DESIGN, CONTENT, AND CULTURAL TRENDS FOR 2019

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We've been around long enough to know that trends in design come and go. The process is cyclical. Novel ideas spread until they reach a saturation point — and then we move on to the next big thing, eventually returning to where we started.

Consider an aesthetically pleasing trope, reinterpreted again and again until it eventually gets refined out of fashion. It's simplified to the point that it's just too easy to copy and, well, "Everyone's doing it." The interesting thing about any trend is its second chance for life. When trends collide with culture, things get heated, and it forces us all to look more critically at meaning. With each reinterpretation, a new set of cultural biases get applied.

Take minimalism, for example. It at first was an artistic reaction to the decorative styles that came before, then a gospel of elite brands, and now it's a movement of mindfulness. The aesthetics are the same, but its meaning has shifted.

Last year's post [Three Higher Ed Design Trends for 2018](#) focused on modular design, animated UI, and designing content. This year, we rely even more on content to drive our best design work. With this 2019 trends post, we consider three cultural movements that hit a tipping point in 2018 and how they will influence the next wave of higher ed websites.

CULTURAL MOVEMENT NO. 1: STAND FOR SOMETHING

With more consumers using their power to support brands that share their belief systems, colleges and universities need to show off the impact of their activities, research, and alumni on society.

In 2018, Nike embraced Colin Kaepernick for its "Believe in Something" campaign, garnering 80 million views on Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. Other organizations released interactive websites that highlight the global impact of their business. [Microsoft by the Numbers](#) touted the fact that it has made 137 "[A.I. for the Earth Grants](#)" to individuals and organizations in 47 countries, helping them use artificial intelligence (A.I.) to protect the planet in the areas of agriculture, biodiversity, climate change, and water.

This is all to say that institutions big and small can benefit from sharing research activities, community engagement initiatives, and belief systems with their audiences. Adding cultural relevance and global responsibility to the list of attributes attracts more right-fit students and builds a stronger campus community.

Many of our clients have already embraced these ideas, and we're working with them to develop interactive articles, stand-alone sites, rich microcontent, and innovative tagging and taxonomies to categorize news and tell these stories better on the web in 2019.

One example of a client embracing this cultural movement is (the recently relaunched!) [Mendoza College of Business at the University of Notre Dame](#).

Ask more of business. Ask more of yourself.

A Notre Dame education is a rigorous one that prepares you for business with a balanced worldview. It develops you as a leader — true to your core values — with the moral courage to act with integrity. It pushes you to see business as more than a career but a vocation to serve the common good.

When you study business at Notre Dame, you don't just learn more. You become more. You ask more of business and yourself. Asking more means:

Analyzing ethical dilemmas and developing the moral imagination to find positive alternatives.

Envisioning how business can become the solution to issues as big as poverty and peace.

Integrating ethical, social and environmental action with traditional business practice.

Recognizing that economic enterprises must serve people, not the other way around.

We offer innovative programs at Notre Dame, conduct cutting-edge research and produce respected business leaders — all committed to asking more.

We created a landing page to showcase Notre Dame's focus on ethical business, and throughout the site you'll find the tagline "Ask More of Business." About Mendoza explains the four core values of what it means to "Ask More of Business." While the content existed before the redesign, mStoner restructured it and designed a beautiful landing page for higher impact.

CULTURAL MOVEMENT NO. 2: LESS, BUT BETTER

With a trend toward scaling down device time, we need to develop meaningful content that is personalized, precise, and device-agnostic.

In 2018, Apple, Google, and others began promoting well-being by reporting screen time to users and allowing them to set limits on app usage. While this may seem counterintuitive and in contrast to Apple and Google's core business, it does reflect a cultural shift toward more meaningful interactions, less mindless browsing, and healthier living. We think this means our design and web content for universities and colleges has to be even more relevant and more useful to visitors — it has to be tightly curated and personalized.

Over the course of 2018:

- Our homepage designs got shorter. This is not because users won't scroll, but because we've found better ways to express our clients' brand — injecting meaning into every detail of the design, including copy and page choreography.
- We ditched social feeds on some sites in favor of custom storytelling around community, academics, and impact. This approach still allows individual community voices to be heard.
- We developed mobile-style menus across all device sizes to declutter and let content shine, and use off-canvas interactions and "sticky" elements to boost conversions and more organic discovery.

CULTURAL MOVEMENT NO. 3: DESIGN AT HUMAN SCALE

We've long known that institutions need to put people at the center of their brand, services, stories, and campus with an emphasis on quality of life.

To get there, we've ramped up our experience mapping process — and you should too. We never start a project without really getting to know individual students and other audiences, considering their thoughts, feelings, and actions throughout their interactions with your brand, services, and website. But *designing at human scale* is more than just understanding audience needs; it's all about designing a digital space that is comfortable, familiar, and right-sized.

Your site should feel alive and welcoming, warm and approachable. We want to avoid overwhelming UI, overstylized photography, or cluttered layouts. Think of your website as a city designed for walking — without impediment, yet perfectly sized for human engagement. Human scale also implies interaction between people. Eventually prospective students want to talk to someone, so let's finally make it easy to chat with admission counselors, alumni representatives, and student ambassadors.

LOOKING AHEAD

As a society, we obsess over the latest and greatest. Once we become acquainted with what is "in", we gear up for the next wave of shiny and new. To stand out among the crowd, think of how these trends affect users and the user experience as a whole.

Remember: Design innovation is not just in the colors, typography, and microinteractions (to name a few!) of a website. To make a difference, you need to take into account current societal trends, where they are today, and where they're headed to better inform new innovations and processes in design.

Looking for a place to start? Building an enduring, values-based brand and developing empathy for the audiences you serve are two places to start. Then, knowing that your website is your institution's No. 1 marketing channel, use storytelling principles to deliver your message and drive people to action. Here are four free mStoner resources that will help:

- [Webinar: Brand Architecture: Building an Enduring Brand](#)
- [Webinar: Map It Out — The Path to Better Digital Engagement With Prospects](#)
- [Webinar: Storytelling and Integrated Marketing Communications](#)
- [Blog Post: Four Strategies to Move Your .edu From Project to Process](#)

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