics that happy and successful

web designers have in common, as well as what you can do, now, to improve your work, your compensation, and your overall career satisfaction.

Let's get started!



Expert Interviews

During the course of this book, I had the chance to talk to several seasoned experts in the web design field. They're a busy bunch—notable editors, award-winning designers, top-selling ThemeForest authors—who kindly took the time to share some thoughts about the field. I want to thank them all for their time and contributions that made this book all the better for you, our reader. Since this is a web design book, you can check out their websites below and say "hi."

Christian Budschedl

Designer, Kreisi on ThemeForest



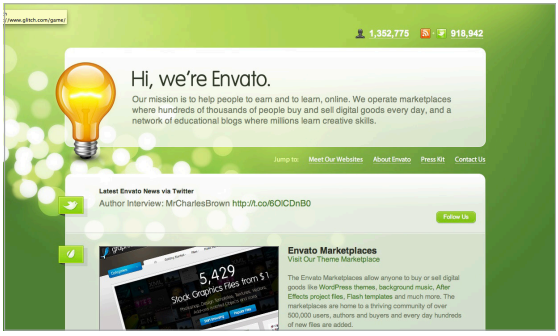


Christian is a 30-year-old Vienna-based web designer & WordPress developer who loves clean and minimal design. He is best known as "Kriesi" within the WordPress community, because of his minimal Theme design, and he's one of the most successful authors across all Envato Marketplaces.

Rodney Blackney

Designer, Envato



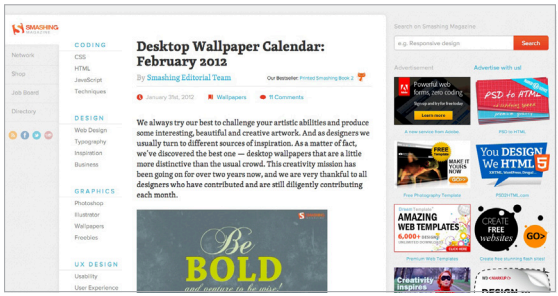


Rod Blackney has been a Graphic Designer for more than 10 years and he currently works at Envato. In his spare time he enjoys playing video games, going to as many concerts as possible and spending time with his son.

Vitaly Friedman

Editor, Smashing Magazine





Vitaly Friedman loves beautiful content and doesn't like to give in easily. Vitaly is writer, speaker, author and editor-in-chief of Smashing Magazine, an online magazine dedicated to designers and developers.

Sarah Parmenter

Owner, You Know Who Design



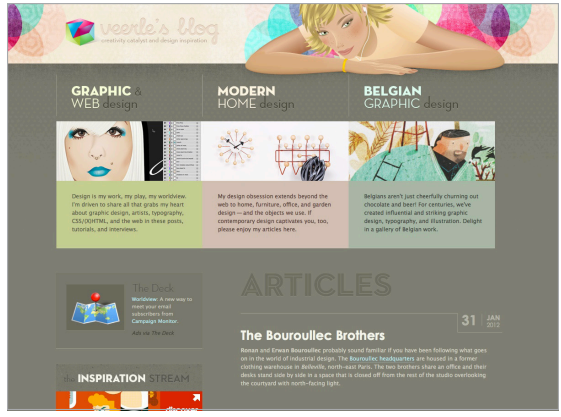


Sarah is owner of You Know Who, a small design studio based in Southend-on-Sea specializing in User Interface Design of Websites, iPhone, and iPad applications.

Veerle Pieters

Designer, Duoh!



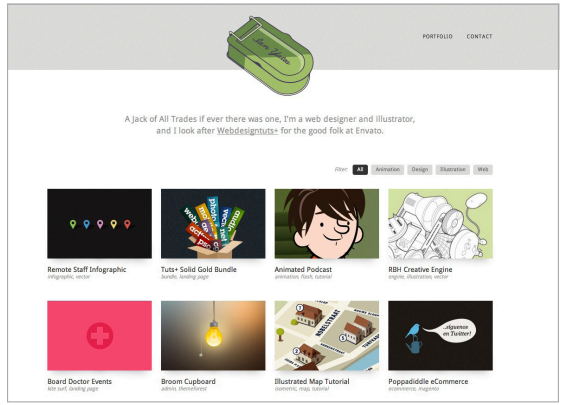


Veerle is a Belgian graphic & web designer, author of Veerle's blog and founder of Duoh! Design agency.

Ian Yates

Editor, WebDesignTuts+

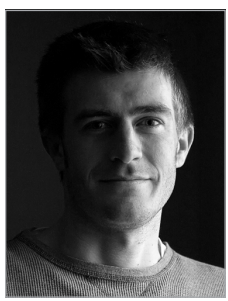


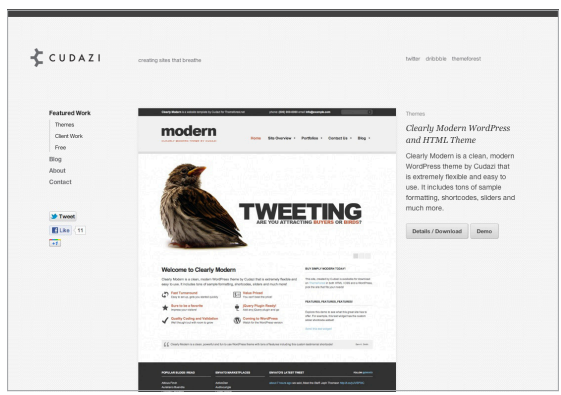


Yorkshire-born web designer and illustrator, lover of all things outdoors (including rain, weirdly enough) and life-long David Attenborough fan, Ian currently lives in southwest France with his wife and two daughters. Ian is also the editor for WebDesignTuts+.

Curt Ziegler

Designer, Cudazi on ThemeForest





Curt Ziegler, also known as Cudazi is a web designer specializing in WordPress theme development. With a B.S. degree in Graphic Communications, he has been designing and building sites since 2000. Curt is also a top selling theme author on ThemeForest.

2

Who's Designing Websites Anyway?

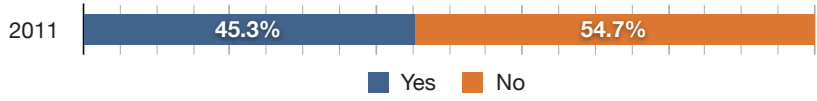
Just like the web itself, the face of web design is a tough portrait to paint. At various times in the history of the web, design has been dominated by, in no particular order, the utilitarian coder, the trendy artist, the motion graphics guru, and more. We're always redefining what it means to be a web designer and who is qualified to do the job.

We'll go further into qualifications and skillsets in a later chapter, but I think it's important to start with a baseline and look at the most fundamental demographics from the 2011 Web Design survey. The survey was hosted by WebDesignTuts+ in November 2011, and it received over 5,400 responses from working web designers worldwide. In this chapter, we'll take a closer look at:

- Professional statistics from the 2011 job market
- Income and what influences it
- The spread and impact of age and gender in web design

How We Work: Titles, Income, Perks

Do you consider yourself a full-time web designer?



It was a rough split between full-time and part-time web designers who responded to our poll, with slightly more part-timers. Web design is a field frequently dominated by part-time, contract, and freelance workers. It's not just designers—many web-oriented industries are evolving the same way. This gives professionals a

lot of flexibility in their work environment, but it also can be a challenge for professional designers looking for traditional employment.

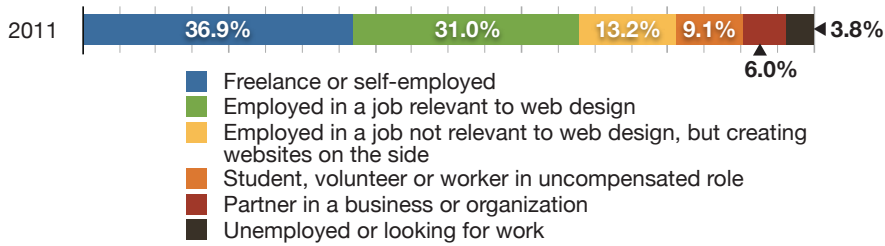
All Respondents	Full-time Respondents
$27,312.44	$38,225.85

Not as big of a shift as you might have expected. There was just slightly more than a $10,000 difference between full-time and part-time designers. Keep in mind that benefits, insurance, and other compensation are not included in that reported income. Nonetheless, you'd think full-time employment would be worth a lot more than $10,000!

Looking closer at the data, we can see that the average full-time salary was skewed downward by a large amount of low paying full-time jobs. Frequently, those who reported low pay in full-time positions also indicated that they were students, they had not completed a college degree, or that web design was only a small portion of their typical work duties.

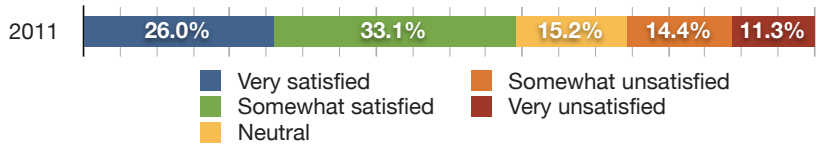
One of the early decisions you'll have to make as a web designer is whether to pursue full-time work as an employee, work as an independent freelancer, or arrange a combination of the two. There are benefits to all three arrangements, and it can help to take a look at the numbers. We asked our respondents what their current work situation was:

What's your work situation?



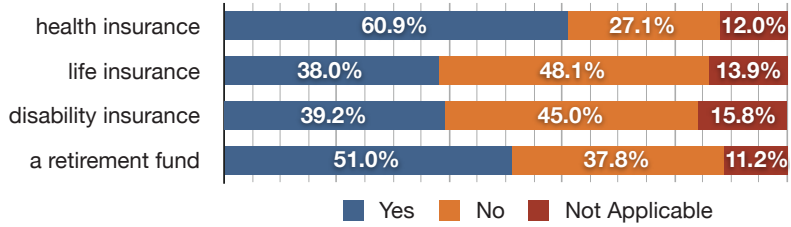
Over a third of surveyed web designers were freelance or self-employed professionals. That number expands to nearly half once you add respondents who were creating websites on the side. Roughly another third work in web design under an employer. We asked employee web designers what they thought of their employer and work situation to see how it compared to the freedom of freelancing:

How satisfied are you at your current employer?



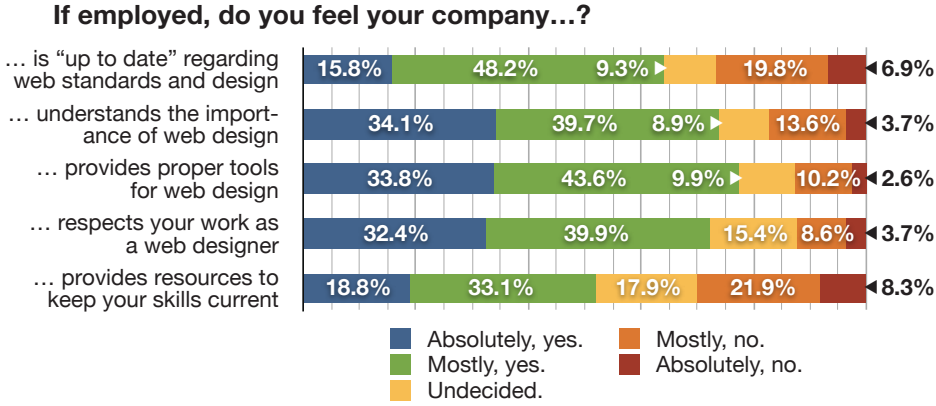
Over half (59%) reported satisfaction, while 26% reported varying levels of dissatisfaction with their employer. This is lower satisfaction overall than that of their freelancing counterparts. However, we also asked about other benefits and support employers offered.

Benefits: Does your employer offer…?



It's no surprise to anyone that employed designers had significantly greater access to various types of insurance and retirement plans. One of the most difficult aspects of transitioning to my own freelance career was replacing benefits. Depending on your country of residence, benefits can be a big or a small concern. See Chapter 3: Getting Started Right for more advice on choosing between freelance work and full-time employment.

Finally, we asked employees how well their employer supported their professional development and kept up to date on the industry.



The majority of employed web designers felt fairly positive about their employer's support and understanding of their work: a great sign for our industry. Overwhelmingly, the most happy and successful respondents were the ones that felt their employers were up to date and supportive (the "Mostly Yes" or "Absolutely Yes" responses). This underlines the fact that a good employer can make or break any position, so those working full-time in web design should pick their companies carefully.

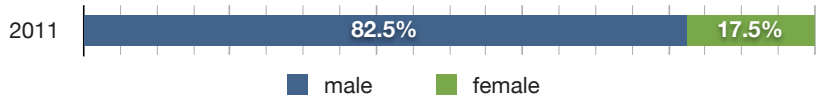
So, which work situation is right for you? Check out Chapter 3 for more advice on settling the studio versus freelance dilemma.

Age & Gender

When I started exploring web design as a young geek of the female persuasion, I was attracted to the ability to work digitally and, in some ways, anonymously. It struck me as the great equalizer. You can't necessarily tell by looking at a website whether it was designed by a man or a woman; in fact, many of us can complete whole projects without meeting our clients face to face. Don't get me wrong—I always enjoyed healthy competition, male or female, but taking the pre-conceptions of gender out of it intrigued me.

Yet, despite this egalitarian concept, web design, like many web and technology fields, is still overwhelmingly populated by men.

Are you male or female?

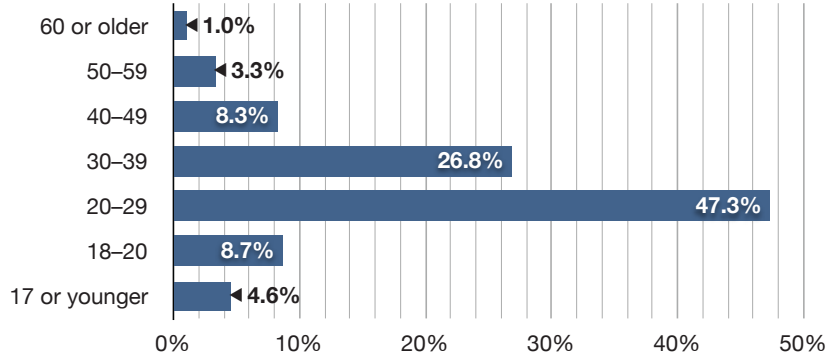


Women only make up 17.5% of the respondents in this poll. This is roughly in line with other industry surveys and suggests that females are a very small minority within the industry. And, there are a few noteworthy differences between genders: Male web designers were more likely to use the title "developer" and female designers were more likely to use the title "consultant" or "freelancer." Freelance female web designers were likely to charge less per hour ($63.96 average) than men ($94.32 average).

But it's not all bad news. Female web designers were slightly more likely to collaborate on projects. Female web designers are also more likely to have completed an undergraduate degree (45% versus 35% of men) and have a slightly more positive outlook on their career (happiness and relevance). On important topics like finding work, using industry standards, and other professional metrics, men and women responded the same.

Like gender, age is another frequently cited bias in our industry. Unsurprisingly, our respondents were predominately under 30:

Which category below includes your age?



While the majority of respondents were in the 21-29 year old age range and that typically fits our image of the typical web design guru, 20-somethings were not necessarily the most successful in industry. For more information on that, check out Chapter 6 on success and happiness in web design.

3

Getting Started Right

The majority of this book assumes you're somewhere on the path of a professional web design career. However, everyone—even our tenured experts—had to start out somewhere. We all began as fresh faces in industry, whether as new college graduates with a smattering of school projects or as self-taught transfers from other disciplines.

However you got here, every web designer has tales of things they wish some kind soul had told them or explained when they were starting out. The right advice that can make all the difference.

Luckily, web designers benefit from a community that is generally quite helpful. Many experienced designers are passionate enough about their craft that they're glad to share what they know to help newcomers succeed. Without these willing mentors, I know I would not have the career I enjoy today.

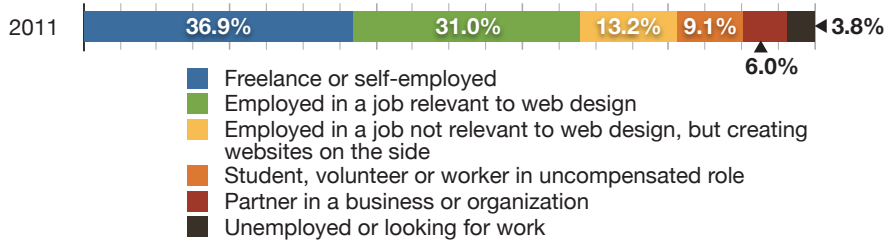
If you're just starting out in the web design world, this chapter is for you. We'll look at some important advice for newcomers:

- Landing your first web design gig and what to expect
- What your peers and the web design community expect of you
- A few vital steps to succeeding over the long-term in web design

Decide Where to Start

There are basically two breeds of web designers: those of us who work freelance and those of us who work for employers, whether independent design studios or on a web team for a large corporate entity.

What's your work situation?



The majority of web designers in the 2011 survey were freelancers, but nearly as many worked as employees. There are benefits to either career path, but they'll likely offer very different work environments. Take the time to consider how you enjoy working when you're looking to break your way into industry. Don't blindly apply to any company that will have you. Likewise, don't take on any and all freelance gigs you find. Doing either is a very efficient way to find yourself stressed out, ground down by the work, and going nowhere fast.

If you've never worked in the industry, however, it can be tough to figure out where you'll fit. The freelance route has developed a lot of romance and mystique about it and is a popular route for many web designers. Ian Yates, freelance designer and editor of Webdesigntuts+, shares why it worked for him:

> *"If, ten years ago, you'd have asked me if there was a rewarding form of employment which would allow someone to live in a different country whenever they were inclined, to comfortably provide for their family, to build connections and friendships worldwide, and which didn't require them to answer to a 'boss', I don't think I'd have thought it was on my horizon. Yet here I am, and it's thanks to opportunities web design has presented me with."*

As wonderful as that sounds, there are a lot of added elements to a freelance career to consider, and it's not an ideal fit for everyone. We'll go over some basic questions to ask, but keep in mind

that it's possible that you'll find the design studio that breaks the corporate mold or negotiate a freelancer career that avoids some classic freelance pitfalls.

Do I prefer collaboration or working alone?

Freelancers, by nature, often complete a majority of their work solo. If you do your best work with colleagues around to provide quick feedback, and you enjoy working on a team, you'll want an environment that involves working with other professionals like a studio or corporate team. (Check out the sidebar for a story from Envato's own design team.) However, if you are disciplined and able to work efficiently alone, you'll appreciate the flexibility of freelancing.

A Story from the Trenches

I asked Rodney Blackney, Designer for Envato, Rockable's parent company, to tell us a little about his toughest design challenge. Envato's design team consists of a couple designers, a project manager, and a couple front-end developers. You can see from his story how many people are involved in a challenging design project. Here's Rodney's story:

> *The toughest recent project was the headers for the Envato marketplaces. The previous navigation elements were a bit clunky and also you couldn't find anything too easily. Jason Ellis, the marketplace manager at the time, had initially come up with some wireframes, and Collis had also completed a few draft designs as well (http://dribbble.com/shots/118371-New-Envato-Marketplaces-Header) in which I could design around.*
>
> *So, I took those designs and created some initial mockups which were good, but needed some tweaking after receiving some constructive feedback and criticism. Previously, I thought the other header was quite heavy with graphics (drop shadows and gradients, etc.).*
>
> *The goal here was to make it leaner and take up less height, which would move all the marketplace items further up the page as a result. I also wanted to add in a useful drop down menu so that our users*

could easily access their profile and financial information whenever they were logged in.

The common challenge we always face with our marketplaces is getting what I have designed to work consistently across all of the networked sites, but the leaner version of this header easily adapted to each site's individual brand and color scheme.

We won't be redesigning all the marketplaces all at once, but piece by piece works much better for us as a team when there is a lot of design work to be done. ”



Can I handle uncertainty or financial instability?

Even if you land a regular retainer as a freelancer, there's a lot more uncertainty and fewer guarantees. Your income will vary (sometimes wildly) from month to month. Your work won't provide benefits like insurance, and you are responsible for determining your own tax implications and setting aside tax payments year-round. Freelancers have to be comfortable with a lot of these financial uncertainties (though job security is often not guaranteed anywhere). If you have a family or lifestyle that depends on stability, you might favor a regular paycheck.

