

Post Mortem

or: How I once designed a typeface for Europe's biggest company.

Name, logo, colour and typeface – those are the basic elements of any corporate design programme. Once the first of these elements has been defined or, indeed, designed, the fourth one hardly ever presents a problem. In Germany, it's got to be Helvetica. And if it isn't Helvetica, Unifers might just be allowed. If a company wants to look more traditional and considers a serif face one usually chooses Times New Roman.

When Sedley Place Design in Berlin was commissioned to develop a corporate design programme for the West German Post Office – Deutsche Bundespost – it became clear right from the start that this time Helvetica did not fit the bill: it is being used by too many other companies because of its 'neutral' appearance and it fails to distinguish the Bundespost on this very basic level.

One of the reasons why so many companies have chosen Helvetica as their corporate typeface is the fact that it is perhaps the most widely available typeface today. This availability has, however, been achieved at the expense

of recognizability. There are so many weights, versions, legal and illegal adaptations and so many other almost identical typefaces that by simply specifying 'Helvetica' one ends up with a range of 'almost right' and 'not quite right' solutions. Visual chaos instead of one typeface being the common denominator of all corporate communications.

Since Helvetica first appeared in the late fifties the typesetting and printing industries have been subject to a series of technical changes, if not revolutions. Poor Helvetica was never intended to be used in very small sizes, set on low-resolution CRT-setters and printed on rough recycled paper. It was also never intended as a space-saving face for listings, tables or in fact telephone books. Condensing it electronically to fit a given space doesn't help much to enhance the original design either, which was for a generous, even appearance. Faced with all these arguments and the fact that today it is possible to go straight from fairly rough artwork into digitisation via the Ikarus programme, thus saving enormous time and costs, the Bundespost gave Sedley Place

Design the go-ahead for the development of an exclusive type design based on the necessities of the corporate design programme.

The brief

A typeface for Europe's biggest employer (more than 500,000 employees) has to do more than look pretty: it has to work pretty hard. Rather than going for attractive novelty, we decided that it needed to be:

very legible, particularly in small sizes and under the special considerations of finding names and figures rather than reading extensive amounts of copy;

neutral, not fashionable, trendy or nostalgic;

identical on all typesetting systems; available from every supplier of typesetting in the country at very short notice and at reasonable cost; economical in its application –

ie space-saving; designed in clearly distinguishable weights;

distinct and unmistakable; technically up-to-date.

1 Helvetica knows neither friends nor enemies – it makes everybody look alike. Even if you cannot see the difference, you can feel it.

2 Counters and negative shapes need special consideration. Definition is improved by flared strokes and precise joins.

3,4 Original pencil sketches to define the characters' 'character'.

5 A question of weight – the middle one is the right one.

6 Caps a little smaller, figures smaller still, but with little 'descenders'.

7 Variations on a theme.

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Hauschrift AEG

Hauschrift BASF

Hauschrift Bayer

Hauschrift BMW

Hauschrift Bundesbahn

Hauschrift Bundespost

Hauschrift Daimler Benz

Hauschrift Lufthansa

Hauschrift Nixdorf

Hauschrift Siemens

Hauschrift Sparkasse

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H bauen 15

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Hamburg
Hamburg

amk

5

bauen
bauen
bauen

3

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g a

4

nab
nab

Special considerations

Printing on rough, thin or otherwise problematic paper stock, coarse resolution of high-speed typesetting systems, uneven inking, extremely small type-sizes, minimum line-feed to save space, and very often – as in listings of all sorts – line after line of similar word shapes pose particular problems to the design of a typeface.

These adverse conditions can only be counteracted by technical and aesthetic manipulations during the design process. Pretty shapes viewed at large sizes are thus less important than the fact that individual characters work well within words and fulfil their purpose within the constraints of that particular brief.

Specially-designed faces such as Bell Centennial show that solutions can be found for clearly defined problems. In order then to define the task instead of relying on individual inspiration by gifted artists, we analysed six families of faces to see what they have in common and how far one can deviate one way or the other.

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The concept

After having measured various proportions, eg x-height to cap-height, stroke thickness to cap-height, average width, dimensions of ascenders, descenders and figures as well as having looked at critical shapes – letters which are easily mistaken for each other, relationships between white space and black shape, etc – we had a clear view of what our typeface should look like: it had to be a sans serif face – to go for anything else would have been too much of a culture shock for a rather conservative client; we needed a narrow typeface, but not a condensed version of an existing design; the main strokes had to be thick enough to withstand printing on rough paper but at the same time light enough to give an even appearance with enough space between letters to distinguish individual characters; characters needed to be individual enough to avoid mix-up with similar characters but not over-designed; capital letters had to clearly mark the

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beginning of new words (in German, all proper nouns start with a capital letter) but not to stick out obtrusively when used as caps only; x-height had to be relatively large but not too much so; figures needed to be clearly distinguishable from each other and somewhat smaller than caps to avoid groups of figures sticking out and looking bigger than type; curves, indentations, flares and open joins were to counteract bad definition, overinking and optical illusions, especially in small sizes; tension between smooth outer shapes and somewhat squared-off counters was to increase clarity and legibility; counters and negative shapes were to be given special consideration.

Having a family of three weights – regular, regular italic and bold – would provide enough differentiation for the Bundespost's needs. The regular and bold weights have to be drawn by hand; after digitisation the data can be used to interpolate the italic, which then needs small adjustments made.

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Most display faces for signage systems are too **bold**, not giving the inner shapes enough definition. This version (top line) is 15% heavier than the regular weight.

