User Experience Report: Flat Web Design Is Here To Stay

We asked 100 web professionals what they really think of flat design. Sixty-eight percent think that flat web design will still be around in five years from now.
Usabilla is a web-based usability testing tool that allows marketers, analysts, designers and usability experts to collect visual feedback on their website in a quick and fun way. Participants answer questions by placing points and notes on top of a webpage, mockup, or sketch. The results of a survey are analyzed and presented in a visual way with charts and heat maps. Usabilla's customers use these visual insights to improve their user experience and optimize their website.

Usabilla is currently in use by more than 20,000 web professionals, and globally recognized brands including Warner, EA, Discovery, LinkedIn, Disney, US Government, Sony, Levi's, and Booking.com.

Usabilla is a privately held company based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Learn more: usabilla.com
# Table of contents

- **Introduction** .................................................................................................................. 4
- **Highlights** ....................................................................................................................... 5
- **The test setup** ................................................................................................................ 6
- **What web professionals think of flat design** ................................................................. 7
  - The professionals ............................................................................................................ 7
  - 5 things that people associate with flat design .............................................................. 8
  - 5 advantages of flat design ............................................................................................. 9
  - 5 disadvantages of flat design ....................................................................................... 9
  - 68% say that flat design is here to stay ........................................................................... 9
- **Taking a closer look** ....................................................................................................... 10
  - What draws the most attention? ..................................................................................... 10
  - What do people like about flat design? .......................................................................... 11
  - What do people dislike about flat design? ..................................................................... 13
  - How usable is flat design? ............................................................................................... 14
- **Takeaways** ...................................................................................................................... 15
Introduction

Lately, there has been a big discussion going on about flat web design. Some think it's just a trend. Others believe it will change the way we design for the web forever.

We tested the homepages of four different websites with a flat design to find out what people really think! In a visual Usabilla Survey, we asked a mixed group of web professionals for their opinion about flat web design. In total, we gathered 2624 feedback points and 638 notes from 100 web professionals. The results are clear. Flat web design is here to stay.
Highlights

68% of web professionals think that flat design is here to stay
68 percent is positive that flat design affects how we design for the web in the long term. 27 percent is not sure about the development and only 9% is convinced that flat design is just another trend.

Flat design requires a professional designer
Only if executed well, flat design lives up to the usability standards that we have become used to over the years. Clickable elements need to be clear to demonstrate that they are clickable.

Flat design puts focus on the content
Putting content to the center of design is certainly a change for the better. At the same time, it is more important than ever to know what is relevant and to write good copy.

Colors take in an aesthetic as well as semantic role
Colors are a positive element of flat design, if they match the purpose of the website. They may be bright, but must not be dominant. They must remain usable contrasts.

White or negative space is a great design tool
White space must be used consistently and with care. It must not create a burden for the user.

Typography can be used for more than just text
Typography becomes more important than ever in flat design. However, the readability is still affected by contrast, font size, line height, letter spacing, etc.
The test setup

For this study, we set up a visual Usabilla Survey and asked 100 web professionals what they really think of flat design. We recruited participants via social media and our professional network.

We started the survey with a general form in which we asked the following questions:

‣ How familiar are you with flat design? (1 = not familiar at all / 5 = very familiar)
‣ What are the first three things that come to your mind when you think about flat web design?
‣ Name the biggest advantage of flat web design?
‣ Name the biggest disadvantage of flat web design?
‣ Do you think flat web design will still be around in 5 years from now?
‣ What is your profession?

Participants were then redirected to one out of four different surveys. Every survey included the same questions, but showed a different flat design each. We tested the homepages of the following sites:

‣ Wistia: http://wistia.com
‣ Windows Phone: http://www.windowsphone.com/en-us
‣ rdio: http://www.rdio.com/
‣ LayerVault: https://layervault.com/

Here are the questions that we asked:

‣ Click on the first three things that draw your attention? Please leave a note and explain why.
‣ Click on the elements that you like about this design. Please leave a note to let us know how they make you feel.
‣ Click on the elements that you would change about this design. Please leave a note to let us know why.
‣ Click on all elements that you think are clickable.
What web professionals think of flat design

The professionals

We asked 100 web professionals about their thoughts on flat web design. Participants were asked to rate how familiar they are with flat design on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (I’m an expert). In average, our professionals rated themselves with a 3.56 regarding their expertise on flat design. See the charts below for a distribution of their expertise and an overview of their professions.

Overview of the participants’ expertise of flat design.

Overview of the participants’ profession
5 things that people associate with flat design

We asked our participants about the first thing that came to their minds when they thought about flat web design. We combined all answers to one semantic word cloud.