Whatever your answers to those questions are, don't be afraid to think outside the box. Sometimes the best solution to your personal goals won't be an either-or choice, but rather it will be a hybrid… or something entirely different! Kriesi, one of ThemeForest's top authors, sums it up when he was asked about his most surprising lesson in web design:

“ *You can make money with almost anything as long as it is 1) well crafted and 2) solves a problem.*

Selling stock designs and themes was definitely nothing I would have ever come up with on my own. But during the last 3 years I have made a good living out of it. and along the way I've seen even stranger

business models, and a ton of them simply worked because someone had a problem and solved that problem in a beautiful way. ”

Valuing Your Skills: A Word for Students

If there’s one thing that I could “do over” from my college years, it would be this: I wish I’d taken the option of freelancing more seriously. The idea of “student work” gets a lot of flack from the design community, but we’ve all been there. The truth is, there’s no better time to take risks, experiment with new skills, and beef up your portfolio with real-world work than when you’re in college.

Value Your Skills—Wherever They’re At

Being an ambitious, inexperienced designer can be a frustrating stage of your career. You’re being trained to be a professional, and you know you’re talented, but you don’t have the projects under your belt to prove it. What’s more, everyone expects you to work for free.

Let’s address that last one right away. You’ll run into a lot of non-profits and academic groups as a student who need design work and ask you to contribute your time. You should never, ever work for free. Even as a new designer, even if freelancing is not your intended career, you need to value your own skills and time. That’s not to say you need to charge these non-profits exorbitant rates as a new designer, or even exchange money at all, but there always has to be something of value traded for your time. Perhaps the group can offer you some great promotion, feature your work at a public event, or write an excellent testimonial, or offer some other boon that helps to get your career off the ground.

Not only does this help build your reputation as a designer, but it also sets the tone for dealing with your design clients. If your

clients understand that in some way they're "paying" for your skills, it puts you on an equal, professional level. You're not an intern, you're not a student volunteer. No one is doing a favor; you're both here to get work done.

It also puts the pressure on you, as a designer, to produce worthwhile work. I made the mistake of doing a lot of work for free for various organizations at my University. It wasn't all bad—I learned a lot and got experience designing for others—but none of those pieces were a lasting contribution to my portfolio. Why?

To be honest, I had so much freedom that the designs were crap—I was just a free "student" designer, after all. The "clients" were getting the work for free and saw the work as a class project and didn't invest the time working with me as a professional—making requirements, requesting revisions, taking it seriously. No matter how well intentioned my designs were, they didn't undergo the rigors of a real, paying gig, multiple iterations, and stringent approval processes, and the work suffered as a result.

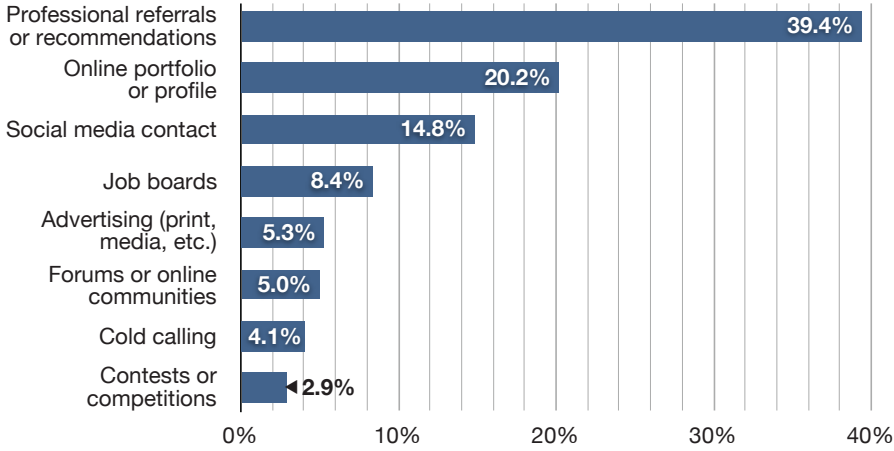
Still, crappy designs can yield valuable experience. Use any and every opportunity to practice your craft in school, learn the value of your time, and hone your project and your client relations skills. Just know, when you come out the other side with a degree and a folder full of projects, which ones are worth a space in the portfolio and which ones are not.

Start with a Portfolio

Getting your first start in any design-centered field can be a challenging prospect. It's a catch-22 of design: clients won't hire you because your portfolio is empty, and your portfolio is empty because clients won't hire you. If you're fresh into the web design industry, chances are that you have not produced a lot of previous professional website work—that's why you need a job. It seems like a mean prank on new web designers.

You might get lucky and find someone to take a chance on you, but more likely you are going to have to put in the work. Especially among freelancers, portfolios are an essential source for maintaining a continuous stream of work, coming in second only to professional referrals.

Where do you frequently find new clients and projects?



So you need a portfolio, but you haven't done much designing yet. Some way or another, you're going to need pieces to fill your portfolio before you even get to your first interview. And we're talking a lot of pieces—one or two student projects won't cut it. You'll want at least 5-6 solid web designs to demonstrate to employers and clients that you've got the chops to get the work done.

There's a number of ways to generate this work: student work, imaginary clients, and so on. Anything that gets you designing and gets projects out there is useful, but frequently the results of these filler projects are fairly obvious to employers—filler work looks like filler work. Instead of focusing on venues that help you generate portfolio pieces, let's look at what is necessary for any piece to be a successful showcase, not just filler. Do the pro bono work, the design projects and so on, then make sure each of your pieces meets these characteristics to get the job done.

Is it a complete project?

A lot of beginning web design portfolios are populated by a common offense: a basic .psd design of the front page of a website. Even when done well, the front page design is only an early step in any web design project. It's the equivalent to applying for a chef's position by showing a sketch of the dish you plan to cook. You've got to allow the client to see the entire completed site design.

Make sure the portfolio item shows off the full design. Just to get you started, even a basic website might have: interior pages, a contact form, a mobile version or responsive design view, a gallery view, a blog or other news feed, and more. If the site isn't fully designed and fleshed out, it should not make an appearance in your portfolio.

Is it live and working?

A static screenshot of a website design tells me one of three things: the project is old, the project is unreliable, or the designer didn't implement it. While you may not always be implementing every element of a design, we're far removed from the time when designers were considered simply graphic artists. Today, designers are expected to have expertise in the basics of development, user experience, persuasive architecture, interface design, and a plethora of other skills that can't be judged by a static screenshot. Those things can only be judged by interacting with a live site design.

If at all possible, provide a link to a live demo. Ideally, this is the finished website that is successfully at work for the previous client or employer. If you're worried about a previous project being negatively altered once you've handed it off, stage a basic demo version of the same design on your own server. It's acceptable if one or two designs are static in a portfolio—I've run into situations in the past where I couldn't reproduce live versions of a design for

legal reasons—but try to fill your portfolio with live, dynamic, interactive websites.

Does it follow modern design standards?

One of the curses of web design is you are frequently going to look at work you completed mere months ago and bemoan how it could have been done better. That's a given. However, your web design portfolio should demonstrate your current aesthetic and design capabilities. If a project looks even the slightest bit dated, it's going to turn off some discerning viewers.

That's not to say that your items should follow every trend of the moment in web design! Developing a personal style, via experience and practice, will ensure a consistent style that serves you far better than blind trend-chasing.

What skills or experience does this item demonstrate? Your portfolio exists for one purpose: to demonstrate your credentials as a top notch web designer for hire. Take some time to look at each portfolio item and identify what that project taught you or what skills you contributed. Make sure your skills are covered and each item "does its share of the work" in proving your credentials.

Don't focus merely on technical skills and software either! Portfolio items that demonstrate a unique client request or working situation (I had to work with five developers on a time crunch), or items with impressive outcomes (won Cool Design Award) can be fantastic talking points when you're interviewing a client or potential employer.

Does another item in my portfolio showcase this better?

On the flip side, contrary to what newcomers might believe, more is not necessarily better in a portfolio. When you're just starting out and scrambling for portfolio-worthy projects, each item you can add to your portfolio might easily have something unique to show

off. After a while though, it's easy to start accumulating portfolio items that are repetitive.

A Word on Portfolio Design

When you're in a hurry to get a portfolio up and running, it's tempting to take shortcuts with your own portfolio site design. In fact, there are some really beautiful, well-designed templates for portfolio sites available. But, it's important to not forget the number one item in your design portfolio, the item that all potential clients and employers will judge your abilities by: the design of the portfolio site itself.

If you are selling your skills as one who designs and creates websites, then you should certainly design and implement your own portfolio. Writers, illustrators, and even designers in the non-web field can get away with using templates for their portfolios, but you're a web design professional; this is what you do. There's simply no reason to not design your own portfolio site. It'd be akin to a blogger having a ghostwriter write their "About" page.

Put in the work. That's not to say that there aren't a lot of helpful plug-ins, widgets, and frameworks out there that can help you along the way, but the design and implementation should be your own. Consider it your flagship portfolio piece.

Later on, should your career take off, evolve, and move you further away from website creation, you may have earned some room to consider a template for your portfolio. Professionals who have a long waiting list of clients or a skillset that goes beyond web design would be foolish to turn down paid work to polish their portfolio instead. If you find yourself transitioning to a role that isn't a purebred design position, or suffering from the high-quality problem of "too many clients," then your customized portfolio may have served it's purpose all too well. I don't have clients flooding my inbox or lining up at my door, but I also don't sell my skills as a web designer anymore. I work much more on the production and strategy side of web content. My professional site (and distinctly non-web design portfolio) was designed by the excellent and talented **Kreisi**. Make no mistake, if you're selling yourself as a full-time web designer, you need to design your own site.



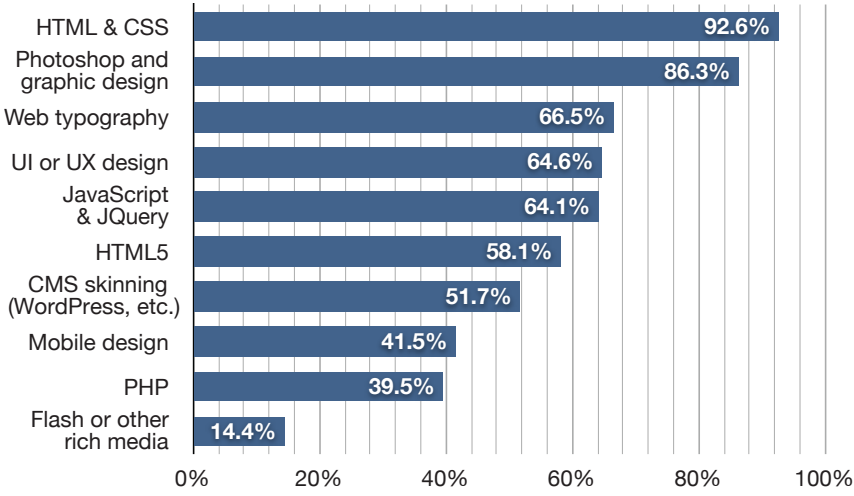
Portfolios require proper upkeep and maintenance. Replace older items with newer or better examples of your work. Weed out the

average items and make sure your best items are the ones getting seen. It's tough to walk that fine line between "too sparse" and "design warehouse," but by carefully curating your items, you'll impress your clients.

Improve Your Skills

You might think that the challenge of educating yourself ended when you received your college degree or certification, but continuous learning and keeping current on design trends and tools is a large part of being a professional web designer. You might start your career with general experience in a number of skills and technologies, but it's impossible to become an expert and stay cutting-edge in them all. We asked designers what skills they felt were most vital to the field.

What skills do you feel it's important for a web designer to know well?



Inevitably, the basic tools of graphic design and HTML & CSS topped the list. Almost unanimously, your colleagues and clients will expect you to master these. These are the basic tools of the trade that you'll want to keep in your skillset indefinitely. However,

you will also want to have general competence and understanding of other skills and, ideally, find a niche to really gain an expertise.

You'll frequently find that after several years in a web design career, you rarely stay a generalist. Inevitably, web designers find a area of design to focus on. We become experts with funky titles: mobile designers, UX engineers, interactive designers, JavaScript ninjas, and WordPress rock stars.

Once you find your passion for a specific area of web design, you'll want to not only master the field now, but stay on top of trends and new developments going forward. Check out Chapter 4 for more discussion on skills.

Develop a Style & Philosophy

You'd think that, having improved your skills, you don't have to worry about style. If you're good enough, you can do any style, right? What's the point in limiting yourself?

In reality, the most successful designers inevitably develop a style which they're known for. And it's important to know what we mean when we say "style" to understand the importance. Style, in this sense, is not merely an aesthetic preference, but a designer's personal philosophy and perspective on solving design problems. To call upon an over-used example, consider Apple's iconic brand. Apple's "style" isn't merely glass screens and clean edges. It's a minimalistic philosophy that includes value on user interface, among many other things.

As you develop your career as a designer, potential employers and clients will want to test and understand your design style. Vitaly Friedman shares the qualities he tests for when hiring new designers as editor of Smashing Magazine (Smashing Network). He explains how little tests on the use of color and design can tell a lot about a designer:

> *When we are looking for web designers for our projects, we are looking for people who are able to strike a delicate balance between distinctive style and effective user interfaces.*
>
> *One of the first tasks I love to give to designers is just sending an article, just a heading along with a couple of paragraphs of text, images and some buttons, and ask the designer to create a colorful, effective and meaningful layout. Color says a lot about a designer's understanding of color theory, effectiveness is related to UX, and meaning is related to the consistency of and vision behind the design. Usually, it helps a lot to just better understand how the designer thinks and what is important to him during the design process.*

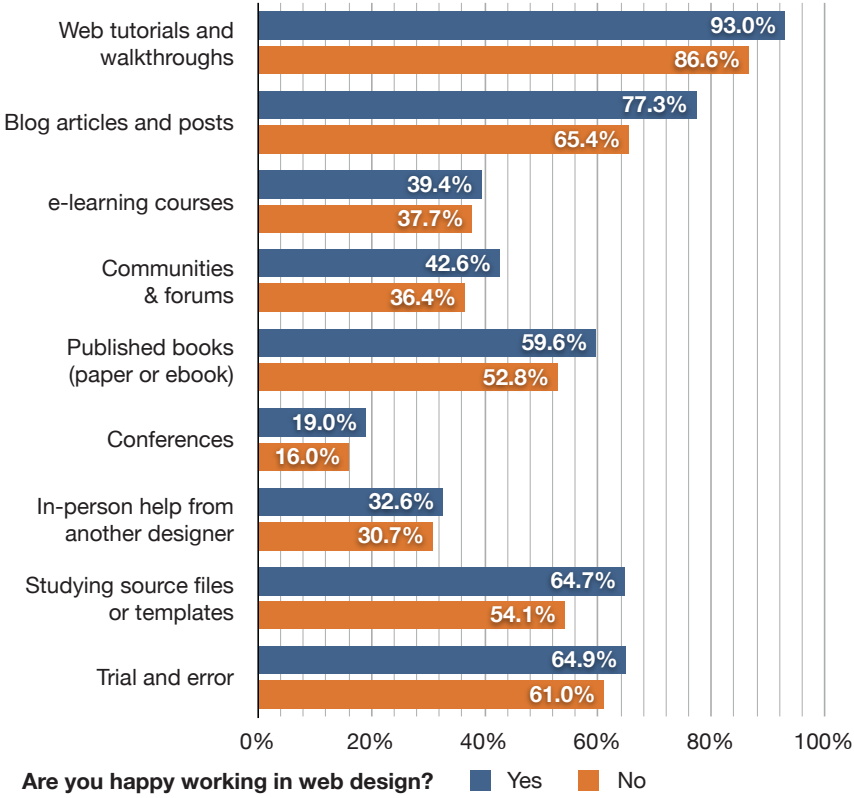
You can see how important it is to not only know the tools and techniques, but to know yourself as a designer. Frequently, your own style and design philosophy will develop over time. Like the design world itself, your opinions and ideas about your craft are going to change. If you are in a hurry to explore style, design galleries like Creattica and other showcases are popular for inspiration and are useful for discovering what you like and don't like. However, your style is going to ultimately be shaped by completing your own projects. There's no substitute for experience.

Share Your Work & Stick With It

So you've set your goals, you have your portfolio, you're developing your style. From here on out, it's the work that all designers have to do over the life of their career—participate and keep going. Turns out, participation is not just good for your career—it's good for your happiness as well. Even accounting for sampling ratio (significantly fewer designers are unhappy as opposed to happy), happy designers were more likely to participate in communities, forums, and other resources that allow you to learn from another

individual. Happy designers are slightly more likely to share and learn with others.

Outside of formal education, how do you prefer to learn new design skills?



Rodney Blackney, designer at Envato, advocates for the importance of sharing your work and networking with designers and non-designers alike:

> *"It's definitely good networking with not only designers, but with developers, project and account managers, etc. That is pretty much how I got my foot in the door for the design job at Envato. I had met Clinton, Ryan, and John before starting here. So my advice is not to*

just network with only designers, get to know other people related to the web design industry, creative directors, account managers, front-end developers. Its not what you know its who you know. ”

4

Your Say: What Web Designers Think About Web Design

Web design is a funny field. We spend years perfecting the craft, technique, and art of design for the public's consumption. Yet the most elegant, successful, most effective designs will be the one that's never noticed by the user—so well designed, perhaps, that it disappears seamlessly into the content.

Luckily, like any industry, we love talking about ourselves. Designers can always be relied upon to have opinions about other designers and designs. I asked both our experts and our survey respondents to weigh in on the current goings on of web design to see where professional opinion was taking hot issues in our field and what we could learn from it.

Necessary Skills

As I hinted at earlier in the book, the mere definition of what it means to be a web designer has been a matter of debate over the years. Are we artists? Usability experts? Technicians? Architects? Developers? Some mix of them all?

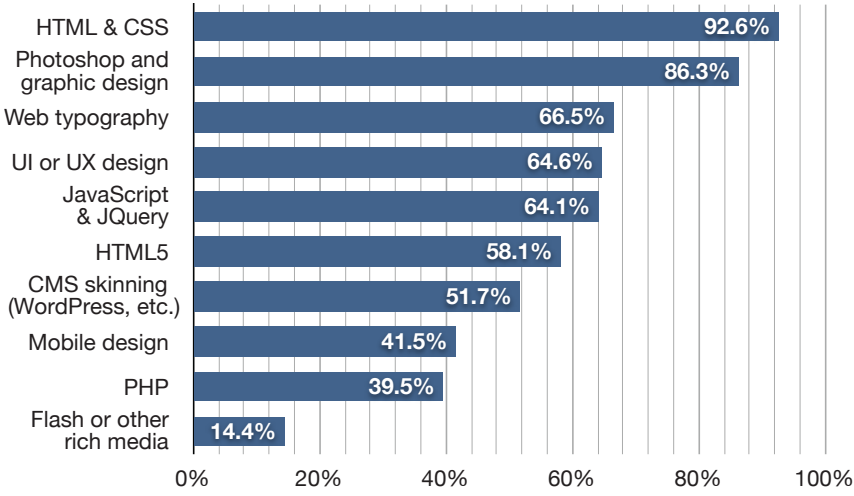
There's been a lot written about the identity of the web designer. However, what a lot of the debate comes down to is the specific skills that distinguish web design professionals in a field that's always changing. What skills must you possess to really call yourself a professional web designer in 2012?

Our experts had a range of answers that included both important technical skills and design disciplines. Ian Yates emphasizes the importance of having core competence skills:

> *"I see no reason for a web designer not to have HTML + CSS in their skillset. Understanding how a page is built will only improve a designer's understanding of the layout. Plus (thanks to responsive web design), we're entering a period where wireframing and designing directly in the browser are perfectly valid methods of completing a design brief."*

A sound majority of the web design survey respondents agree. Responses didn't dramatically change, whether full-time, part-time, young, or old; most designers surveyed felt professionals should have a firm grasp on HTML & CSS as well as Photoshop.

What skills do you feel it's important for a web designer to know well?



It's important to note, however, that the next top responses were not technical markup skills, programming languages, or software; they were areas of web design theory. The following top-cited skills were web typography (at 66.5%) and user interface or UX design (at 64.6%). Kriesi, a top WordPress theme designer on ThemeForest, considers a defining skill to be the way a professional uses her design knowledge to handle basic elements.