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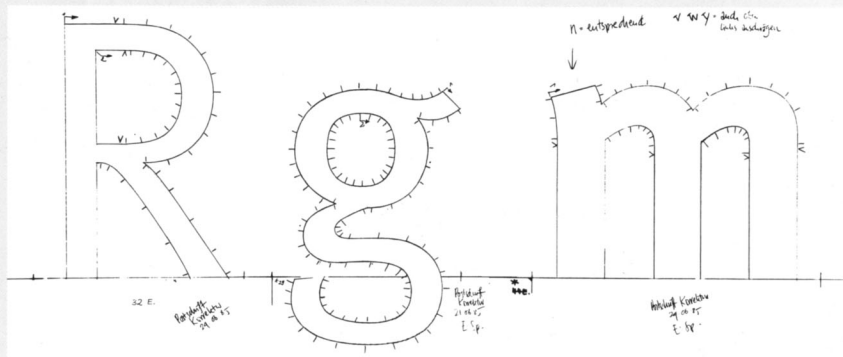
Corrected outline drawings at the final size of 192.5 mm (7 3/4 inches). The little ticks are the points the computer needs to store the complete character.

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Could regular and **bold** have the same widths?



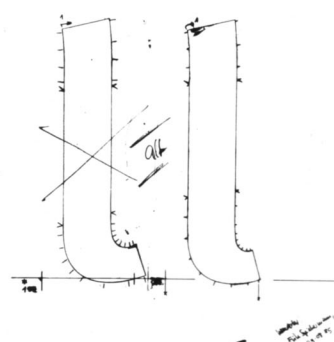
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Defining the rhythm – h, o, and n are unitalicised and set the standard for the rest of the alphabet.

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Preliminary artwork for the regular weight, cap height approx. 90 mm (3 1/2 inches).

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After digitisation, more corrections were (and still are) needed.

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The Bundespost logo was also redrawn to harmonize with the typeface, digitised and included on the typesetting font.

For signage systems, architectural lettering, vehicles and large headline sizes one would need a special medium weight which can be without all the limitations of a typeface for very small sizes. This means it can be less explicit in its individual characters but instead be legible in large sizes and from a distance. This version, too, can initially be interpolated between regular and bold and then adapted to its specific purpose. Once the data are available on the Ikarus system, one can even consider a slightly more condensed and exaggerated version for setting telephone books with specially adapted weights and figures.

Special signs such as pictograms, symbols, signs, the Bundespost logo etc can also be included on a font for typesetting, thus eliminating reproduction and make-up work.

It would eventually even be feasible to use the design as the basis for an exclusive typewriter face on electronic daisy-wheel machines.

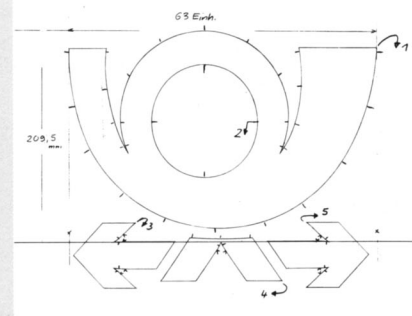
The result

The illustrations on these pages show the development of Sedley Place's design work on the typeface. Once a typesetting font was available, the forms which Sedley Place had re-designed were all set in the new face as were some publications. This was all done without any major corrections to the original design which would, of course, be needed eventually – as this setting shows.

Through talks with all relevant manufacturers of typesetting equipment it was guaranteed that the face would be available on all these systems at the same time. As the Bundespost had paid for all the design work, the fonts could be sold at a considerable discount, therefore allowing even the smallest supplier of typesetting to invest in the new typeface.

The Minister of Telecommunications himself had expressed interest in the face, the publicity department, who had asked Sedley Place to go ahead with

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the project, wanted it and a professor of Applied Psychology had written a very favourable report on it. The administration, however, decided not to go ahead with the introduction of the exclusive corporate typeface because it would 'cause unrest'.

Instead, it was decided that all the known Helveticas were to continue as the Deutsche Bundespost's houseface.

So go back to the beginning and start reading again.

Original concept, research and sketches:

Erik Spiekermann, assisted by Michael Bitter, at Sedley Place Design, Berlin.

Design and artwork of complete alphabets: Gerry Barney and Mike Pratley at Sedley Place Design, London.

Digitised:

D. Stempel AG, Frankfurt.

Trial settings: Fotosatz Hoffmann, Messel.

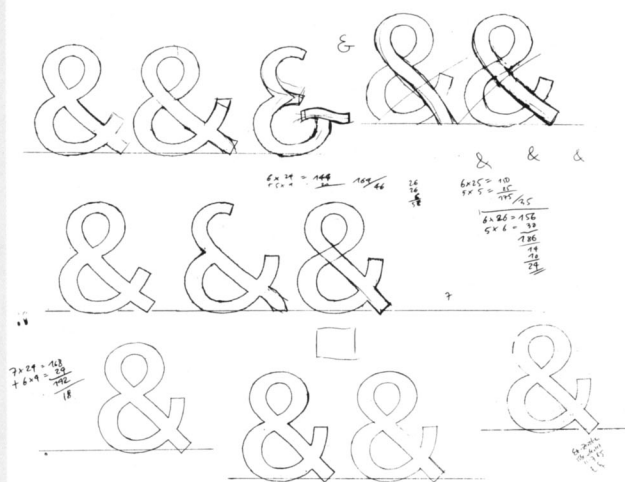
This article was set in PT 55 and 75.

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Amperands to choose from, but the one on the right still isn't quite the final one yet.

16, 18
First digitised version of PT 55 (regular) and PT 75 (bold), set on CRTronic.

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Hand-drawn artwork for the display weight, brought to the same size.



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abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz ßäöü
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
QRSTUVWXYZÄÖÜ
1234567890 (./-&-)

Hausschrift

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Hausschrift

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Hausschrift