



CONSISTENCY SCRIPT

CONSISTENCY: When it matters, when it doesn't

An important design principle is illustrated by my car.

The first thing you'll notice is that it's really old. Pleistocene age, I think. You can tell I obviously don't give a fig about impressing anybody with my car.

Second, you might guess that I would rather get a root canal than shop for a car, and you'd be right. So this gazillion-year-old piece of basic transportation has got over a quarter million miles on it.

And third, you'll notice it's recovering well from its annual washing. Its protective coat of dirt is coming back nicely.

One thing you probably did not notice is that the hubcaps on the left side do not match the hubcaps on the right side. And now that I've brought that to your attention, you probably don't care – because why should you?

The inconsistency doesn't cause you any problems, inconvenience you, or confuse you. It doesn't matter.

That's the design principle. Consistency is a wonderful thing, for all the reasons you already know. But it is not an absolute. Sometimes it matters, sometimes it doesn't. Consistency matters if and only if

1. Any given user is likely to encounter both instances
2. Those encounters happen close enough together for the user to notice the inconsistency
3. It causes the user some kind of problem, like confusion OR
4. It causes your team some significant problem.

Actually, consistency sometimes does more harm than good. In the case of my hubcaps, for example, the originals had black lettering. When one hubcap got lost, the only replacements available had gray lettering. I could have spent \$35 for one (which would have been noticeable), \$70 for a matching pair on a single side, or \$140 to make all four match. I spent 70.

Yet I've had clients waste lots of time, energy, and money ferretting out every diddley little inconsistency that no one but them will ever notice or be troubled by. For example, something that's done one way for an Android mobile app and a different way for the Apple version. Or one way for the consumer version and a different way for the large business version.

So the design principle is, Suitability is more important than consistency. If an element works appropriately in one context and a somewhat different version of that element works appropriately in a

different context -- and if nobody outside your own four walls will ever notice or care – then your time is better spent on more important matters.

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