> *Typography. If you reduce web design to the bare minimum you will end up with only a bunch of paragraphs. That's what the web is all about; written information. Only the very best designers can create a website that pretty much contains nothing but text and makes it look great. Unfortunately, typography is something that is often overlooked by newcomers, and more often than not, poor line spacing can destroy an otherwise beautiful website.*

Vitaly Friedman concurs on the importance of typography and also places an emphasis on problem solving practices:

> *I think that Web designers should be capable of at least three things: 1) they should master the core of our craft which is problem-solving and communication. 2) they should be aware of best practices and follow them, yet also know when to break them, creating enough room for experimentation and creative breakouts. 3) They should understanding the importance of typography and copy.*

Meanwhile, Sarah Parmenter of You Know Who Design boils it down to developing an eye for the little things:

> *Attention to detail. I don't think it's good enough to be a fabulous designer or developer, I think you need a critical eye for detail. So many of my designs get ripped to shreds when passed on to a developer, because they don't have an eye for detail, they miss the subtle shadows, the bevels and highlights, that really make a difference within a design, and what I end up seeing isn't the hours of details I put in, but a version of my version. I'm sure designers don't appreciate the finer details that developers do either; it's definitely a two-way thing.*

In short, a professional web designer should be a wizard of the technology, a craftsman of the theory, and a master of the process. No problem!

If this doesn't describe you yet, just relax. If there was a test of this nature to pass before designing your first website, then none of us would be in business today.

However, every single skill mentioned here undoubtedly makes you a better and more successful designer. Call it the tripod of professional web design: technique, design theory, and practiced experience. Always be looking for ways to practice and improve. Quite frankly, that's the hallmark of a professional designer and the most necessary attribute; one who's always learning. Veerle Pieters of Duoh! expands on the importance of improving as a designer:

> *"You need to be willing to keep on learning all the time. The world of web design evolves very quickly. There is a lot of experimenting involved, as there are a lot of different techniques to be learned on how to do things. You need to find what's best for your project. The unexpected factor in this may be the pace of how fast you need to learn new techniques. It almost feels as if you're constantly catching up on things."*

So, let's take a look on what it means to stay current and where you should focus your efforts.

Staying Current

People like me who write about design love talking about trends, because designers frequently like reading about them. Stagnating, falling behind, or being judged for becoming dated is a common fear. And it's important to stay aware of what's going on. But despite our tendency to mimic, aesthetic trends are not the heart of web design. Vitaly Friedman of Smashing Magazine has strong words to debunk the concern of trends:

> *"Trends are extremely overrated in our industry, and we are always trying to be trendy and cool and appear "current." I think that we should strive for holistic user experiences instead—experiences that don't rely on trends for their effect, and designs that try to be timeless and bulletproof…"*

Vitaly is absolutely spot on. However, I think it's important here to understand the difference between staying current to the latest design "fancies" and staying current to industry standards and best practices. Several of the experts I interviewed explained the importance of staying on top of developments in the field of professional design:

> *"For the last year or so "responsive web design" has been on everyone's lips. Treating web designs as flexible, fluid layouts, which specifically alter depending on their circumstances, is an exiting idea for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it recognizes the fact that our browsing habits are changing, as are the devices we use to access web content. Secondly (and more importantly), it marks a change in the way designers are approaching their designs. We're starting to think differently, flexibly, and the funny thing is we could have taken this lateral perspective a long time ago."*
> *—Ian Yates*

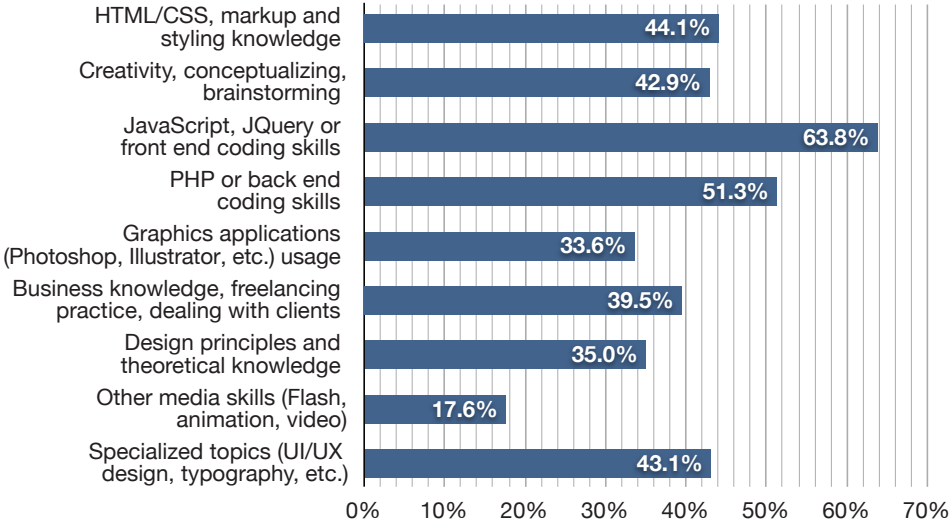
> *"I think being current means understanding multiple platforms. It's not enough that you can code HTML/CSS for desktop browsers now, you need to know how to take that and make it evolve for tablets and smartphones. I'm teaching someone the basics of HTML/CSS at the moment, he's picked it up really quickly, but I'm dreading having to add into the mix all these other facets of what we do, as it can seem so daunting."* *—Sarah Parmenter*

> *Staying current means pushing yourself into new and unfamiliar territory on a regular basis to challenge and enhance your current skillset. Anyone in this industry must be the type of person who is highly self-motivated and willing to learn and improve themselves.* —*Curt Ziegler (Cudazi)*

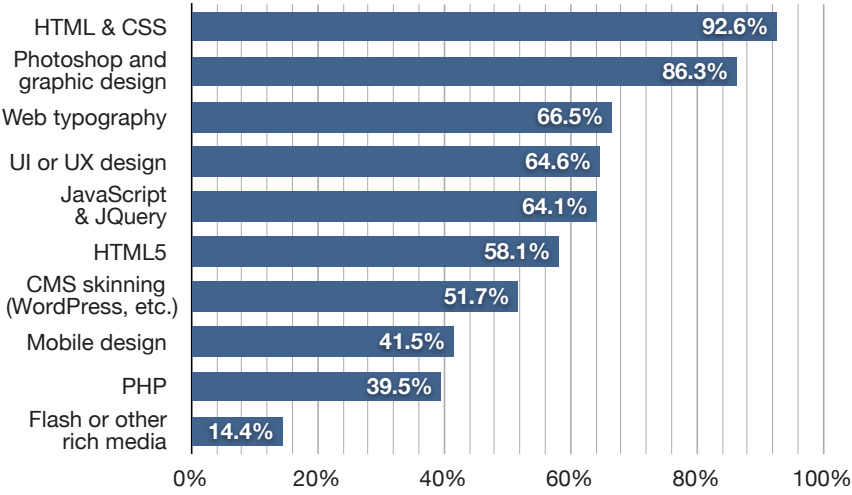
The point that all our experts make is that staying current means constantly learning and staying (critically) aware of ongoing developments in the industry.

I've included several graphs from the survey to give you a taste of what's going on in the field in 2012. These don't need a lot of commentary—see what your fellow designers are using and where you could stand to improve.

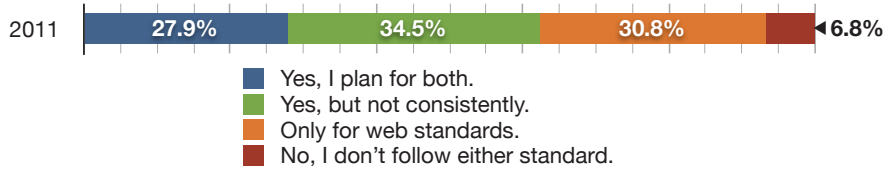
What skills do you most want to learn or improve right now?



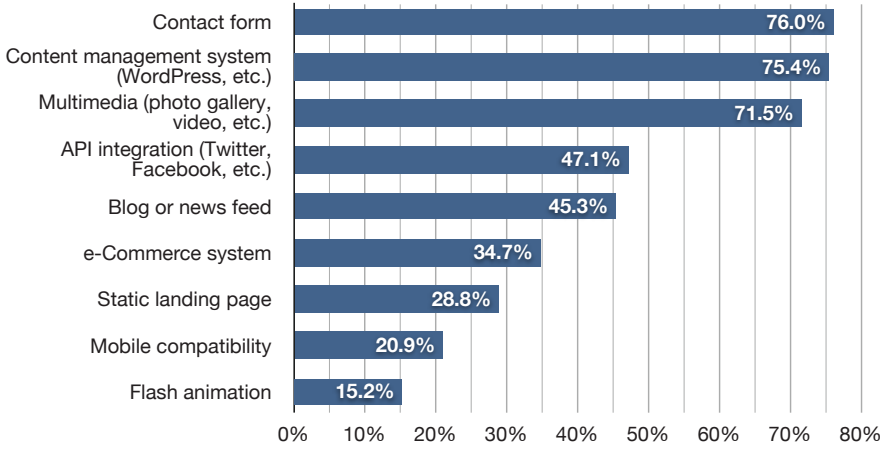
What skills do you feel it's important for a web designer to know well?



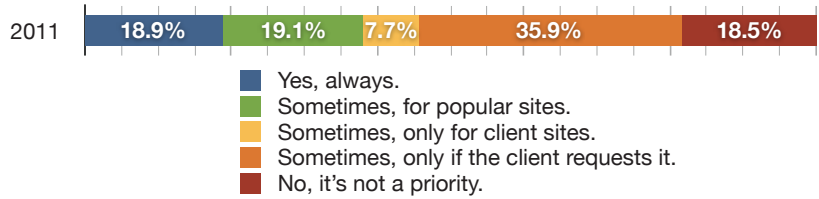
Do you plan your designs with web standards (W3C) and accessibility (508, ARIAA) in mind?



What features do your clients commonly request for their website design?



Do you plan for mobile and tablet versions of your web designs?



As you can see from those responses, web design has progressed a heck of a long way from HTML and spacer .gifs. No matter what your expertise or tenure, you're going to find new skills and concepts to master. Continually experimenting and learning new things is at the heart of the field and the one piece of advice that was echoed over and over by both our experts and survey respondents. Here's just a few words on the importance of learning by the pros:

> *"Luckily, we're involved in an industry which thrives on the very thing it contributes to: the Internet. By checking blogs, podcasts, tutorial sites, technology feeds, and web communities, you can't help but be influenced by, and carried along with trends and developments."* —Ian Yates

> *"…Sharing your work, in whatever medium you choose and accompanying it with what you learned from doing it, has always been my motto."* —Sarah Parmenter

> *"Not all techniques are reliable, and not all practices are bulletproof, but there is a lot of discussion going on in conferences, meetups, workshops and blog posts. And it's fantastic—fantastic because it drives and pushes our community forward."* —Vitaly Friedman

Finally, keep in mind that learning is not a passive activity. The best way to improve your talents is to get involved with a community—learn what you can from others and teach what you can. It may be cliché advice at this point, but that's because it's true. What's

more, you'll develop relationships with other designers, developers, and web professionals that could lead to entirely new opportunities you hadn't considered. Ian sums it up nicely:

> *"My only advice would be to get involved, rather than just watch from the sideline. Offer your own opinion, teach others what you think is valuable, and you'll find yourself becoming a part of a great movement."*

5

The State of Web Design Trends: 2012

So what are some of these trends and practices you should be aware of?

This article by Ian Yates was first published on WebDesignTuts+ on January 12th, 2012. (Original article: http://webdesign.tutsplus.com/articles/industry-trends/the-state-of-web-design-trends-2012-annual-edition/) It's an annual tradition of WebDesignTuts+ to take a look at the trending ***techniques*** of web design that year, not just the "fancies" we mentioned earlier. After discussing the importance of participating and staying current, I thought it was a great way to get you started thinking about the field in an organic, progressive way.



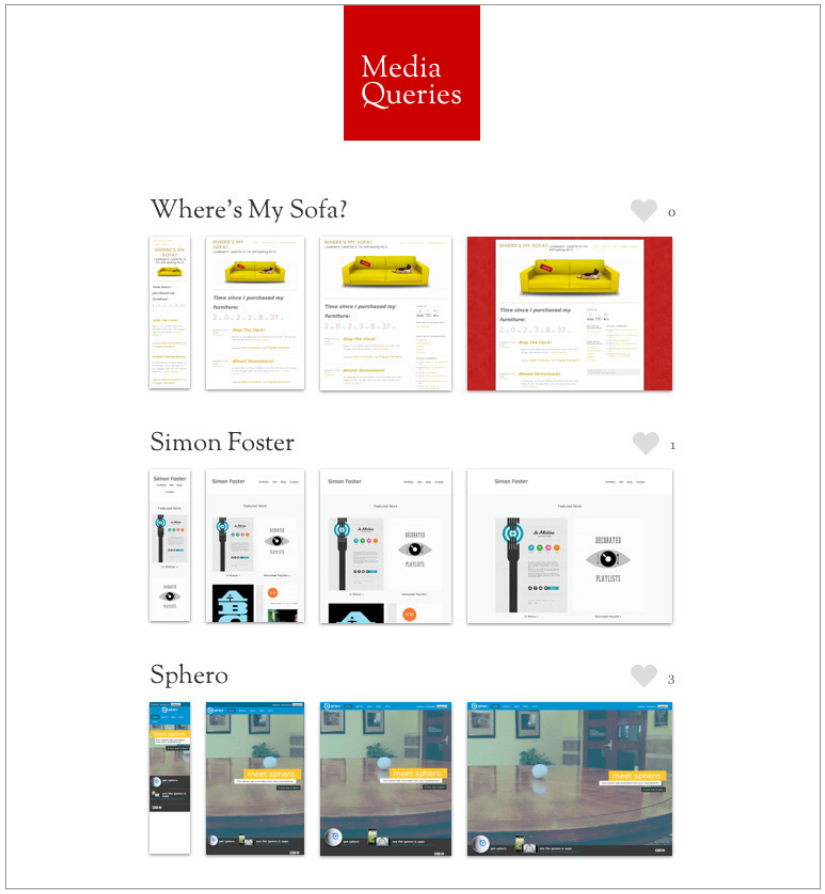
As Ferris Bueller famously said "Life moves pretty fast; if you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it." Let's heed his sage advice and take a moment to look around some web design trends we witnessed in 2011.

> *"The web is an ever-changing beast, full of flaws and imperfection and experimentation."*
> *—Dan Cederholm*

Responsive Web Design

Responsive Web Design is becoming a bit like a brilliant, yet over-played song. It seems like everyone has had their say, and Ethan Marcotte's agenda has never looked healthier. There's good reason for this though; the concept is simple, the motives are logical, the technology is straightforward and the results are extremely satisfying.

2011 saw an explosion in the number of websites built responsively, and the beauty of it is that we're all involved in developing the process. It's still in its youth, designers and developers are concocting new approaches all the time, and we're a long way off nailing down any real best practices. Should we first design for large screens and use media queries to gracefully degrade our designs for mobile? Or should we design for mobile first, progressively enhancing for more capable devices? Paul Irish kicked off an interesting thread over on GitHub if you'd like to dive into the discussion.



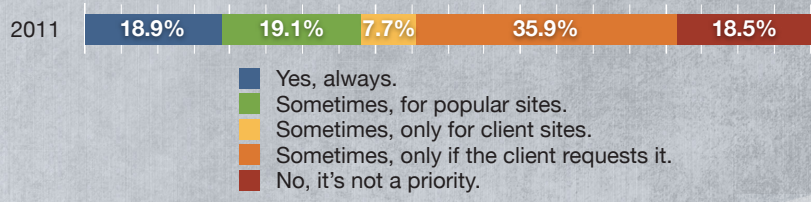
Mediaqueri.es uses a responsive, "squashy" layout.

With new and inspiring responsive designs popping up on a daily basis, there's clearly room for a showcase gallery. Mediaqueri.es by Eivind Uggedal fills that gap perfectly, displaying the latest in stretchy, squashy layouts. Mediaqueri.es itself is responsive (not being so would have been pretty unforgivable) and demonstrates how uncomplicated RWD can be.

Confidential Comments: Responsive Web Design

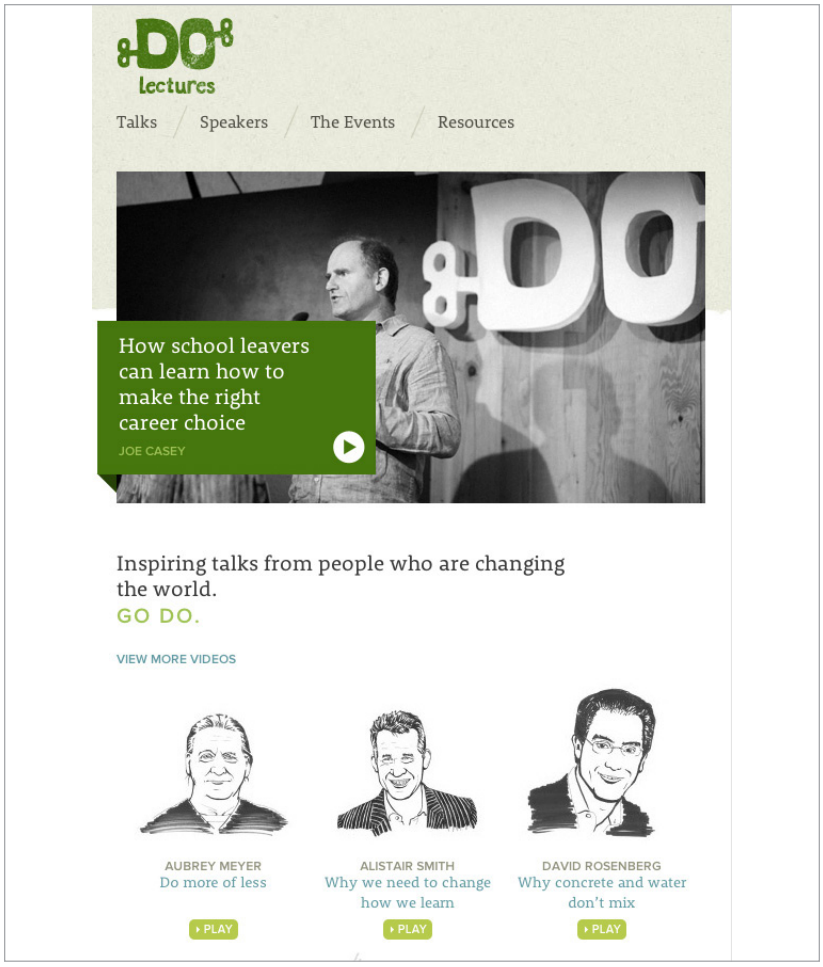
Many of the 2011 survey respondents commented on the importance of responsive web design. One respondent called for "Broader, meaning more device integration, so that web is spread across multiple platforms. As well as web design structure and layout changing as newer technology becomes more readily available." Another designer summed it up simply as "Responsive, adaptive, device-agnostic. Standardization (Finally!). More focus on people."

Do you plan for mobile and tablet versions of your web designs?



One thing RWD has highlighted is the focus on content. Aside from all other factors, the content of any given website is what's important; the meat-and-two-veg needs to be legible, accessible, and clear on any device. Designers are certainly taking this on board as is evident in many of 2011's emerging websites.

Take dolectures.com for example; even its full-screen, 960px incarnation is devoid of unnecessary clutter. Once you've considered mobile and what's absolutely crucial for the limitations of a smaller device, it often puts the larger layouts into perspective. Do you really need all those links filling up your footer? If you've altered the way they're presented for mobile, why not for desktop too?

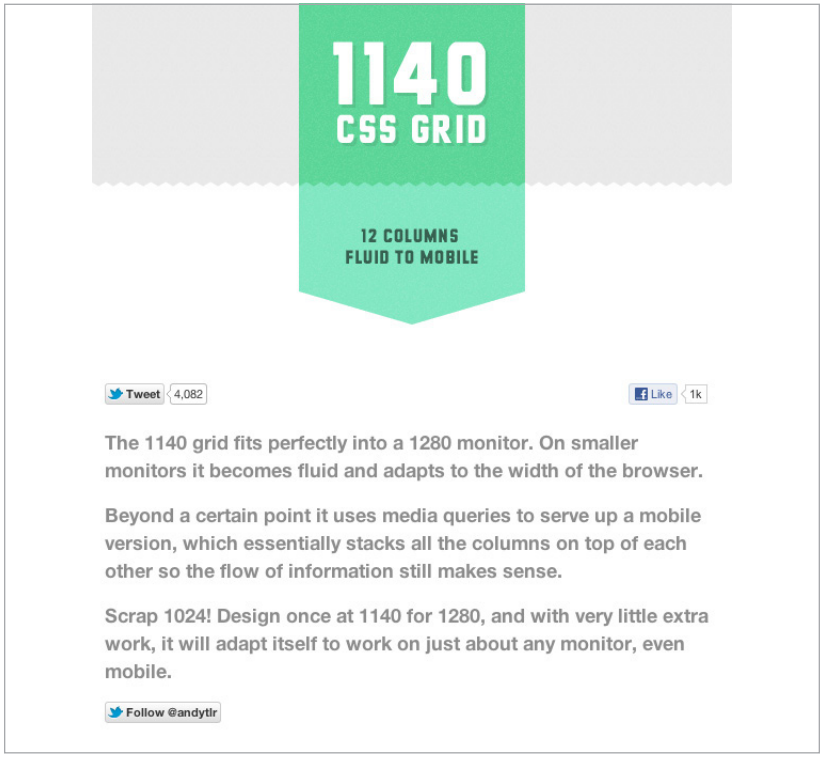


dolectures.com uses a minimal design to focus on content and stay mobile friendly.