Here are the 5 concepts that were mentioned the most:

- Simple
- Clean
- Colorful
- Modern
- Boring

All answers were put together to a semantic wordcloud using Wordle.net.
5 advantages of flat design

‣ Clarity
‣ Ease of Use
‣ Modern appearance
‣ Efficient responsive design
‣ Fast load times

5 disadvantages of flat design

‣ Different from what people are used to
‣ Difficult to execute well
‣ Unclear what’s clickable
‣ Boring design
‣ Lack of personality

68% say that flat design is here to stay

We asked participants whether or not they think flat design will still be around in 5 years from now. 68 percent is positive that flat design is not just a trend, but affects how we design for the web in the long term. 27 percent is not sure about the development of flat design. Only 9 percent is convinced that flat design is just another trend, which will not last.
Taking a closer look

What draws the most attention?

The rdio homepage shows a very colorful, big visual to attract attention. With big success.

What people say about rdio:

“I love the beautiful, vibrant colors silhouetting familiar/famous faces.”
“Red is a very attention-grabbing color.”
“The colors of this image were the first things to catch my eye.”
“I noticed the button b/c it is big. Also, its blue color stood out against the white background.”

What people say about the other pages:

“Video draws my attention, when I see a play button I want to click it.”
“The image of the two people grabs my eye.”
“I immediately looked at the image with the bright yellow border.”
“The big headline and reference to smartphone made me look.”
“Icons are simple and easy to scan.”
“This text stands out given the sparseness of its background.”
“The headline caught my attention first because it was big and bright and in my face.”
“Sky blue color is bold and eye catching without being straining.”

What do people like about flat design?

The homepage of Wistia is clean and colorful. At the same time, people think it’s boring and confusing.
What people say about Wistia:

“Logo font size and colors stand out nicely on the white background. Simple and professional design.”

“I like the colors and the simple and clean shape of the logo.”

“The simplicity of the header is refreshing.”

“The navigation bar is very clear and uncluttered. It makes the website easy to navigate.”

“Love the vibrant blue color. Makes me feel alive.”

“I like the simpleness of this site. It makes me feel calm.”

What people say about the other pages:

“I really like the typography.”

“This is a very neat and easily readable presentation.”

“The images stand out over solid color backgrounds and do not get cluttered.”

“I love the bright colors. They really make the page pop out.”

“So simple and clean. The whole site really catches my attention.”

“That’s an attractive background with lots of colors.”

“Excellent graphic choices, the images are colorful and exciting and definitely grab my attention.”

“I like the image tied with text, it’s easy to read and notice. It makes me feel clarity and purpose.”
What do people dislike about flat design?

The LayerVault website is flat and modern - yet, there is a lot of room for improvements.

What people say about LayerVault:

“Boring, what's your message?”

“This turquoise background is off putting. It's an odd color for here.”

“I just got on this site, why would I have a left button? Just have a right button, I don't know where I'm going anyway.”

“The page overall is too wide making me have to scroll.”

“This gray area at the bottom doesn't seem to fit with the attention-grabbing colorful graphics above. Seems a little bland”

“These links should be easier to see and not greyed out.”

What people say about the other pages:

“I would add a button to activate users to scroll down.”

“This site has so much blue! Use of another color might work well.”
How usable is flat design?

One argument against flat design is that it’s supposedly less usable. Reason for that is the fact that clickable elements lack an indication that they are clickable. We asked our professionals to identify all clickable elements on the four homepages.

*Flat design is clean and simple. However, keeping it usable remains a challenge.*

On the Windows Phone website, people identified 50 different clickable areas. However, only 35 of them are actually clickable. This means that 30 percent of what people thought were links are just regular text or visuals.
For the Wistia homepage, people identified 46 clickable elements. The page only comprises 31 links. 33 percent of the identified links are in fact not clickable.

On the rdio homepage, people thought that 40 different elements were clickable. Only 25 elements really are links. Almost 38 percent of the identified links were not interactive.

On the homepage of Layer Vault, people identified 30 links. Only 5 links were identified incorrectly. This means that only 16 percent of the identified links were not correct.

**Takeaways**

So what do these results tell us? From 100 web professionals, we learned that there are still mixed feelings about flat design. People like it, because of its clear and modern appearance. At the same time, they think that it easily lacks personality and excitement.

Still, 68% of the professionals that we asked thinks that flat design is here to stay. So it does have potential and we can expect it to improve the web for the better - if executed well and with a lot or care. The idea is to keep it simple with a focus on content, colors, negative space, and big fonts. However, these challenges remain for designers:

Putting content to the center of design is certainly a change for the better. At the same time, it becomes more important than ever to know what is relevant and to put that content into words.

What is clickable? The biggest challenge of flat design is to keep it simple and at the same time intuitive.

Colors take in an aesthetic as well as semantic role. They must match the purpose of the site. They may be bright, but must not be dominant. They must remain usable contrasts.

White or negative space is a great design tool - if used consistently and with care. It must not create a burden for the user.

Typography can be used for more than just text. Just keep it mind that readability is still affected by contrast, font size, line height, letter spacing, etc.