

Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression and design systems are often thought to be on opposing sides. One person wants to explore novel ways of presenting an idea, while another cements well-known practices that have proven successful for users. How can a designer spread their colorful wings when locked in a cage of historic guidance? This is where we see a poor understanding of design systems from outside of our practice. We look like police, out to reprimand every button using the wrong color while designers smuggle purple gradients into their artboard's dark corners.

Let's set the record straight right now. Ask any design system maintainer for their opinion about the color of your buttons. You should find that their response involves accessibility and, more importantly for their job role, agreement. To codify agreement across an organization. Getting people—especially creative people—to agree is very difficult. Creative people often have feelings that manifest in their work. This can manifest as a lack of well-communicated motivation past these emotions. They may say, “This blue looks better” but without understanding *why* it looks better. Design system maintainers have no stake in this game and would rather sell tickets to the “Battle of the Blue Buttons” to

crown a winner as long as we can read what the button ultimately says. Stakeholders outside the system should greatly influence the final presentation of the experience. Experience designers focus on the flow from one context to the next, while user interface designers curate the style of known patterns.

As design systems maintainers, our challenge is to support freedom of shared expression while governing an agreed-upon cohesive presentation. How might we allow our peers to experiment with new stylistic mediums while battling with different, but valid, opinions?

If what I've described is too abstract, let me paint a picture of what we'll set out to solve.

Imagine we have a page expected to show pricing options for our product. We offer three tiers on this page: Free, Pro, and Enterprise. Each tier displays a list of features available after purchase, all with a similar layout using brand colors and typography to convey to users that this is a legitimate business they can trust.



Pricing page with 3 tiers of increasing visual treatment

Creatives are taught to curate a more interesting design that attracts attention to the expensive tiers. The psychology behind

this is that a person doesn't want the boring tier; they want the vibrant one because it looks like more effort was put into that tier, including its features. We bet on this user behavior and hope more people gravitate to the expensive tier for purchase. This is a common approach to pricing pages and can be seen all over the Web.

For many design system maintainers, supporting this varying visual treatment is a nightmare. At first glance, this looks like it requires design tokens specific to the pricing page and more specific to the tiers. We'll need tokens that describe the new background, foreground, and collection of newly introduced accents to draw attention in ways that aren't found anywhere else in the product. For some, it just seems easier to mark this as an exception that exists outside of the system because it is traditionally too special of a case to support. This causes other exceptions to be identified, and before you know it, you wonder where the system is even useful anymore. For veteran maintainers, this is several units of work for an exercise in token naming; assigning new values with resources that need to be published, documented, and later maintained, all for a single place in the entire ecosystem. The juice just doesn't seem worth the squeeze.

This example is what has many creatives at odds with their system maintainers. From the maintainer's perspective, it seems like the creative is being *too* creative. "If they were just a bit less creative, they could align better with the rest of the system." We want our users to trust our offering, and the best way to do that is to meet our users' expectations across the experience, every step of the way. Any deviation from the norm is at risk of a user questioning the product's legitimacy, losing confidence, and leaving with one swift click. The maintainer believes the system should support a product's trust by offering repeatable patterns and tested standards.

From the creative perspective, the expression is warranted. This additional treatment is meant to enhance the messaging, with a root in human psychology and marketing best practices. “This is a valid expression to support, so why doesn’t the system account for it?” What else does it not account for? If the system can’t support this change, how can I trust the rest of the system will support my creativity over time? “The system isn’t supporting me!”

Recognize that in this scenario there are conflicting requirements. The business wants more significant sales, while the user wants assurance that this company is legitimate before opening their wallet. Compromises must be made to balance both of these needs, but the sacrifice does not need to be extreme. We should be able to have our design system and express it too.

This has become more apparent recently with the need to support multiple brands with a single system or even offer “dark mode” for the organization. We are seeing changes to the design landscape that have never been considered before in the digital medium, where outside influences can affect the final presentation of our work. It is not enough to design responsively for mobile and tablet, but to also consider translated content, assistive technologies, and other permutations of personalization options. In a striking study by the Common Sense Advisory¹, users are twice as likely to purchase a product when it is presented in their language. With this fact, we should begin to see the benefit of adapting to users in various ways, even if only for profit. What you design is not always necessarily what the user wants. The design needs to be flexible enough to adapt to any number of changes that could occur, either by business need or user preference or anything in between. A well-designed system will be prepared for these possibilities, while a well-experienced creative will be humble to these eventualities.

The big question is, assuming we want designers to join us in the system, is adding more flexibility to support freedom of expression attainable without causing unnecessary complexity or

maintenance? I have confidence that the answer is yes, and by the end of this book, you and your team should have a new worldview of design that empowers your organization to be creative in useful ways.

Endnotes

1. <https://csa-research.com/Featured-Content/For-Global-Enterprises/Global-Growth/CRWB-Series>

SAMPLE