

Corporate Typography

Type is visible language, it is the way a corporation is seen to be speaking. Corporate Design should be a system of integrated visual elements that can each express the voice of the corporation (or call it brand, company, institution) if seen on its own. Cover up the logo, leave out the images, print in black and white, and all you have left is a typeface and a layout style, the arrangement of the page. That tectonic arrangement is like the facade of a building. It should be unique, although there are only so many ways to put doors and windows into a house without making it inhabitable. The building bricks – to extend that metaphor even further – are the typefaces. They don't look much from a distance, but close up one recognizes structure, subtle shades of colour: character. Neglecting to choose a proper, suitable and possibly unique family of typefaces results in the corporate building (there goes the metaphor again!) looking like all the others; prefab, boring, forgettable.

Corporate typography deals with four issues:

Identity

Design and production

Distribution

Licensing

1. Identity:

You can design a typeface from scratch, occupy and dominate an existing one, or adapt and own an existing one.

Designing from scratch is not half as expensive as most design managers think. The amount of money it takes to buy a license for the worldwide use of a family of fonts from one of the digital type foundries, buys you one all of your own. The scarcest resource, as always, is talent. The dilemma in designing yet another typeface suitable for text as well as display, to be read across diverse cultures (and we're only talking about the Roman alphabet just now) is that it has to look 95% like all the other faces out there, lest it be seen to be silly, contrived and fashionable. But that is a dilemma all serious typedesigners face. Vanity is not

a good advisor here, but neither is timid adaptation of so-called standards. Who – besides Deutsche Telekom, BMW and others needs another Helvetica clone that has been altered enough to avoid paying a license for the real thing but not enough to give it character? I am not talking about typefaces for a campaign or another limited application, but full corporate typefaces that have to last at least ten years, or until the next merger or management change.

Kurt Weidemann designed Corporate ASE (as in Antiqua, Sans, Egyptienne) for Daimler Benz, back in 1990, and it is hard to imagine that brand's communication without these typefaces. Weidemann knew that you need more than just a Sans to properly express everything a company needs to say. More and more companies understand that type has to not only fit the brand, but also the content. That is why we added Utopia to Futura when we redesigned Volkswagen's identity back in 1995, and that is why even a company like Nokia had an exclusive Sans and Serif family designed. If you want to communicate with type across all media and audiences rather than just making your advertising look unique, you need to consider a system of coordinated typefaces, be they exclusively designed or simply chosen from a catalogue.

If the communication needs are simpler than they would be for a global brand that sells a variety of goods and services, it may be enough to take a face that is appropriate, fairly distinguishable without being silly and legible enough for headlines and short text. Who can name the typeface used for all Marlboro ads? Neo Contact has only one weight and couldn't be used for more than a few words at a time, but it is recognized by everybody. Marlboro dominate it so much that you would think it was their exclusive, even though anybody else could use that typeface.

If designing from scratch seems to risky or too much trouble, you can always take, say, your average Univers and Times New Roman and make them your own. That is what Audi did when they repositioned themselves as a premium brand in 1994. The decision to use these two faces had been made when we came to the project, so we took the faces and tuned them to Audi's purposes. With a license from the original

foundry, you can do that with any typeface, as long as you don't resell it. One of the advantages is that you can rename the fonts so that everybody knows they are using the right typeface. Audi Sans is different from Univers, but most users wouldn't know that if it weren't for the name.

2. Design and production

Very simply put: A corporate typeface has to be good-looking, well-built, and useful.

Good-looking is difficult to define, but in the context of a Corporate Design Programme it means that the typeface has to be in line with the brand values. It is no good taking a cuddly, cute face for a hi-tech company, nor a cool fashionable geometric one for a manufacturer of health foods. That goes for all the other elements of the design system, but type-designers seem to be either afraid of taking risks altogether and keep tweaking the same well-known outlines all over, or they fall victim to the latest trend. It is easy to score with clients either way, but in the long run neither serves the brand. Modesty is a virtue when it comes to designing type, as long as it doesn't equate boredom.

A well-built typeface has all the characters for the languages required; only English needs no accents. It has to have enough weights to make it useful in different applications. To look good on paper as well as on screen, it needs to be digitized with attention to detail, well hinted and carefully tested across all platforms. Theoretically, Open Type is the new font format which works on both Mac and PC. Practically, however, we still have to supply TrueType and PostScript Type 1 fonts, if only for all those users who haven't upgraded to the latest Windows or Mac OS. The character set could include logos as well as special sorts like arrows for signage. Anything that could be accessed via a keyboard should be included in the corporate typeface. It needs to be easy to install, use concise menu names, style-links and sufficient, but no redundant hierarchies.

It is usually best to identify user groups and make separate packages available for design, documentation, office communication. Not everybody needs all the weights, nor all the formats.

3. Distribution:

It is best to appoint an agent to handle world-wide distribution, with order forms available online and different payment methods for departments, suppliers, agencies. And why not make suppliers pay for the corporate fonts? Not only will a cut of the proceeds pay towards the design and production (and often actually way more than that), but it will also make people appreciate the fact that these fonts are only to be used for that one client and according to their guidelines.

4. Licensing:

Legally, fonts are treated as software. You do not buy a font, but acquire a license to use it. A multi-user license is needed for a font used on more than five CPUs or more than one output device. As those licenses tend to cost quite a bit if you're buying them for a few ten thousand users, it makes a lot of sense to invest that same sum into designing your own typeface. You then hold it exclusively and can either sell to your suppliers or even to the open market. That is what Daimler Benz did with their Corporate ASE. Against the advice of their marketing and design experts, of course, but how do you explain the value of a unique brand to a controller? Now every bucket shop in the world can have the Daimler typeface on their sign.

Typedesign and the production of fonts have become easy, technically. A new typeface can now be designed and produced within months rather than years. Getting the right balance between "corporate" and unique still depends on the talent and knowledge of the designer. While there are more type-designers than ever, working to a brief within the constraints of a corporate system isn't everybody's scene. When it comes down to it, there still are only a handful of people who successfully straddle the disciplines of corporate design and typedesign.