

Consistency

The usability of a system is improved when similar parts are expressed in similar ways.

According to the principle of consistency, systems are more usable and learnable when similar parts are expressed in similar ways. Consistency enables people to efficiently transfer knowledge to new contexts, learn new things quickly, and focus attention on the relevant aspects of a task. There are four kinds of consistency: aesthetic, functional, internal, and external.¹

¹ Use consistent approaches when possible, but do not compromise clarity or usability for consistency. In the words of Emerson, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds ..."

Aesthetic consistency refers to consistency of style and appearance (e.g., a company logo that uses a consistent font, color, and graphic). Aesthetic consistency enhances recognition, communicates membership, and sets emotional expectations. For example, Mercedes-Benz vehicles are instantly recognizable because the company consistently features its logo prominently on the hood or grill of its vehicles. The logo has become associated with quality and prestige, and informs people how they should feel about the vehicle—i.e., respected and admired.

Functional consistency refers to consistency of meaning and action (e.g., a traffic light that shows a yellow light before going to red). Functional consistency improves usability and learnability by enabling people to leverage existing knowledge about how the design functions. For example, videocassette recorder control symbols, such as for rewind, play, forward, are now used on devices ranging from slide projectors to MP3 music players. The consistent use of these symbols on new devices enables people to leverage existing knowledge about how the controls function, which makes the new devices easier to use and learn.

Internal consistency refers to consistency with other elements in the system (e.g., signs within a park are consistent with one another). Internal consistency cultivates trust with people; it is an indicator that a system has been designed, and not cobbled together. Within any logical grouping elements should be aesthetically and functionally consistent with one another.

External consistency refers to consistency with other elements in the environment (e.g., emergency alarms are consistent across different systems in a control room). External consistency extends the benefits of internal consistency across multiple, independent systems. It is more difficult to achieve because different systems rarely observe common design standards.

Consider aesthetic and functional consistency in all aspects of design. Use aesthetic consistency to establish unique identities that can be easily recognized. Use functional consistency to simplify usability and ease of learning. Ensure that systems are always internally consistent, and externally consistent to the greatest degree possible. When common design standards exist, observe them.

See also [Modularity](#), [Recognition Over Recall](#), and [Similarity](#).