When all's said and done though, even if you're a little tired of seeing yet more RWD tutorials and articles cropping up, stay tuned. 2012 is going to see big developments in the way we all approach it.

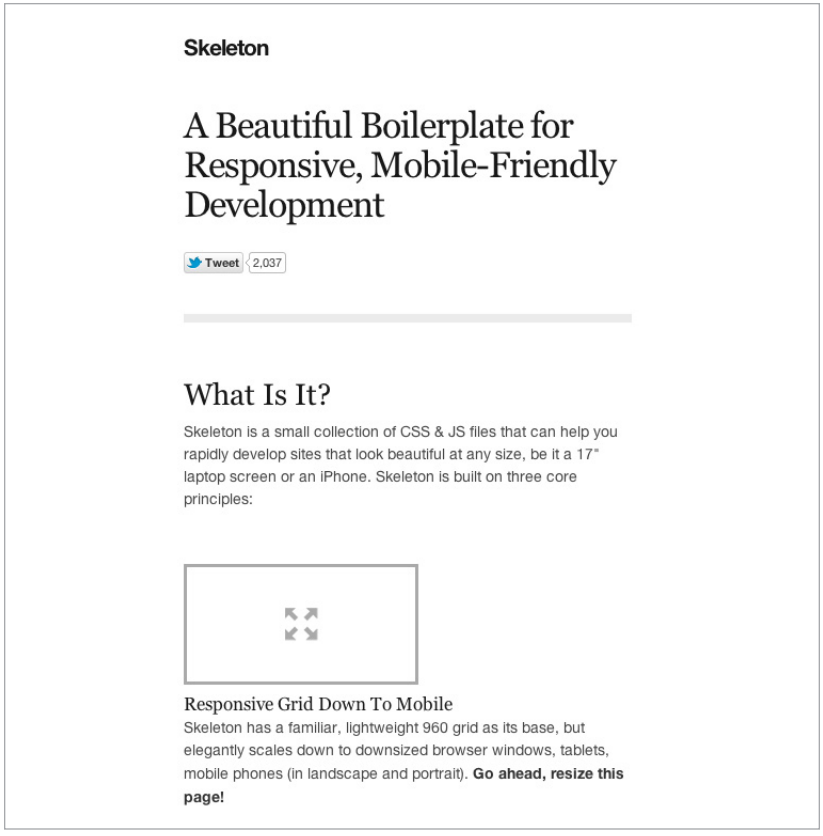
Grid Systems

Partner in crime to the responsive layout is the grid. 2011 has seen fixed grid frameworks make flexible improvements, not to mention the appearance of even more tools to help us out. All of the following frameworks, tools and guides cater to today's needs and offer fluidity.



1140 grid is an alternative approach to flexible layouts.

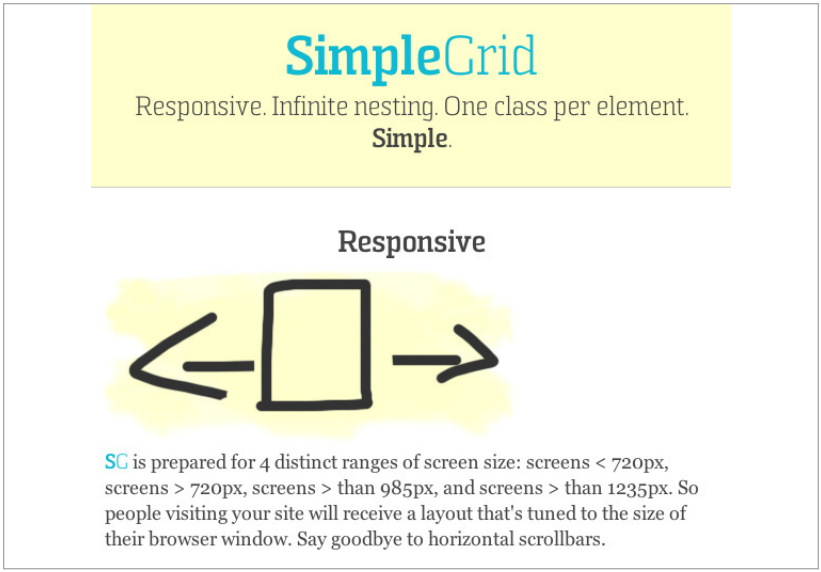
The 1140 grid takes an alternative approach to what has become the standard 960px width. As we're already working on flexible layouts, why does it matter what size the initial grid is? 1140 allows for some nicely rounded up values and includes some pleasantly wide gutters as a result.



Skeleton is the minimalist aesthetic to the extreme, yet beautiful.

Skeleton from Twitter's Dave Gamache is a whole responsive boilerplate that includes some gorgeous basic styling. Devoid of textures, images and non-system fonts, Skeleton illustrates just how effective minimal design can be, but it leaves plenty of room for adding your own style.

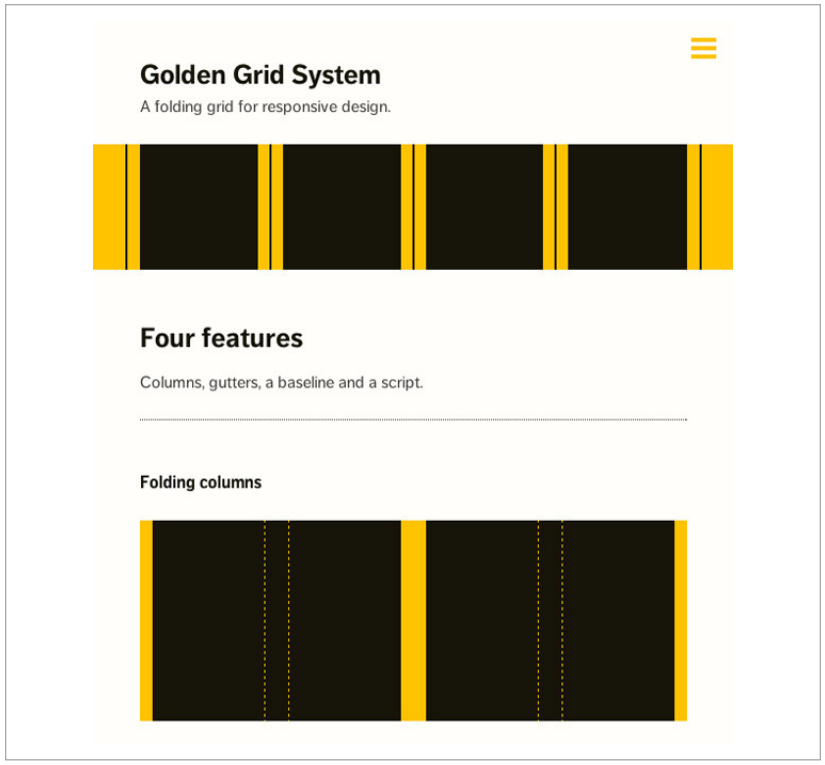
It also uses media queries to execute a number of fixed width layouts, as opposed to altering a completely fluid design. The four states take all devices, resolutions, and orientations into account, simplifying the whole build process. Playing with just four set widths means fewer breaking points and fewer decisions to make. Ideal.



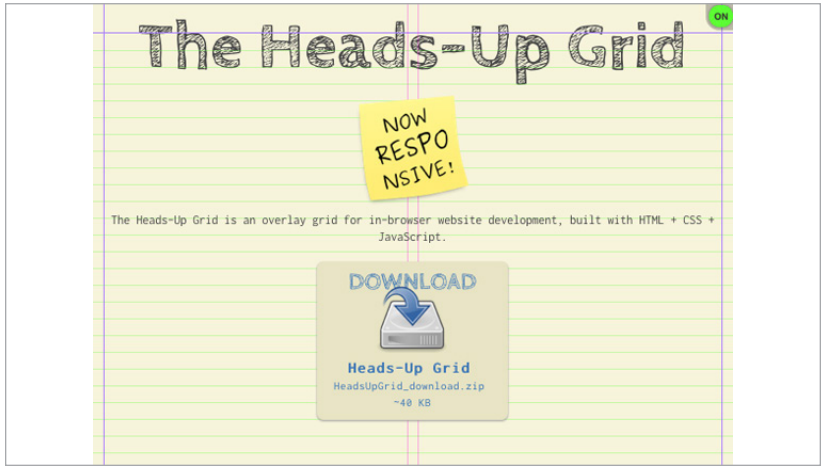
SimpleGrid leaves the decisions to the designer.

SimpleGrid takes a similar approach to its media queries, catering to four possible screen resolutions. Unlike the Skeleton boilerplate, SimpleGrid is a straightforward grid system (a simple grid, I suppose) which leaves you to make all the design decisions yourself.

The Golden Grid System is another example (there really are a lot of similar systems, so I won't bore you with all of them). The devil is in the details however, and a closer look at The Golden Grid System reveals some solid principles and ideas. Joni Korpi, the brains behind it, advocates things such as mobile-first development, utilizing maximum screen width (an unaltered Golden Grid System caters for screens up to 5120px!), box-sizing: border-box;, gutter widths relative to text size instead of screen size, and all sorts of other intriguing practices. Good stuff.



Golden Grid advocates many of the responsive design essentials.

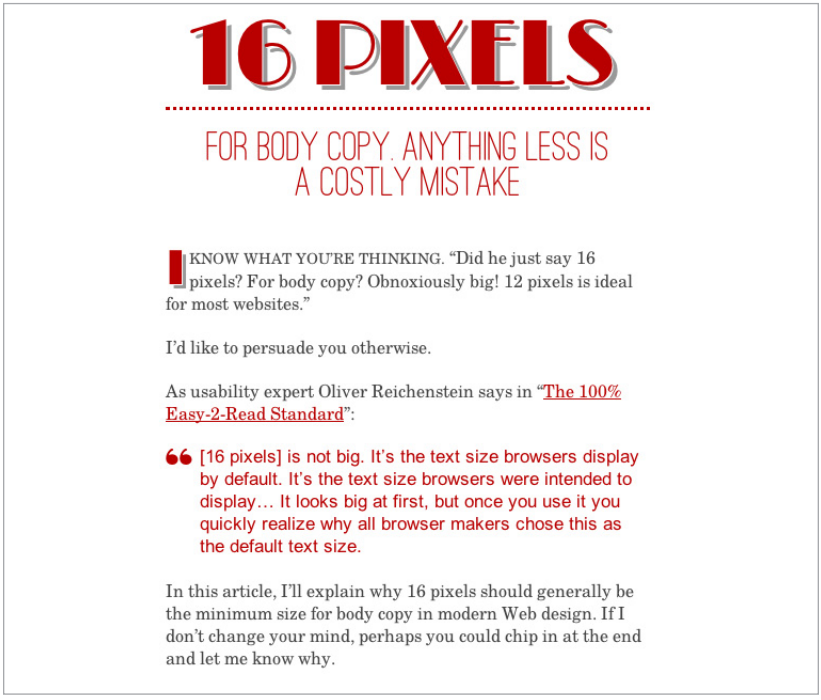


Heads-Up Grid helps you visualize your design grid.

The Golden Grid System also ships with its own “Golden Gridlet”; a JavaScript tool that lays the grid guides over your page to aid design. Similar tools are available to throw into any old web project—take The Heads-Up Grid for example (see previous page). The Heads-Up Grid lays gridlines (as defined by your desired dimensions) over your webpage to help visualize alignment and relationships between elements in your design. Again, it’s responsive, so it shrinks and grows along with your layout.

Typography

Obviously, typography isn’t a discipline which has emerged in 2011, but it’s an area of web design that continues to grow and is facilitated more than ever by web fonts and services.


16 PIXELS

FOR BODY COPY. ANYTHING LESS IS A COSTLY MISTAKE

I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE THINKING. “Did he just say 16 pixels? For body copy? Obnoxiously big! 12 pixels is ideal for most websites.”

I’d like to persuade you otherwise.

As usability expert Oliver Reichenstein says in “The 100% Easy-2-Read Standard”:

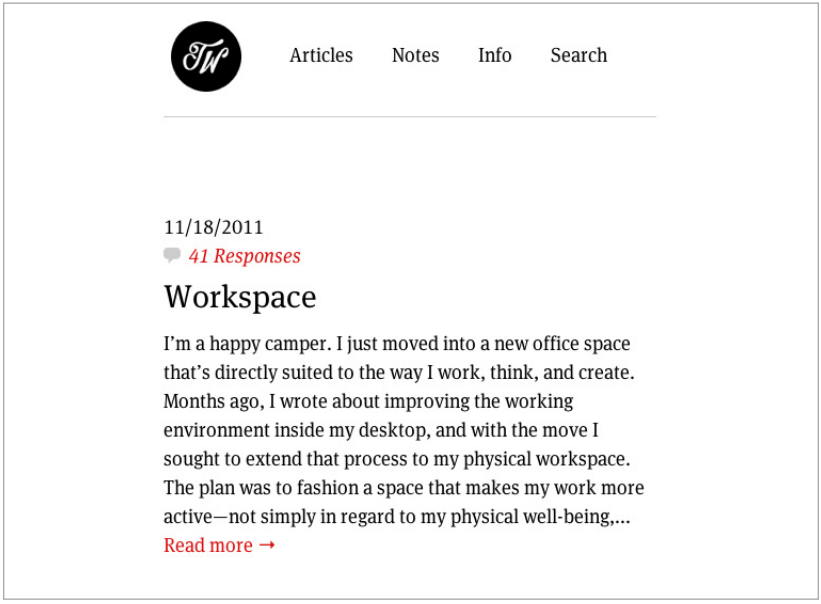
> [16 pixels] is not big. It’s the text size browsers display by default. It’s the text size browsers were intended to display… It looks big at first, but once you use it you quickly realize why all browser makers chose this as the default text size.

In this article, I’ll explain why 16 pixels should generally be the minimum size for body copy in modern Web design. If I don’t change your mind, perhaps you could chip in at the end and let me know why.

The 16 pixels movement for content.

Two noteworthy aspects of typography are the aesthetics (web fonts are allowing designers to indulge themselves) and the growing understanding that type exists primarily to be read. Fonts don't have to be microscopic to appear chic, and the emphasis on content first is pushing us towards a web full of big and beautiful type.

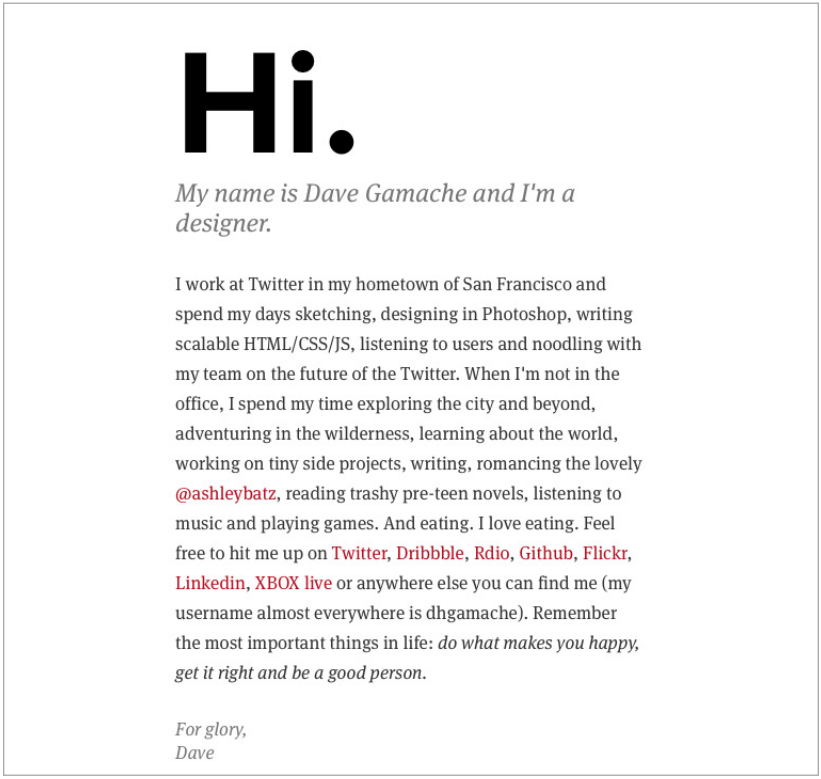
The concept of using 16px as a default body copy font size isn't new, but it has been largely ignored until recently. We read computer screens at a distance which makes 12px text appear much smaller than its equivalent 12pt text in printed material. 16px is the font-size your browsers will apply to body text unless instructed otherwise, and for good reason! Words exist to be read, so by placing "readability" back at the top of your typographic priorities, you'll be doing your content a huge favor.



Walton's blog is another great example of content first.

Trent Walton's blog is a great example of the "content first" approach to design. Huge swathes of white-space draw your attention to article content, whilst large font-sizes and generous

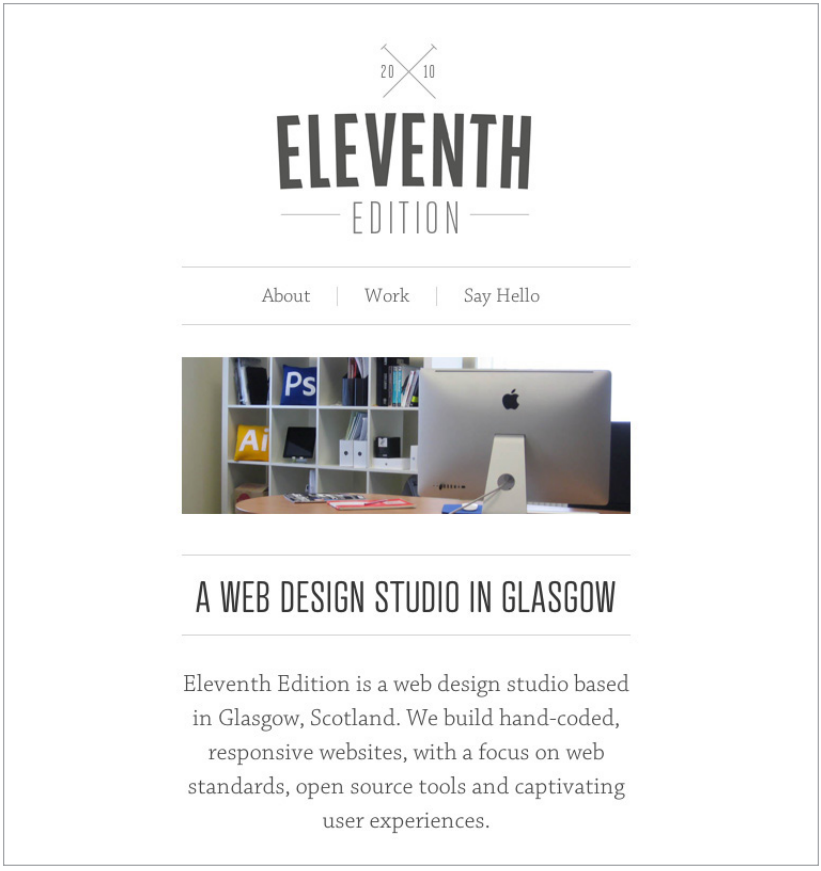
line-heights (leading) make reading the actual text a pleasure. No squinting here.



Dave Gamache's blog.

Dave Gamache's blog (remember the Skeleton boilerplate?) demonstrates a very similar approach to Trent Walton, both even use the brilliant FF Meta Serif Web Pro for body copy, but Dave has chosen the strong Proxima Nova to make his headings no-nonsense. Again, very readable.

Typekit are also behind the more whimsical Chaparral Pro used by Eleventh Edition for their body text. A totally different mood is created, but again you'll notice large font-sizes, wide leading, confident contrast. How easy it is to read everything. How refreshing!



Eleventh Edition uses Chaparral Pro for body text.

