UX Trends for 2020

Illustration and minimal language will define the user experience this year.

While you may be settling back into the studio to gear up for the year ahead, design trends don’t wait for the ball to drop.

Something becomes a full-on trend when it hits a critical mass and it seems everyone is trying to do it. Like tech, trends follow an adoption curve. So, by the time you read about a trend on a prediction list, like this one, the trend is likely already trending.

So here’s the question. Are lists like this one predicting the future or ensuring it? We all try to stay on top of the latest waves in the design world. So when we get excited by a prediction list, are we just feeding the self-fulfilling prophecy?

Think about that while you read through what I think 2020 has in store for us in the design world. These are some of the trends I’m seeing gain momentum in 2019 — trends I expect will fill up our Dribbbles in the new year.

I hope, looking back at the end of this year, I missed at least a couple of unexpected trends. The ones we don’t see coming are the ones that really rock our world.

Enjoy.

1. No design is an island

Where design guidelines were there for, well, general *guidance*, design systems are the law. And we’re going to see more designers laying down the law in the new year.

The focus will shift even more to creating the overall environment for users rather than separate pieces of design plugged together.

This should lead to more efficiency and effectiveness in our design workflows. Expect to see even more card UI, carousels, patterns, grids and systemising modules.

2. The message matters

Bold type. Short sentences. Minimal language.

As we all fight for users’ attention, we’ll come up with countless ways to make sure they get the right info. One of the key ways will be eliminating unnecessary information and using simpler, punchier language that gets to the point.

This does double duty. First, tight language is faster to absorb for everyone. Second, simple words help your work speak to a greater audience of people for whom English is their second, third or twelfth language.

3. Design for all

I’m squeezing in two trends here. Don’t tell anyone.

In 2020, we’ll see device agnosticism becoming the absolute norm instead of a talking point. Universal design principles will create uniform experiences for all users – across device, posture, occasion, et cetera.

But universal design principles will mean something else as well – inclusive design across generations, demographics, and ‘design minorities’. With AI and more intuitive design principles, those design minorities, such as small businesses, non-profits and grass-roots orgs, will be able to create high-quality services and experiences as well.

Expect more ‘plug and play’ design UI components and modules.

4. Out of the shadows

The third dimension is back. And it’s the spotlight that’s going to kill the shadow for good. The influence of Google’s Material Design made the shadow effect take the back seat to flat design systems.

But now, we’re seeing brands trying to rise off the screen and grab attention with 3D brand design elements. Take a look at Zenly, Toss, Zepeto and Uber and get used to seeing those styles popping up all over the place in 2020.

5. Drawing you in

It’s no shock to suggest that illustration is again on the rise for 2020. You probably saw it on trends lists from 2019 and even 2018. But it makes me particularly happy, so I’m including it.

First, it means more work for all my illustrator friends. Nice. But secondly, illustration fills a really valuable gap in the brand design arsenal. Stock images? Yeah, clearly terrible. Photoshoots? Sure you can create really ownable elements for a brand with custom photography. If it’s good. And if you can afford it. But, any photo of people is by definition not universal, because, as a user, they may or may not represent me.

Illustration checks a bunch of boxes. You can pull from the brand identity styles and colours, create custom artwork that is responsive and scalable, and when we illustrate “human elements”, they are universal expressions.

6. Life in motion

Interactions, movement and transitions were once the ‘bells and whistles’ of a design project. That’s changing. In 2020, I expect motion will become even more fundamental and expected – by designers and by end users.

That’s a great thing. Since we’re all trying to design positive experiences, having more ways to do that – more senses to entice and engage – means better products, better ideas, and happier users.

I’m excited to see more interaction/sense integration in 2020. Haptic feedback, sound, sight, and voice working together to make an interaction that you can’t fully capture with a gif on your portfolio.

7. Gradients with meaning

The Apple Card this year got me excited about the potential for gradients to communicate data rather than just being visual interest.

2020 is going to see a whole clowder of copycats trying similar things. So you can likely expect to see a bunch of flowing colours in the new year.

For me, this is about more than the gradient. I love the thought of reimagining fundamental graphic design elements to communicate information. It will be interesting to see how design aesthetic and function can merge in beautiful ways.

8. Prototyping as a given

Let me be the first to say it, I am a bit biased. Not because of my company though, but because of the impact. Seeing how quickly ideas can improve and develop through prototyping is incredible.

In 2020, more and more design teams at companies big and small will see the competitive advantage that prototyping gives them. Teams will embrace the workflow boosts. It’ll be big.

This year, I think prototyping will ‘level up’ as well. More multi-device and contextual/real-world prototypes will take ideation beyond a single screen experience. It’s going to be sweet.

9. No seams, it seems

Seamless integration may not feel super exciting as a trend, but you’ll love the experiences it enables. Because when things just work well, you don’t even have to notice them.

The experience ecosystem is getting more and more complex, but users don’t care about how complex it is; they still expect great experiences. In 2020, more seamless integrations are going to make that easier. Social login, SNS sharing, app-integrated payments, software plugins and more will become the norm.

10. A full toolbox

So many design tools have been fighting for supremacy in our world. In 2020, the winner has been crowned. And it’s… all of them? Instead of trying to put all your eggs in one basket with an all-in-one design, wire-framing, animation, prototyping, communication, handoff, development, testing tool, we’re all going to use a suite of different specialised tools throughout our design days.

The ever-more sophisticated and ever-more demanding design ecosystems we’re creating will require us to look for more tools to keep in our tool belts, and the ability to use them together effectively will be seen as a major advantage for designers.

Conclusion

So that’s my list for 2020. Seeing these trends take off this year won’t come as a surprise. But, like I said, I’m hoping there are a few major surprises throughout the year that keep us all on our toes and up at night.

The one trend I didn’t include on the list is the one I’m most certain of: that design and designers will increasingly be seen for the value they add to users, brands, business and the world. It’s an exciting time. Good luck in 2020, everyone.

Tony Kim is

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