Stop Stealing Sheep & Find Out How Type Works

Erik Spiekermann & E.M. Ginger

Printed in the United States of America. Published simultaneously in Canada.

01

Type is Everywhere?

Have you ever been to Japan? A friend who went there recently reported that he had never felt so lost in his life. Why? Because he could not read anything: not road signs, not price tags, not instructions of any kind. It made him feel stupid, he said. It also made him realize how much we all depend on written communication.

Picture yourself in a world without type.

True, you could do with-out some of the ubiquitous advertising messages, but you wouldn't even know what the packages on your breakfast table contained. Sure enough, there are pictures on them – grazing cows on a paper carton suggest that milk is inside, and cereal packaging has appetizing images to make you hungry. But pick up salt or pepper, and what do you look for? S and P!

Breakfast for some people wouldn't be the same without the morning paper. And here it is again: inevitable type. Most people call it "print" and don't pay too much attention to typographic subtleties. You've prob-ably never compared the small text typefaces in different newspapers, but you do know that some newspapers are easier to read than others. It might be because they have larger type, better pictures, and lots of headings to guide you through the stories. Regardless, all these differences are conveyed by type. In fact, a newspaper gets its look, its personality, from the typefaces used and the way in which they are arranged on the page. We

easily recognize our favorite newspapers on the newsstand, even if we see only the edge of a page, just as we recognize our friends by seeing only their hands or their hair. And just as people look different across the world, so do the newspapers in different countries. What looks totally unacceptable to a North American reader will please the French reader at breakfast, while an Italian might find a German daily paper too monotonous.

Of course, it's not only type or layout that distinguishes news-papers, it is also the combination of words. Some languages have lots of accents, like French; some have very long words, like Dutch or Finnish; and some use extremely short words, as in a British tabloid. Not every typeface is suited for every language, which also explains why certain type styles are popular in certain countries, but not necessarily any-where else.

This brings us back to type and newspapers. What might look quite obvious and normal to you when you read your daily paper is the result of careful planning and applied craft. Even newspapers with pages that look messy are laid out following complex grids and strict hierarchies...

The artistry comes in offering the information in such a way that the reader doesn't get sidetracked into thinking about the fact that someone had to carefully prepare every line, paragraph, and column into structured pages. Design – in this case, at least – has to be invisible. Typefaces used for these hardworking tasks are therefore, by definition "invisible." They have to look so normal that you don't even notice you're reading them. And this is exactly why designing type is such an unknown profession; who thinks about people who produce invisible things?

Nevertheless, every walk of life is defined by, expressed with, and indeed, dependent on type and typography.

If you think that the choice of a typeface is something of little importance because nobody would know the difference anyway, you'll be surprised to hear that experts spend an enormous amount of time and effort perfecting details that are invisible to the untrained eye.

It is a bit like having been to a concert, thoroughly enjoying it, then reading in the paper the next morning that the conductor had been incompetent, the orchestra out of tune, and the piece of music not worth performing in the first place. While you had a great night out, some experts were unhappy with the performance because their standards and expectations were different than yours.

Food and design: how often do we buy the typographic promise without knowing much about the product? Stereotypes abound – some colors suggest certain foods, particular typefaces suggest different flavors and qualities. Without these unwritten rules we wouldn't know what to buy or order.

The same thing happens when you have a glass of wine. While you might be perfectly happy with whatever you're drinking, someone at the table will make a face and go on at length about why this particular bottle is too warm, how that year was a lousy one anyway, and that he just happens to have a case full of some amazing stuff at home that the uncle of a friend imports directly from France.

Does that make you a fool or does it simply say that there are varying levels of quality and satisfaction in everything we do?

While it might be fun to look at wine labels, chocolate boxes, or candy bars in order to stimulate one's appetite for food or fonts (depending on your preference), most of us definitely do not enjoy an equally prevalent form of printed communication: forms.

If you think about it, you'll have to admit that business forms process a lot of information that would be terribly boring to have to write fresh every time. All you do is check a box, sign your name,

and you get what you ask for. Unless, of course, you're filling out your tax return, when they get what they ask for; or unless the form is so poorly written, designed, or printed (or all of the above) that you have a hard time understanding it. Given the typographic choices available, there is no excuse for producing bad business forms, illegible invoices, awkward applications, one's ridiculous receipts, or bewildering ballots. Not a day goes by with-out one's having to cope with printed matter of this nature. It could so easily be a more pleasant experience.

While onscreen forms offer a very reduced palette of typographic choices, they at least provide some automatic features to help with the drudgery of typing your credit card number.

Every PC user today knows what a font is, calls at least some of them by their first name (e.g. Helvetica, Verdana, and Times), and appreciates that typefaces convey different emotions. Although what we see on screen are actually little unconnected square dots that fool the naked eye into recognizing pleasant shapes, we now expect all type to look like "print."

While there is a tendency to overdesign everything and push technology to do things it was never intended to do, like printing onto raw eggs, at least we can continue our typographic train-ing even when deciding whether the food we bought is good for nourishing or not.

Some of the most pervasive typographical messages have never really been designed, and neither have the typefaces they are set in. Some engineer, administrator, or accountant in some government de-partment had to decide what the signs on our roads and freeways should look like. This person probably formed a committee made up of other engineers, administrators, and accountants who in turn went to a panel of experts that would have included manufacturers of signs, road safety experts, lobbyists from automobile associations plus more engineers, administrators, and accountants.

You can bet there wasn't one typographer or graphic designer in the group, so the outcome shows no indication of any thought toward legibility, let alone com-munication or beauty.

Nevertheless we're stuck with our road signs. They dominate our open spaces, forming a large part of a country's visual culture.

Traditional type for signs used to be constructed from geometric patterns so that they could be recreated by signmakers everywhere. Type as data travels more easily, so there are no more excuses for not having real type on signs.

Engineers are still responsible for the signs on our roads and freeways. And they still think that Arial is the best typeface ever, simply be-cause it is ubiquituous. But there are signs (!) of progress even in those circles: The new German DIN (Deutsche Industrie Norm = German Industrial Standard) committee has finally acknowledged what a lot of designers have always known: Some characters are easily confused with each other. A figure 1 looking like a lowercase | and a capital I are major of-fenders. The new DIN 1450 suggests a lowercase | with a loop, a capital I with serifs, and a figure 1 with a horizontal bottom stroke.

Why not use serif faces in the first place, you may ask? Interesting question, and unfortunately one not even discussed among the engineers on the committee (although there was a real type designer present). They think that serif faces are old-fashioned and could not possibly be used for signage or any other contemporary pur-pose.

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