Technology Pushing Art

2011 has seen huge leaps forward in terms of browser capabilities (and version numbers!) Even Microsoft recently conceded that automatic updates for Internet Explorer are probably a good idea. All of this means that web designers have more toys to play with in terms of HTML and CSS, which understandably leads to creativity as a result of technology. The 'because I can' approach, if you like.

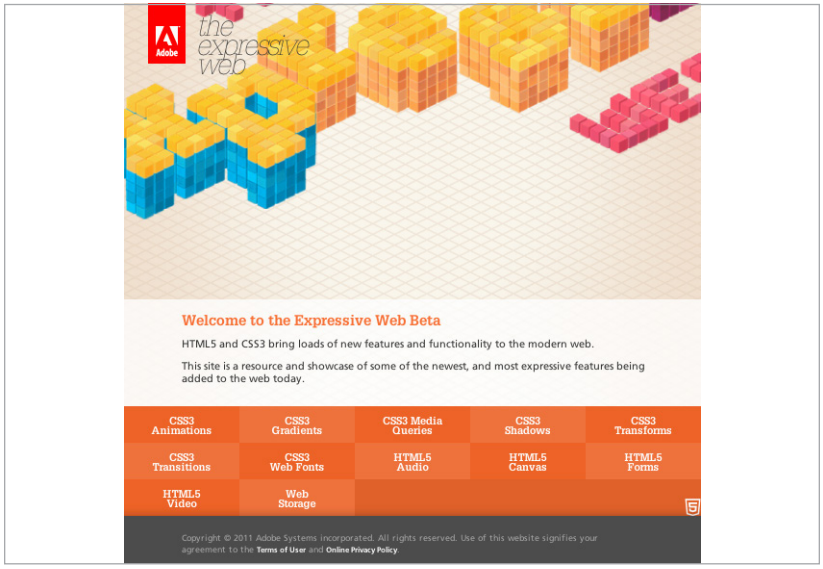
http://hobolobo.net tells the tale of Hobo Lobo of Hamelin whilst you scroll horizontally. It's built up of layered .png images and the

parallax effect creates depth and dimension as you scroll. Does it enhance the experience? Yes it does. Does it help convey the story? Hmm, not so sure, but it does illustrate what's possible with some imagination and use of modern techniques.



Hobolobo uses layered .png files to tell a story.

A site which demonstrates possibilities even more effectively (that being its sole purpose actually) is http://beta.theexpressiveweb.com.



Adobe's the Expressive Web.

Launched in August of 2011, The Expressive Web is a superb interactive demonstration of HTML5 and CSS3 capabilities, acting as a one-stop-shop for all kinds of web trickery. It also serves to show how supportive Adobe are of web standards.

Scrolling, Vertical Narratives

I can't think of a better title for this bit, sorry. So what am I talking about? Vertical scrolling.

It's a daily task for web designers to play down the importance of the fold. The fold is impossible to define, what with the plethora of devices and resolutions these days, so content "being above it" shouldn't be a client's number one priority in a design solution.

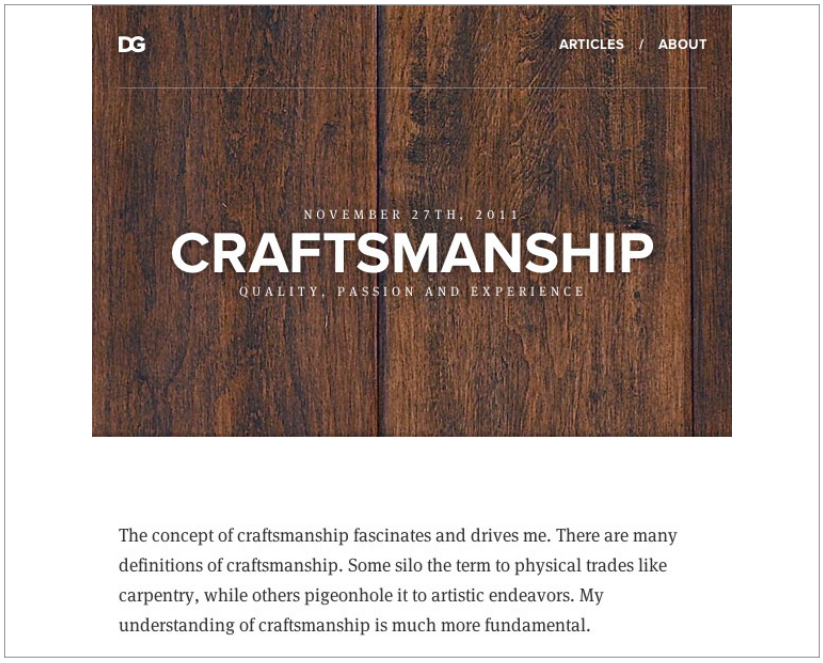
We're embracing vertical scrolling. The rise of mobile devices has reminded people that they can scroll and there is relevant content below the first few pixels of a web page. Some designers have taken this to the next level and made scrolling a fundamental part of the browsing experience.

One approach is in subtle parallax effects as seen in the next few examples.

This is turning into some kind of Dave Gamache fan letter, but his work demonstrates a wide variety of things that I need to illustrate! Visit his blog and scroll down each post; the header, background, and text disappear in a pseudo 3D transition. Whilst serving no practical purpose, it adds an element of intrigue and dimension to his otherwise minimalist layout. It encourages scrolling.

There's also the idea that some content can scroll up to a point. 2011 saw wide use of this effect; keeping social icons, shopping carts, menu bars, calls to action etc. persistently in view. Check out the sharing link panel on Scout Books.

Note: The images following obviously don't do the websites justice in print form – go and check them out (and get your mouse wheel ready…)



Example of scrolling narrative.



Scout Books sharing panel.

… or the shopping cart on the Hungarian Wine Society site.



Hungarian Wine Society

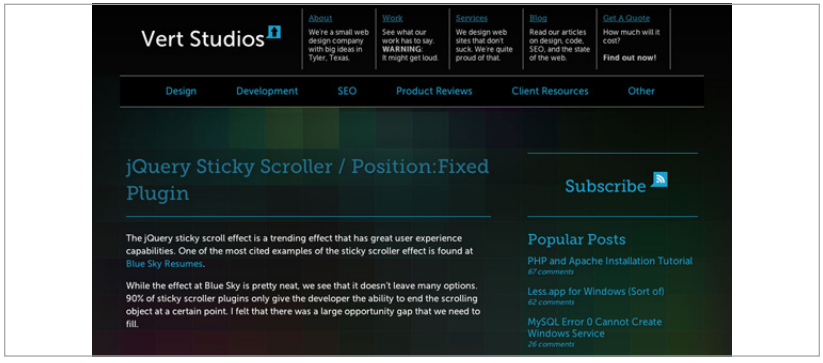
eCommerce solutions often utilize a lot of vertical real estate, and in scrolling down you inevitably lose sight of certain elements. These sites prevent that from happening by releasing objects from the document flow. Once you've scrolled down far enough, these important objects take on fixed positioning, effectively anchoring them to one point on your screen. Always visible, always available.

A Call to Action is the perfect example of an 'important' object which you'd rather a user didn't lose from view. The JavaScript für Designer workshop made sure that visitors were always able to sign up, irrespective of where they were on the landing page. Their call to action scrolls to a certain point, then pins itself to one position.

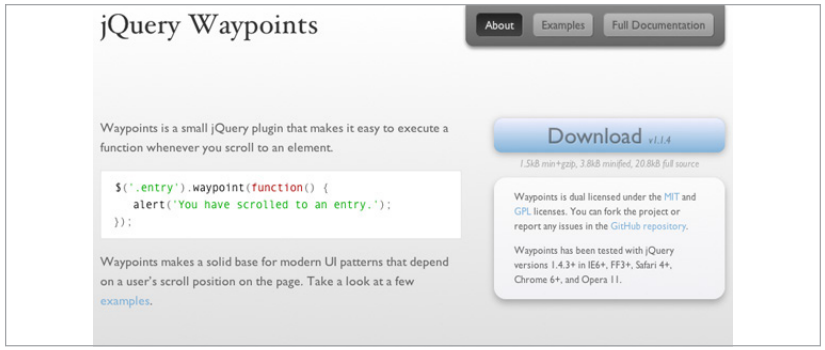


Call to action in JavaScript für Designer

So how's this achieved? Often, a combination of jQuery and CSS positioning. Here are just two resources to help you out:



Vert Studios



jQuery Waypoints

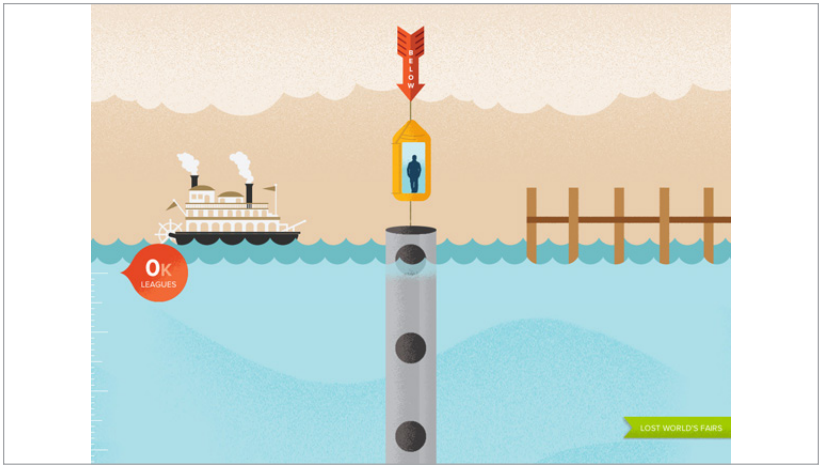
jQuery Waypoints detects when a window has scrolled to certain (definable) elements on a page, allowing you to trigger events when that happens. In the examples mentioned, you might detect that an element has been reached, at which point you apply different CSS positioning.

Some sites have taken the concept even further, animating elements and calling complex events when certain vertical points on the page are reached:



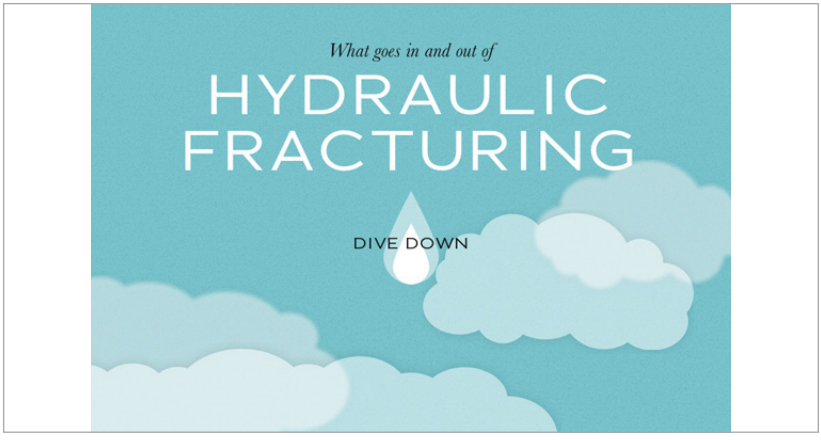
Facebook Timeline

Scroll down the Facebook Timeline presentation site and observe how headings and other elements appear, scroll and fix themselves depending on your vertical position. This behavior not only makes for an appealing experience, but it also keeps the layout uncluttered until information is actually needed.



Lost World's Fairs

This Lost World's Fairs example uses positioning, transparency and scrolling to great effect in order to present information. It's more straightforward than you might think; the background simply moves above a fixed element (the man in the capsule) as you scroll. Simple, yet effective.



Dangers of Fracking

The Dangers of Fracking (there's a new term for you) explores the same idea but on steroids. Multiple objects, multiple layers and

a wide variety of events keep your interest peaked as you scroll down the page. Very clever.

And then there are examples which take scrolling down a web page into a totally new dimension (really, check this one out)…



Inzeit

Navigating Inzeit almost makes you forget in which direction you're scrolling! Objects, images and text slide in and out from left to right and up and down. This site uses all the techniques discussed in our 'scrolling' section, and executes them very well.

Like it's 1983

Diagonal is awkward, it doesn't play along with today's grid-based surroundings, but for some reason oblique lines have been popping up all over the place during 2011. It's like a kick-back to a time even before mainstream Internet, and you'll find other visual reminders of that era too; odd color combinations, lighting effects, beige and bronze. Weird.

I can't help but be reminded of old magazine ads with their abstract diagonal lines, display serifs, big hair, Joan Collins and pearls. It's a look which is oddly appealing.

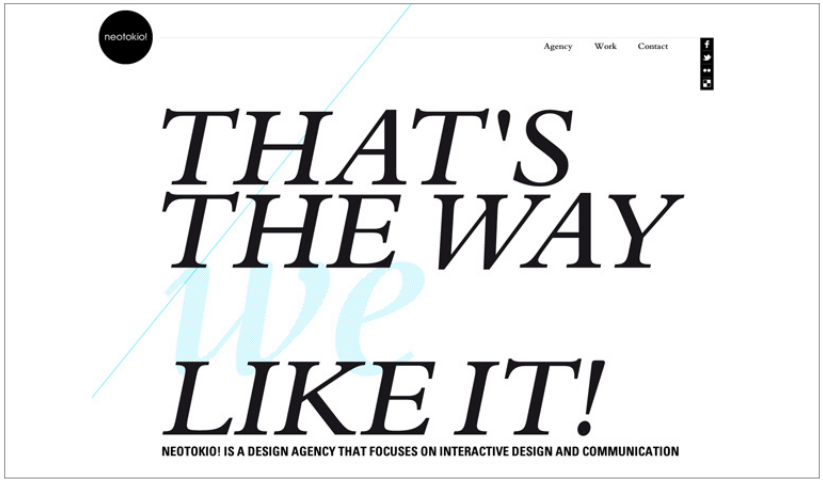


Datsun 280-ZX



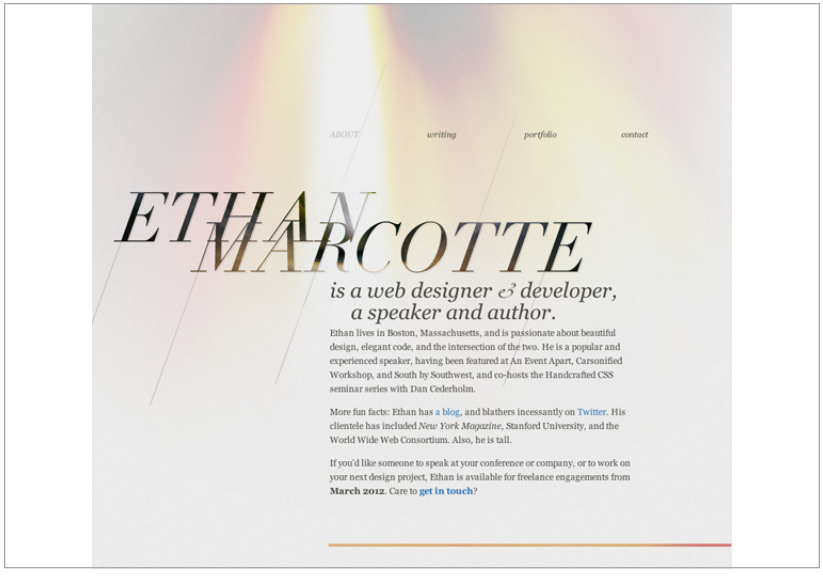
Jordache advertisement

It doesn't seem like long ago when we were opening magazines to be presented with layouts like these, eh?

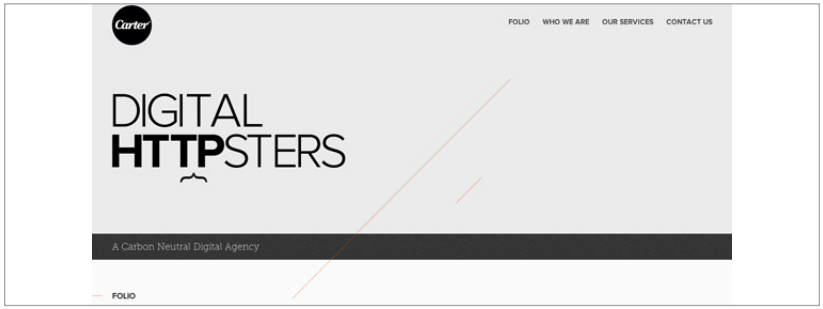


Neotokio design agency

Both Neotokio and Ethan Marcotte use obtuse lines with odd typefaces and colors, but they all combine effectively to make memorable designs. Memorability is one of the chief motives behind exploring the aesthetics of a design.



Ethan Marcotte



Digital HTTPsters



Why Interactive



Unfold



Pelicanfly

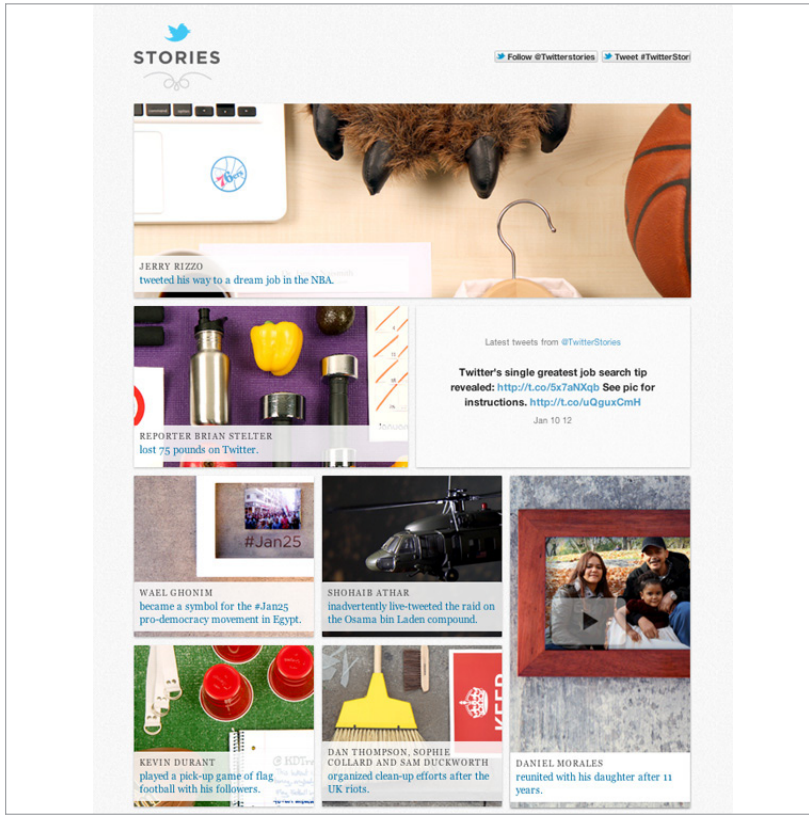
Aesthetics also aim to create mood and one thing you'll notice about all the examples in this section is a similar atmosphere. They all share common traits in terms of the typography used, but above all it's the simple diagonal strokes which strike you.

They make the layout sharp. They go against the typical vertical and horizontal flow, almost like a knife cut into paper. They draw the eye away from the rest of the page, just enough to make you double-take and concentrate on the content.

Modular Interfaces

Approaching layouts in a modular fashion is again something favored by responsive web design. Managing areas of a design in modular chunks allows fluid repositioning and segregates content clearly. You could argue that the rise of modular interfaces is due to the influence of apps. Increasingly we find ourselves publishing

(and accessing) web content via external apps such as Facebook and Twitter; the lines are blurring between desktop screens and handheld devices.

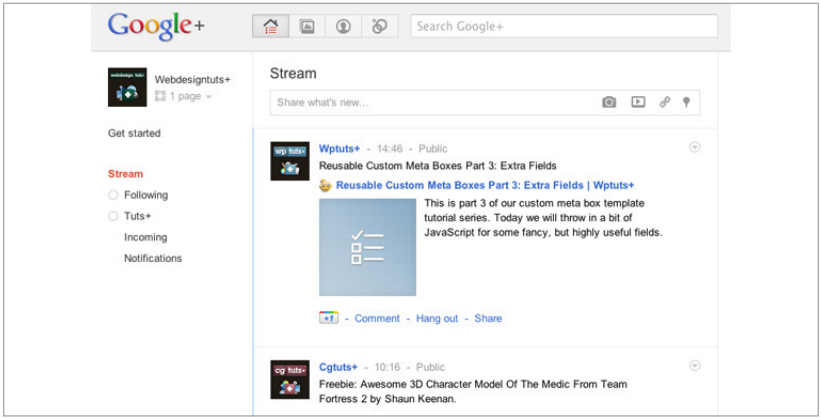


Twitter Stories

Twitter Stories is perfect for modular design. Each tweet is presented in almost scrap book form, making each one accessible and unique. The styling, typical of Twitter, contributes to a warm and relaxed atmosphere, whilst the arrangement of information keeps navigating practical.

