

BLOG

Three Trends from the Design Leadership Summit

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Sensei Labs February 20, 2020



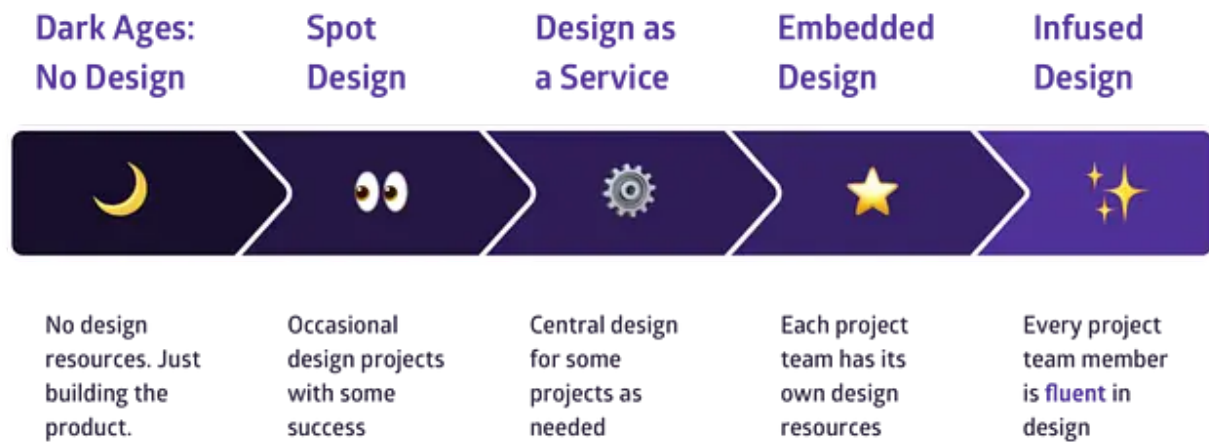
350 designers from around the world gathered in Toronto for two days of talks on design leadership at the end of 2019 hosted by [DesignX](#). Leaders from Facebook, Shopify, Dropbox, and others shared their insights, challenges, and outlooks over a breakneck paced 48 hours.

I'm a big believer in learning from others (or teaching yourself) over learning from schools and curriculums — and the summit packed in a lot of education to digest.

Here are three key takeaways that I brought back to the team and hope you'll also find them useful in your own practice:

1. Embedded & Infused Design

Jared Spool, founder of UIE, gave a talk about design maturity in organizations, identifying the importance of getting your whole organization fluent in design.



Think about the analogy of learning to play an instrument: the first time in your life you pick up a guitar, pluck the strings, and make a sound.

You start to learn a chord or two and then show off your skill again and again for your family or friends. You think you sound great, but really you're probably at the point of unconscious incompetence — you don't yet know that you're not good at guitar. It's only until a friend points it out (or you see their reaction) that you become conscious of it.

Having that understanding of what is and isn't good means you're actually becoming literate in something — and that's as true for design as it is for learning an instrument.

So the minimum goal is to get your entire organization at least literate in what good design is and isn't (along with the value it brings) and even better if you can get as many people as you can to be fluent in it.

Not everyone needs to be a master, but the more developers, Project Managers, and Customer Success members you can teach the basics of design to, the further along you'll be to improving the overall design skills of an organization. Much more so than hiring one or two masters and keeping them siloed away.

At Sensei Labs, we actually started this shift a year ago, moving from an agency model with a centralized design team to an embedded model with a product designer on each sprint team sitting right next to developers, helping share that fluency and knowledge. We're not 100% there just yet (and

have plans to continue spreading design literacy), but I feel like we're on the right path to "infused UX design" as Jared identified as an end goal (for now).

2. Concept Clarity

[Elizabeth McGuane](#) from Shopify gave a great talk on an often overlooked area of Product/UX when it comes to content strategy. More specifically around the 'dictionary' you use in your product both internally and externally — or (super simply), how you present your features.

This is called the "concept model" and represents how you present a feature and the shared understanding of what that means.

"A bad name is like building a beautiful door with an invisible handle."

Looking back at her time at Intercom, the product suite was named after the job-to-be-done of using a feature: engage, respond, educate. While this sounds great in theory, they found that the concept model didn't match with people's mental models of those features (triggered messages, support chat, guides, and articles) and they realigned all the marketing and product communication so there was a consistent match between the two.

Her suggestion — to take a step back and build a glossary of all the terms in your own product — the results might be surprising. (I'll note that we've been doing this at Sensei Labs and found numerous areas where we were able to add clarity).

3. Designing for Trust

At Sensei Labs, we're often serving mission-critical functions or acting as a source of truth for the organizations that use our tools — and that means there's a lot of trust placed with us. Something we don't take lightly.

There were actually two speakers that overlapped on this theme: [Michael Chanover](#), VP Design of Khan Academy and [Margaret Stewart](#), VP of Product Design at Facebook.

Trust is broken down into 2 parts: **trustworthiness and assurance**. Trustworthiness is the initial appearance that can or can't establish trust and assurance is all of the follow up experience or interaction that helps maintain or strengthen it. When designing your product, you have to consider both of these two levers — as each on its own can't maintain trust in the long term.

Think about a well-designed restaurant: the interior is well lit, clean, and modern; the staff look friendly and have matching uniforms. That's something that you might **trust** enough to try. But after eating, the service and taste of the food either delivered on that trustworthiness or it didn't (its **assurance**).

One note on assurance: reviews and testimonials help establish that delivery of trust without the person themselves having to gather it first-hand.

There are a number of steps we've taken at Sensei Labs to help add trustworthiness into our products: We're in the midst a large initiative to standardize our user interface with consistent components: we're taking the time to polish older parts of the application (from email notifications through to settings screens) and we're ensuring that we expose as much detail as we can to our customers so they can understand what's happening in the platform (e.g. exactly who made a change when).

On the assurance side, we've rebuilt areas of poor performance and scaled up our testing team (along with a number of process changes) to make sure we're delivering a dependable experience.

Another level of designing for trust is to consider the fact that product design is not neutral. That is, every decision usually has unintended consequences and we need to consider those from as many angles as possible. In the simplest case, moving a feature might solve a design problem for a new customer, but will have a knock-on effect for every other person who used the platform when they can no longer find it.

"Responsible design accepts that there are no neutral design choices."

At Facebook's scale, these problems get much more murky. To paraphrase Margaret, "once your product has any social aspect, you're no longer just solving problems (which have solutions), you're optimizing the outcome of dilemmas."

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All in all, while these three themes stood out from the Design Leadership Summit, there were so many amazing speakers giving talks on diversity, growth, design operations, and more that left a lot to think on. That is, until the next conference.

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