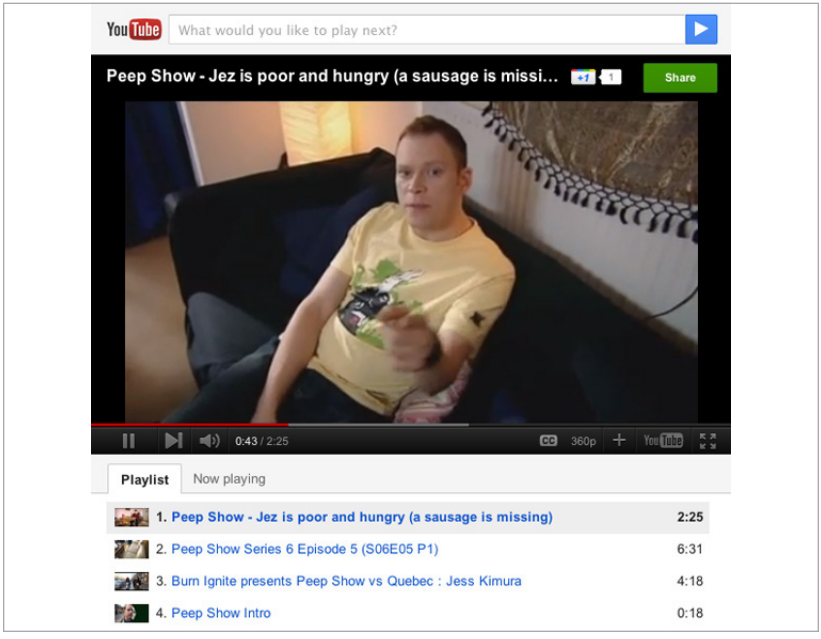
Of course, the bare bones of Twitter is a colossal resource of social comments, a feature shared by all social networks these days. Google play a large (perhaps I'm understating that) part

in the way we all interact with the web, and their interfaces are increasingly influenced by the 'app' nature of the internet.



Google+

Different services, different devices, and all that information require crystal clear design solutions. Google manages just that with Google+, and retains unity across their range of services.



YouTube



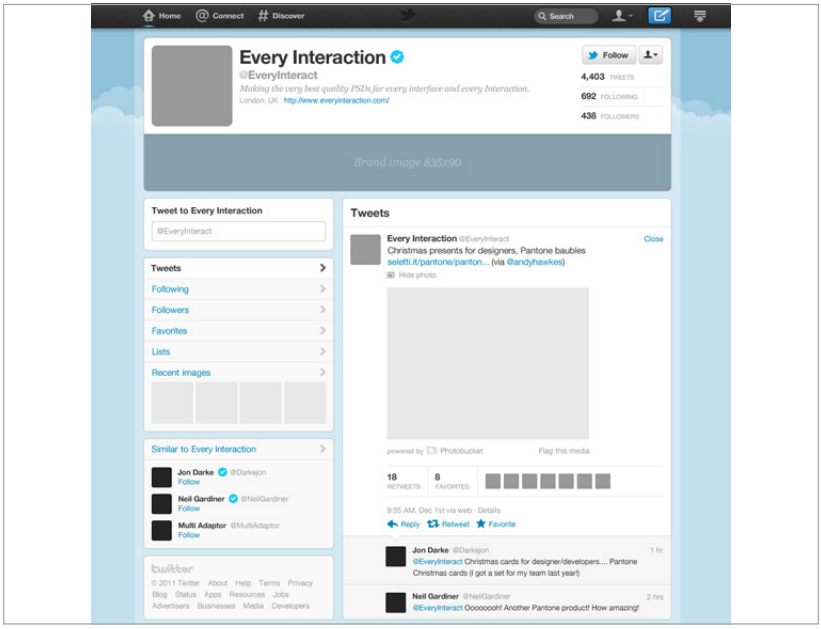
Google Web Fonts



@JetBlue on Twitter

Twitter's homepage is the perfect example of modular design; each section, each task, each form of navigation has its own segregated

module. It serves to demonstrate that the dashboard-like nature of modular design is ideal for web apps.



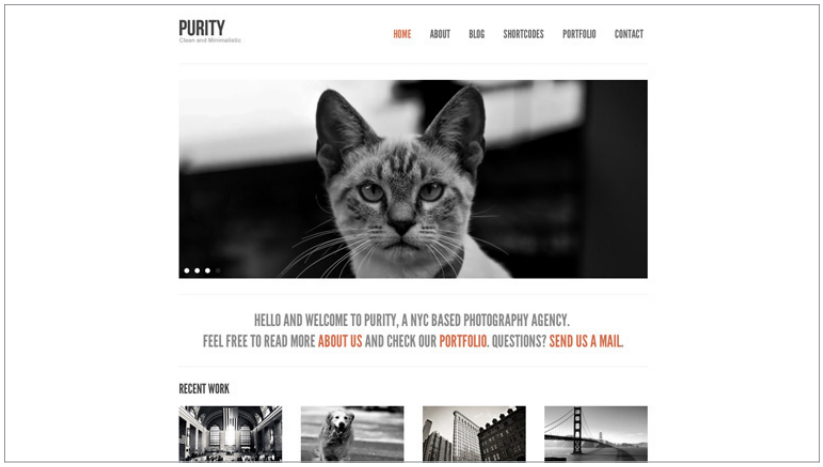
12 on Twitter

Themeforest

I asked Themeforest review maestro Ivor Padilla what he'd seen happening on Envato's number one marketplace during the last year. He observed a couple of trending aspects:

> *1) The portfolio layout is still dominating the market. 2) Responsive web design and mobile-focused sites are hot. 3) Minimal design has been consistent throughout the year.*
>
> *2011 was the year of minimal design in ThemeForest.*
> *—Ivor Padilla*

You don't have to look deep into the Themeforest archives to see what he means either…

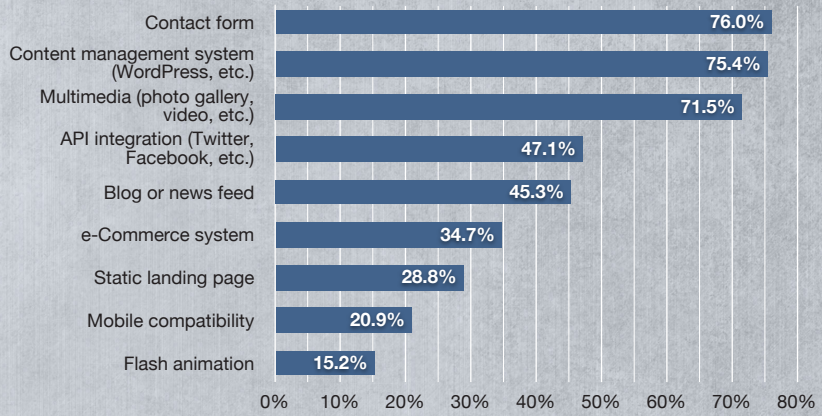


Purity theme

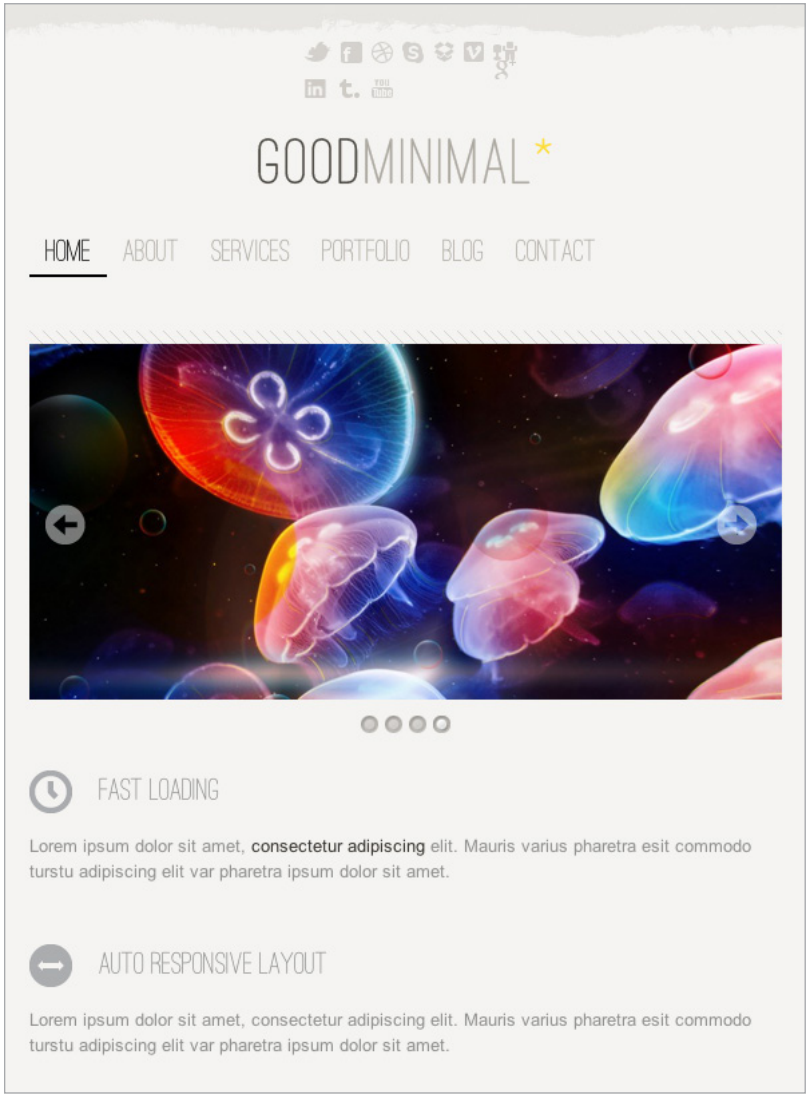
Confidential Comments: CMS & Theme Design

Building a site with a content management system (CMS) has become a popular request for client sites, with 75% of respondents listing it. Understanding how to build and customize themes is a vital tool in any designer's toolbox. One of our respondents notes,

> *"I think it is becoming like print design, where many clients are trying to save money and want to either set up their own site using a template or have the capability to manage their own content. For that reason, knowing how to customize a CMS is becoming more and more important."*

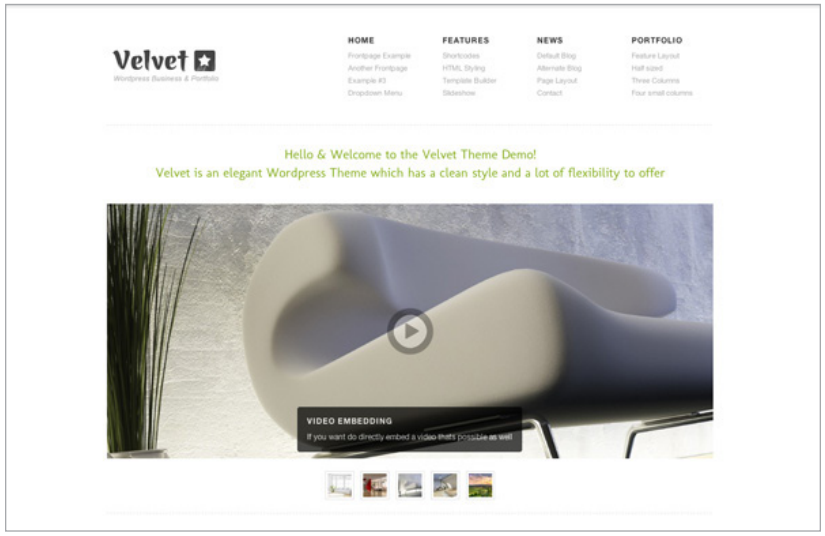


The aptly-named Purity is clean, open, uncluttered, and offers a limited color palette. Pure and simple.

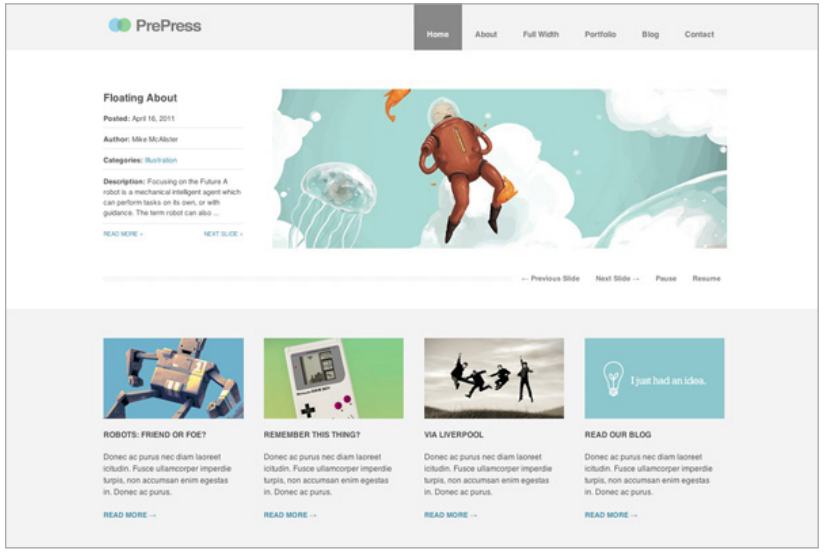


GoodMinimal theme

Good Minimal is similarly clean, though a touch warmer. And, it's responsive.



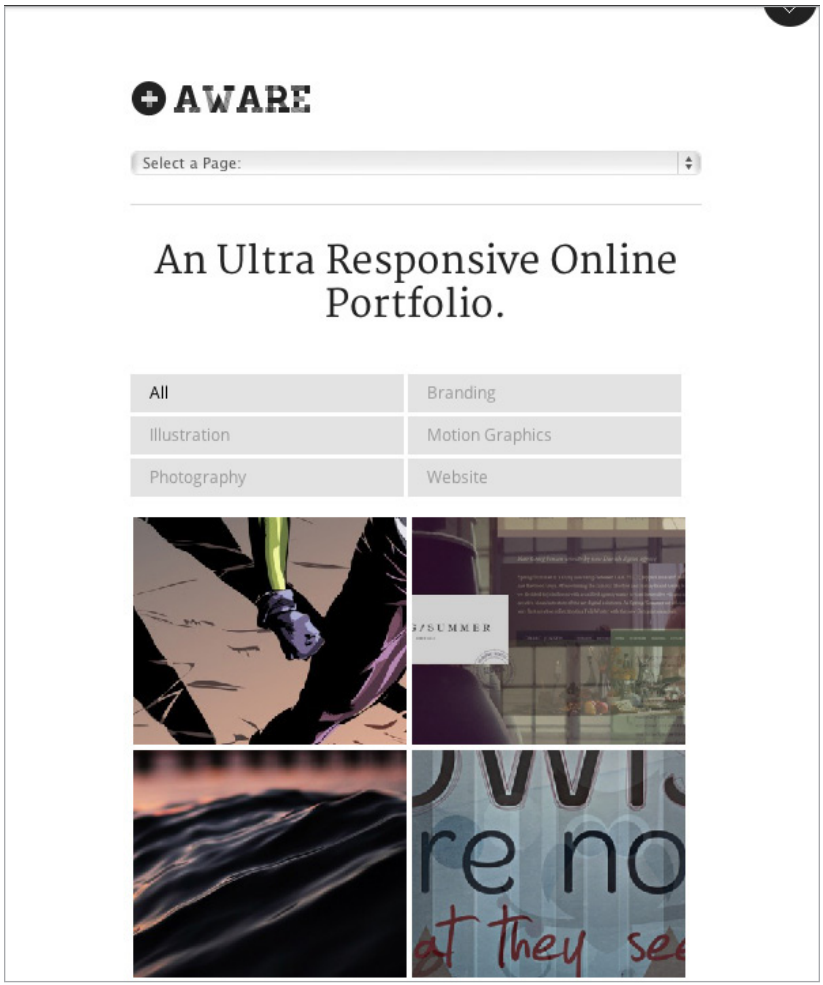
Velvet theme



PrePress theme

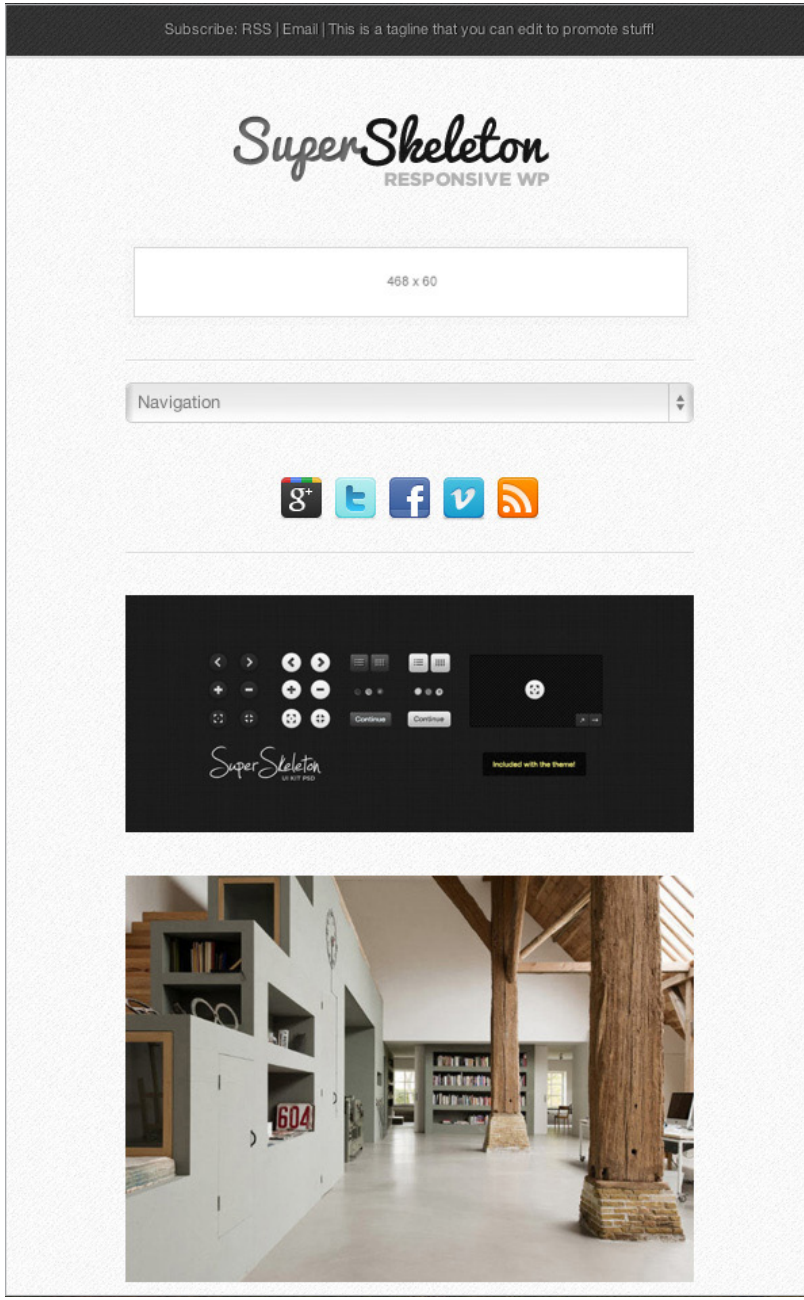
Aware makes use of the excellent (in my opinion) menu replacement method for mobile devices. Using media queries, you can show and hide different navigation menus depending on the

resolution; standard links for desktop experience, and a dropdown for touch screen devices. Excellent usability.

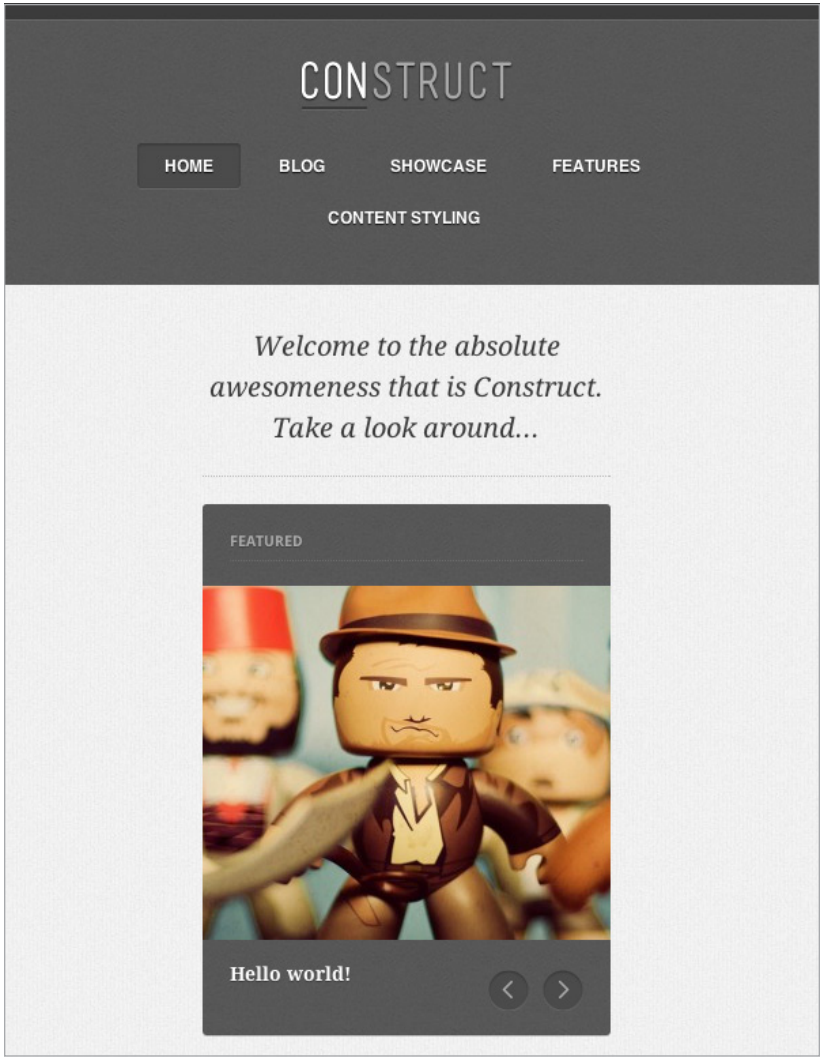


Aware theme

Brandon Jones' Skeleton uses a similar responsive navigation technique—along with some sumptuous textures and colors.

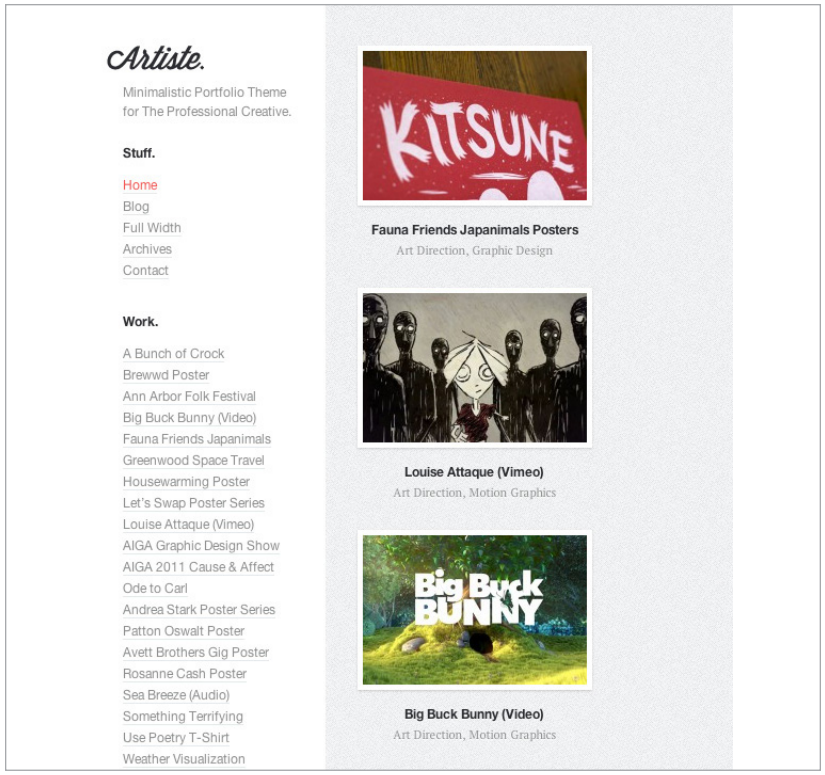


SuperSkeleton theme



Construct Theme

Construct sticks to standard anchors for navigation, though the links themselves are pleasantly large to aid chubby fingers. It's another great example of modular design; each thumbnail shifting and sliding around the layout like tiles on a polished surface.



Artiste theme

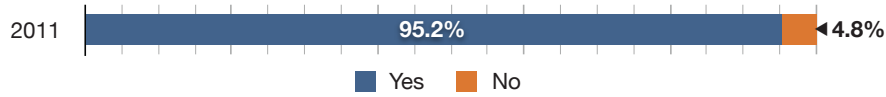
Last (but by no means least) Orman Clark's Artiste is a simple, yet warm portfolio layout. Typical of his pixel-perfect approach to design, the details are simple, yet spot on.

6

Making It Work: Reported Happiness in Web Design Careers

Web design is a field about passion. Very few people make a career out of web design just to pay the bills. Most of us got into the work because some aspect of it excited us. We're a field of true believers and evangelists. And we're a generally happy bunch.

Are you happy working in web design?



Only 4.8% of respondents indicated they were unhappy with their web design career. You'd think, then, that happiness, satisfaction and success in such a career field would be straightforward: do what you love and keep doing it.

In reality, the 2011 survey indicated there are a number of factors that play into how successful or "happy" web designers reported to be. Aspects as simple as your attitude on your previous education, your work hours, even your job title, provided correlation to satisfaction.

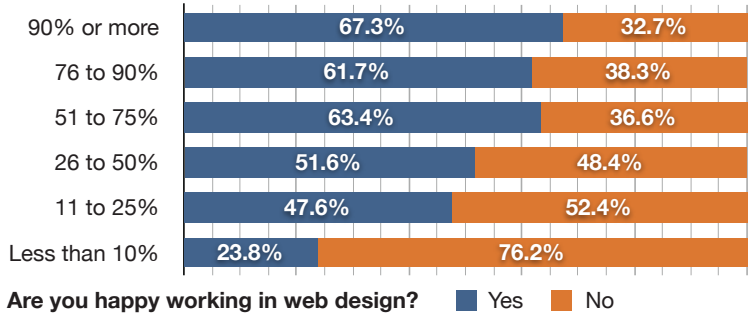
You're most likely to be happy in a web design career if you can check as many of the following boxes possible:

- ☐ **Male, between the ages of 21-29.** Women and those 30 and older were slightly more likely to report unhappiness.
- ☐ **Live in an established or large city in Europe or North America.** The changes regarding continent were slight, but rural dwellers were slightly more likely to report being unhappy than city dwellers.

- ☐ **A full-time web designer.** While full-time versus part-time was a roughly equal split among happy folk, 73% of respondents who reported unhappiness were not full-time designers.

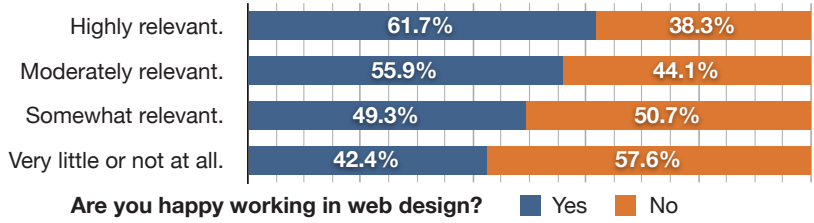
- ☐ **You spend at least a quarter of your time doing design work.** There was a notable increase in happiness if your working hours comprised of at least 25% of the time working on designing and building websites.

On average, how much of your time do you spend actually designing and building websites?



- ☐ **University or college educated AND you felt your education was relevant.** More so than the education itself, your attitude on education is a big indicator for job satisfaction as a web designer. Overwhelmingly, those who received advanced education which they felt was relevant or highly relevant to their career reported higher happiness.

Do your find your education relevant to your work in web design?



- ☐ **You avoid calling yourself a consultant or freelancer.** This one was surprising because freelancers, in general, report high happiness (*Freelance Confidential*, Rockable Press 2011). However, unhappy web designers were much more likely to be working as a consultant or freelancer. "Web Developer" was also a title that displayed lower levels of happiness.

Increasing Happiness & Work Satisfaction

Some indicators, like gender and age, you can do little to change, but let's focus on steps to increase your chance for finding fulfillment in a web design career.

Find ways to relate skills.

As indicated above, respondents who found their education relevant to their work were distinctly more likely to be happy than their counterparts. It's not simply a matter of what degree you got—sometimes it's your perspective. Some of the most interesting designers I know come from unconventional backgrounds: illustrators, engineers, event poets. A different perspective doesn't make you handicapped, in fact, it can lead to surprising designs and solutions. Web design is such a multifaceted field, you'll often find ways to apply knowledge that you didn't expect would be relevant. Value seemingly unrelated experiences and education, and find a way to apply them.

Just stick with it.

No, really. While happiness seemed to reach a pretty good peak in the first decade of web design careers, there was a larger spike further down the road after 16-20 years of tenure.

You might think this is due to an incredibly narrow margin of responses—after all, web design is a young field, and if only

three people responded in that 20-year range and two said they were happy, 66% would look disproportionately significant. The sampling of respondents with such experience is small, however 65 individuals responded in this range, making a 78% positive response small but still worth considering. People take a while to figure out what works best. There's frequently a satisfaction curve in careers. Stick with it.

Experiment and learn.

Doesn't it always come back to this for us? Users who reported positively on questions dealing with new skills and inspiration (were more interested in learning a new skill or looking for sources of inspiration) were more likely to be happy. We're wired to enjoy a certain amount of change and variety.

Share with others.

Design has taken on a strong social vibe in the last decade. We're not artists or technicians in isolation anymore. There are a hundred ways to share your design work and works in progress: Dribbble and Forrst, just to name a few. Respondents who reported working with others or participating in social forums were generally more happy. What's more, it can generate feedback that can help make you a better designer. Vitaly notes:

> *"Don't be afraid to experiment and publish something that is wrong or will fail. In the very beginning, I was experimenting a lot, yet I was never brave enough to publish those experiments online to get some feedback and learn from that. Instead, I was learning in my small dark room, playing around with things alone and losing quite some time to get a firm grasp of what I was doing. It would have saved me a lot of time if I just posted about my findings and my problems."*

If you're a bit unsure of how to share your work online, don't worry. There's no right or wrong way to share your work and receive

feedback, and designers usually work out their own method over time. Finally, Sarah also has simple advice for those designers worried about doing social media "right":

> *"Don't put too much weight on social media. It isn't the be all and end all—there are plenty of amazing designers without Twitter accounts. Twitter isn't the real world, sharing your work, in whatever medium you choose and accompanying it with what you learned from doing it, has always been my motto."*

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

Like I said when we started: it's an exciting, big world, web designers. We've only touched on a fraction of the industry here. I hope you've found something surprising, useful or inspirational here. If there are valuable insights I've gathered from writing this book, it's this:

Web design isn't for cowards.

It's a field that is constantly changing, growing, and reinventing itself every few years, and it's going to demand a heck of a lot from any professional. You've got to love the field or it will run off without you.

You're never done.

By now, you may be very tired of hearing me harp on "keep learning," but it's a Confidential book for a reason—that's the truth, sexy or not. That's the best advice I can leave you with and one that will likely become the rabbithole of your career—
I know it has been for mine. Every career move or opportunity I've encountered started with me exploring a new community or learning a new skill in my free time. And every setback or challenge I've experienced has usually come from my own blind spots. Still, it's led me to some amazing places.

You can't do it alone.

The best designers are the ones who put themselves out there. Not just on their best masterpieces, but on their sketchy works in progress and fanciful doodles. The best designers are also the ones who will sit down with you and help tear your rough draft apart. It can be a scary process, sharing with other designers, but we're all better for it.

So if you're still here after reading all that and still love the field, I can only assume you're an incredibly passionate, smart, fearless

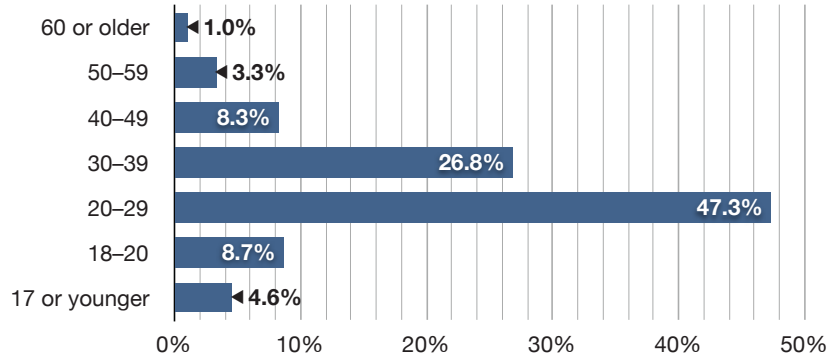
web designer with a drive to improve. (Devastatingly good-looking too, I assume.) Wherever you are on your career, you have the gusto to go far. I hope you'll let me know what you think and where you go from here. Let's go change the world.

Amanda Hackwith
amanda@envato.com
amandahackwith.com | @ajhackwith

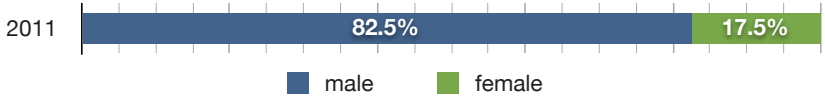
APPENDIX

Appendix: Full Survey Results

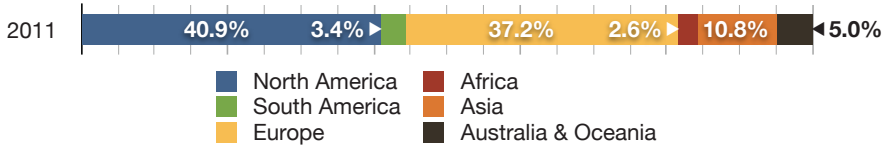
Which category below includes your age?



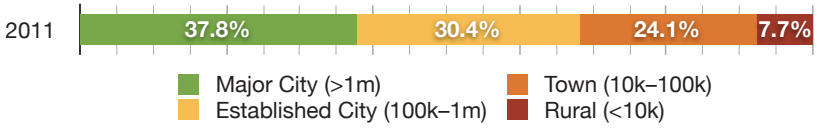
Are you male or female?



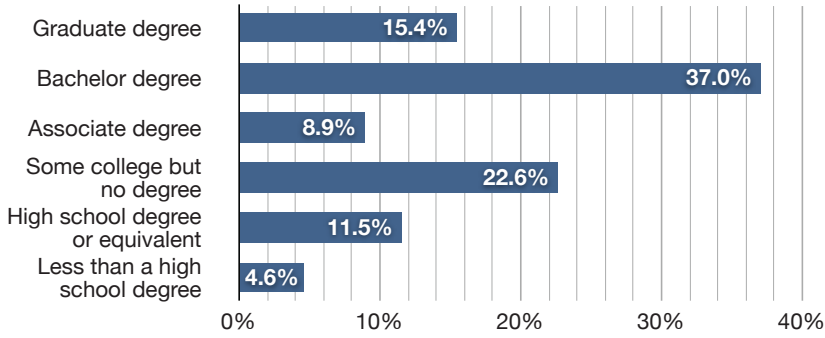
On what continent do you live?



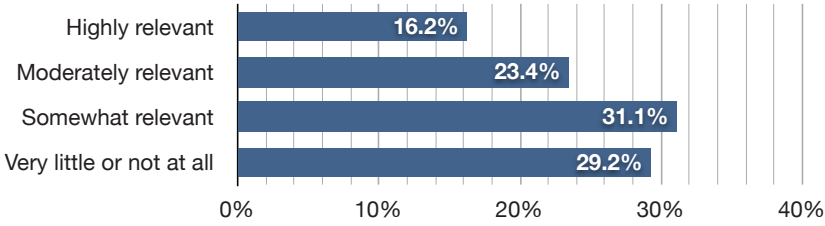
How would you describe where you live?



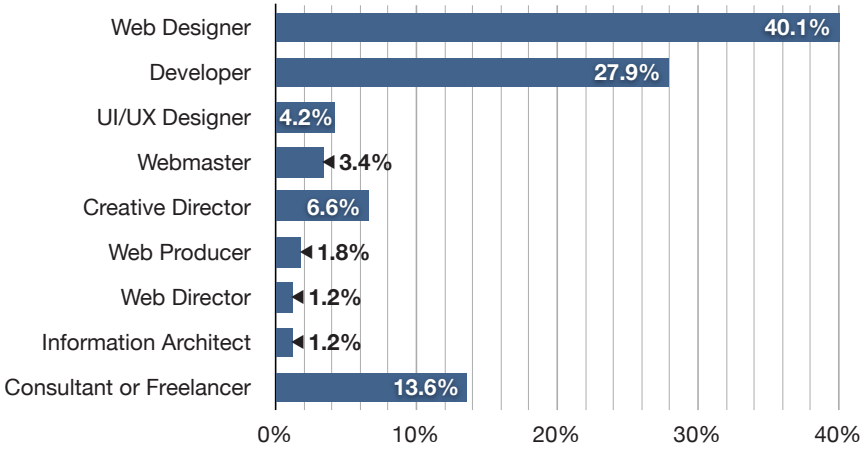
What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?



Do you find your education relevant to your work in web design?



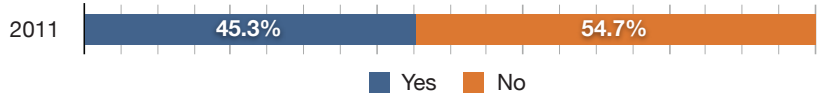
What do you call yourself? [Job title]



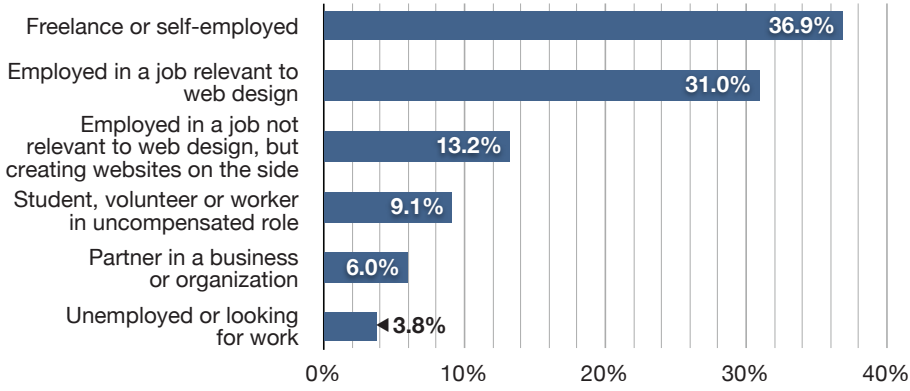
On average, how much do you earn (before taxes) as a web designer each year?

All Respondents	Full-time Respondents
$27,312.44	$38,225.85

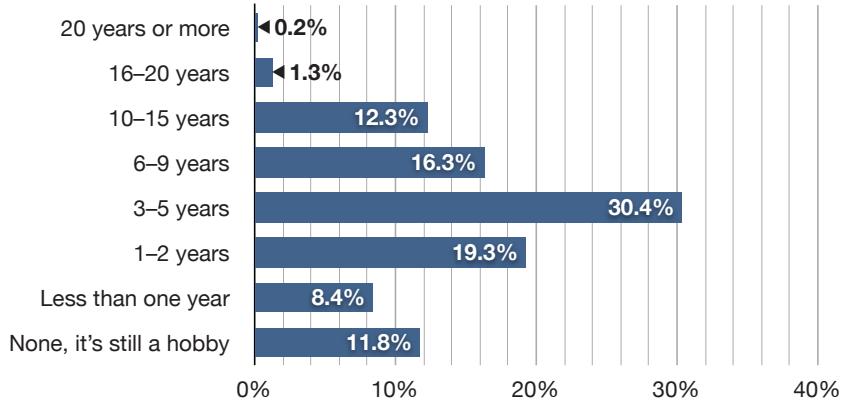
Do you consider yourself a full-time web designer?



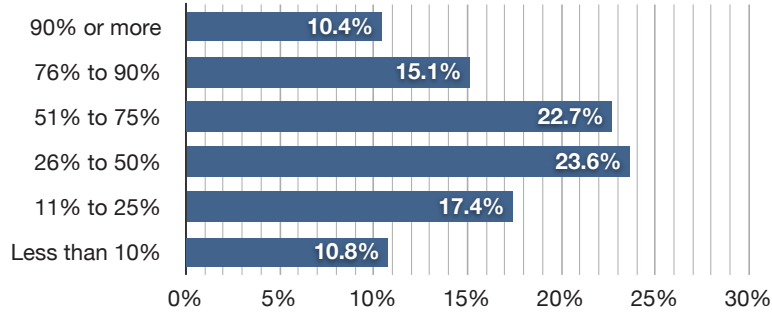
What's your work situation?



How many years have you been working as a web designer?

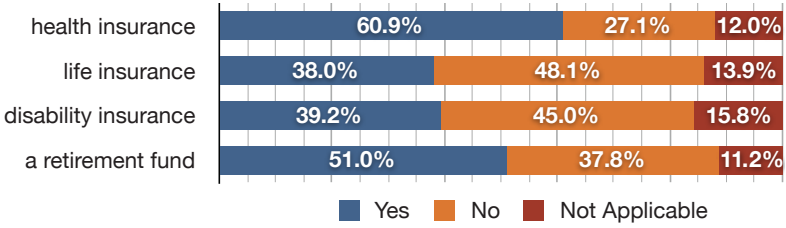


On average, how much of your work time do you spend actually designing and building websites?

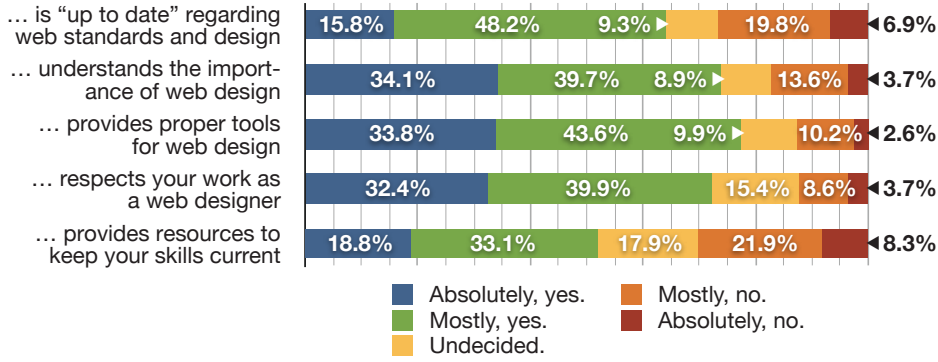


The following three questions were only asked of respondents who work in an employer-employee work situation:

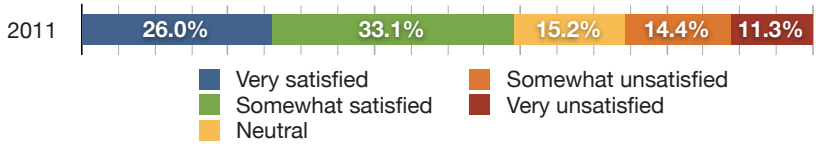
Benefits: does your employer offer...



If employed, do you feel your company...

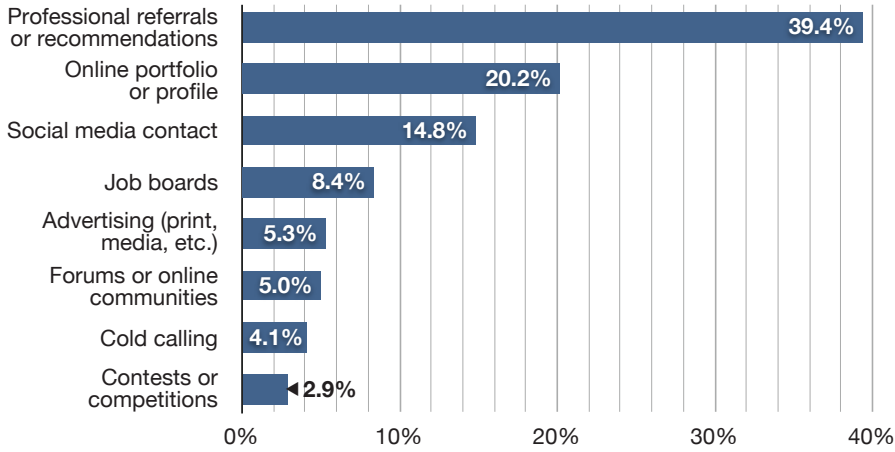


How satisfied are you at your current employer?

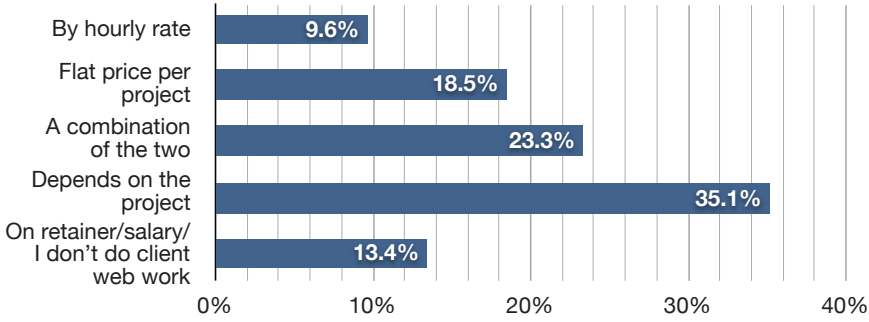


The following two questions were only asked of respondents who work as freelancers:

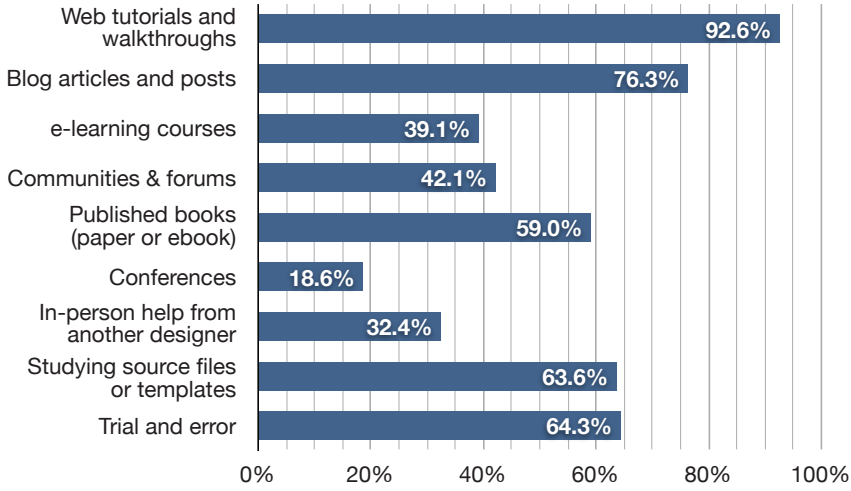
Where do you frequently find new clients and projects?



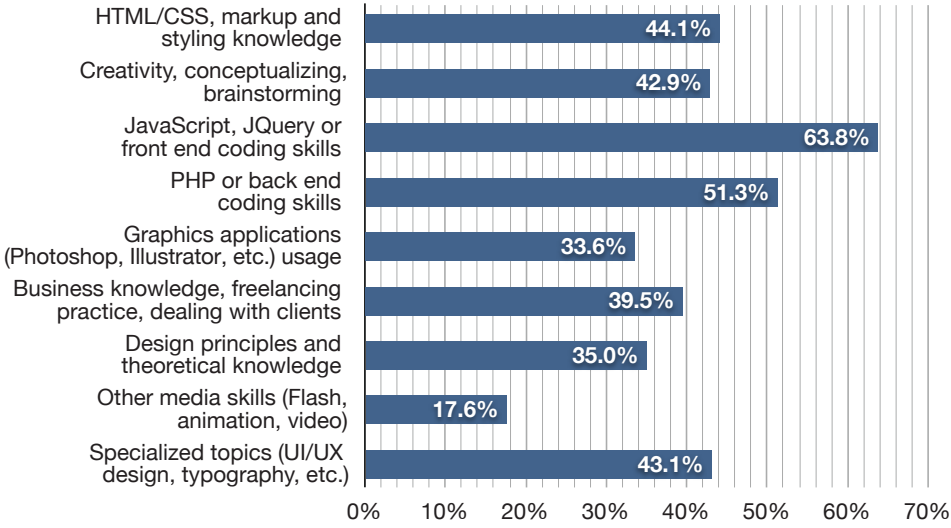
How do you discuss price for web design work?



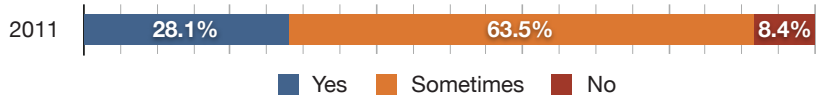
Outside of formal education, how do you prefer to learn new web design skills?



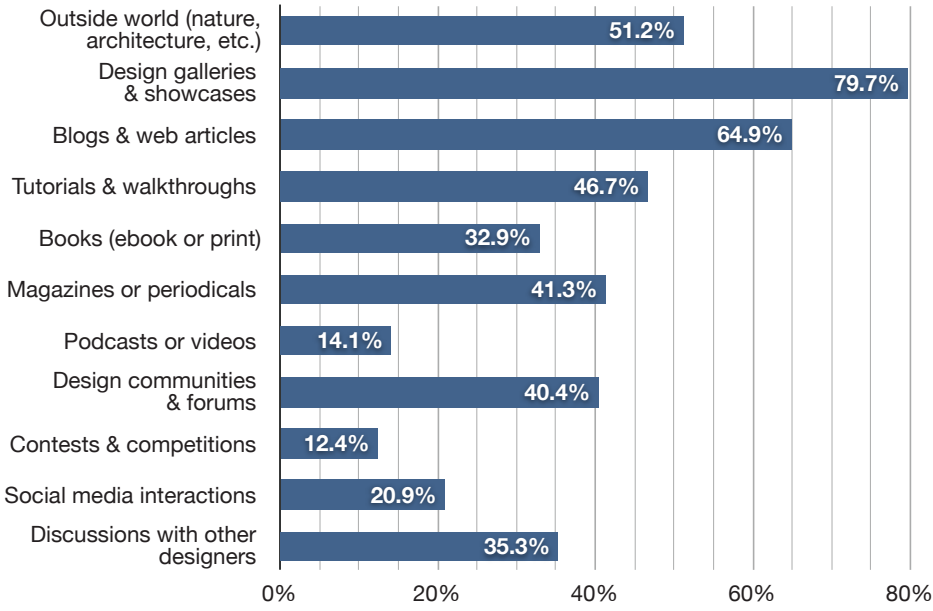
What skills do you most want to learn or improve right now?



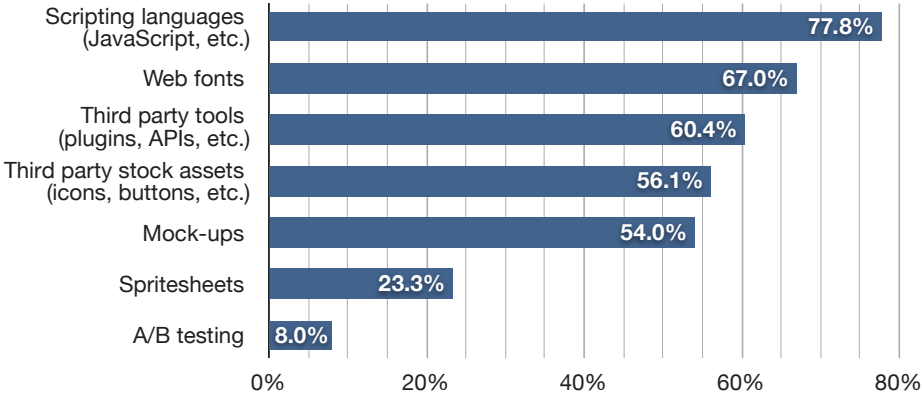
Do you ever struggle to find inspiration for your work?



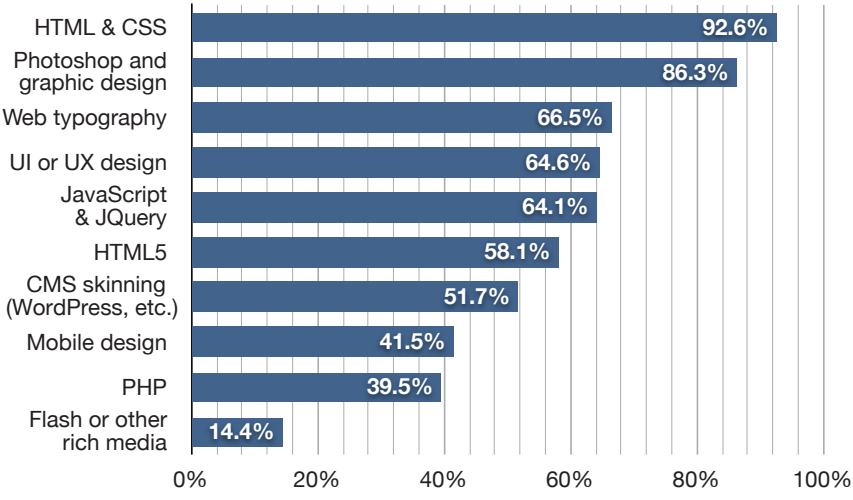
What are your favorite sources for inspiration?



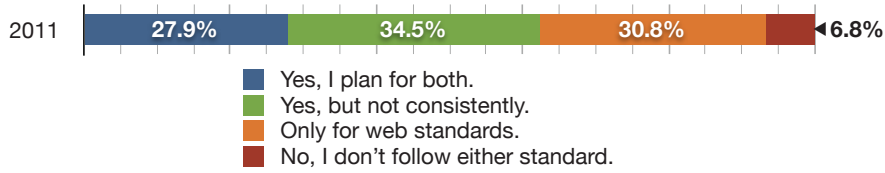
Which of the following do you use regularly in your designs?



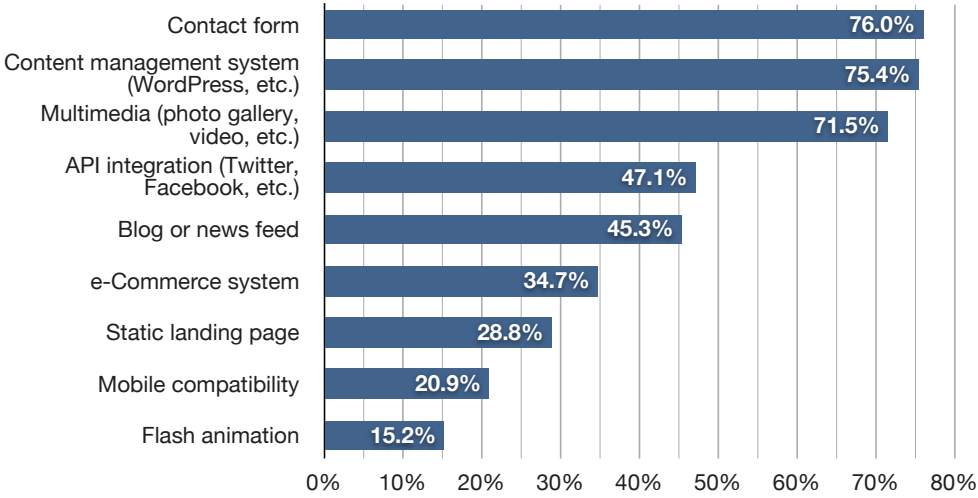
What skills do you feel it's important for a web designer to know well?



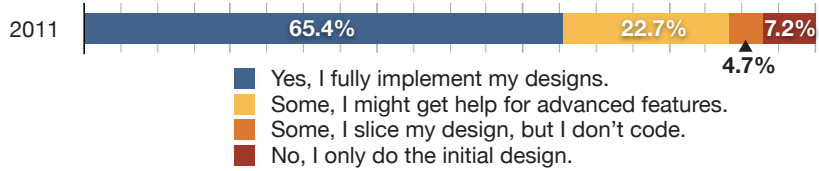
Do you plan your designs with web standards (W3C) and accessibility (508, ARIAA) in mind?



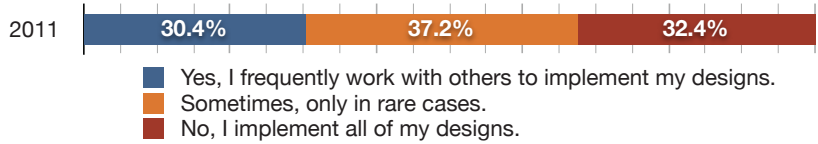
What features do your clients commonly request for their website design?



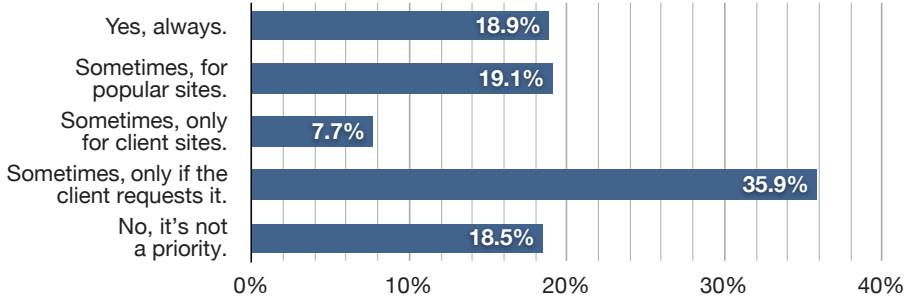
Do you implement (slice and code) your own designs?



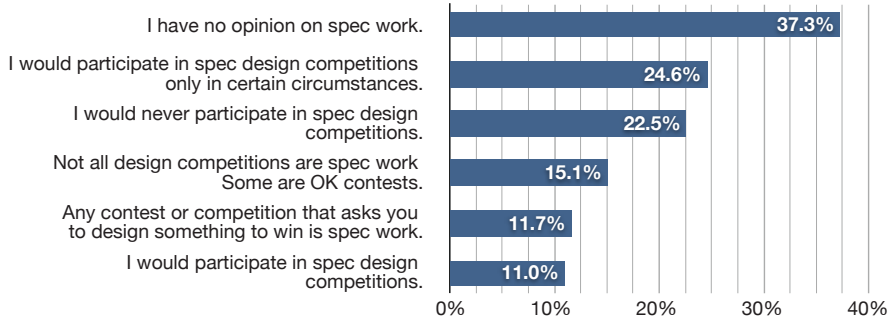
Have you ever worked with another professional (developer, animator, etc) to implement one of your designs?



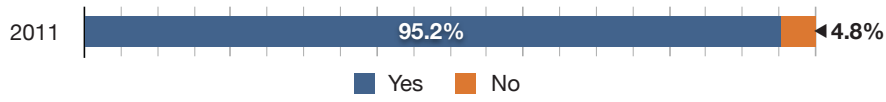
Do you plan for mobile and tablet versions of your web designs?



What's your opinion on spec work? (Check all you agree with.)



Are you happy working in web design?



Thank You

… to Rockable Press and Envato for inviting me to write a second Confidential book and talk about an industry we all love so much. I'm honored and I hope I do it justice.

… to all the expert contributors who kindly fielded interview questions and pesky follow-up emails during the holiday season. I owe you a fruitcake.

… to my family and friends, who, while I'm pretty certain they won't make it all the way through reading this book, have been unerringly supportive about "all that web stuff."

… to Dr. Tracy Bridgeford, who is responsible for encouraging me to stop wasting time on essays and start combining all my passions into a career that I didn't think was even possible. She got me to open my eyes and see the possibilities, and that's made all the difference.

… and most of all to my husband, Levi, who had to survive the saga of writing an entire book over the holidays for the second year in a row. I think they give medals for that now. I couldn't do it without you.

About The Author



Amanda Hackwith is a writer and creative director based out of Omaha, Nebraska. She is a creative producer for Tuts+ and Envato, and generally spends her days producing new web projects and content. Her previous book, *Freelance Confidential*, is available via Rockable Press and Amazon. You can find Amanda on Tuts+ Premium, her personal blog (www.amandahackwith.com), and as @ajhackwith on Twitter.

WEB DESIGN CONFIDENTIAL

Web Design Confidential offers expert advice and extensive industry insights based on survey results from a study of more than 5,000 web designers from all over the world and from several interviews with seasoned designers as well.

Have you ever wondered if your hourly rate is too low or too high? Are you torn between freelance design work and full-time employment? Are you missing an essential design skill without even knowing it?

Whether you're looking for the latest web design practices, words of wisdom from design veterans, or just a better understanding of your profession, Amanda Hackwith and 5400 of your colleagues have the answers to your questions and you'll find what you need in ***Web Design Confidential***.

ROCKABLE*