

# typography

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## The Brand Inside

**C**ompanies invest millions of dollars implementing and maintaining their brands, and an unknowable amount trying to get all their employees to embrace and "live the brand." In consumer products, the brand impression can be seen in packaging and documentation. "The quality goes in before the name goes on" is Zenith's famous trademark. Slapping a logo on a product might have been the norm a few decades ago, but this won't suffice today.

With advances in technology and technology products, it is possible for corporations to put their brand "inside" their product line. Innovative and competitive companies recognize this and utilize the User Interface (UI) of a product as a very powerful customer touchpoint. The UI screen can be personalized with the color, typography, images and sound of a brand.

A variety of issues involved with taking the brand inside a product, and displaying the brand typography in the UI, deserve exploration. Technological advances have made the UI screen an irresistible target for branding fonts. Everyone involved in the product from engineers and designers to product and brand managers, should be compelled to examine their current UI to see if it reinforces their brand.

### Electronic brand touchpoints are everywhere

A wide variety of brands have products or services that use electronic screens. More than you might think! TVs, computers, PDAs, mobile phones, digital music players, copiers and multifunction printers have all had screens, but now we also have kitchen appliances, gas pumps, ATMs, airline check-in kiosks and automobile displays. Every device is a brand touchpoint with the opportunity to deliver on the brand promise.

Each of these brand touch-

points has something in common: they all use fonts in their UI. Type is a critical part of the visual identity of a brand. Fonts are by nature expressive and can be very powerful tools when used effectively. As Stefan Rögener stated in his book *Branding with Type*, "Type is magical. It not only communicates a word's information, but it conveys a subliminal message in the letter shapes themselves."

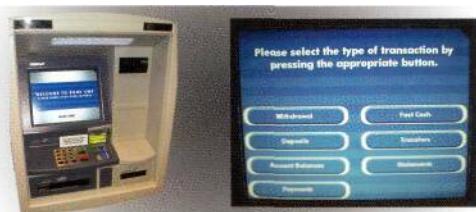


The challenge for every brand is to consistently deliver on the brand promise and have font and typographic guidelines that address all the places customers "touch" your brand.

Leveraging the personality of a brand's fonts in the UI is a recent phenomenon. Historically UI screens have been of such low quality that font decisions were left to engineers. Moore's Law observed that the number of transistors would double every few years, thus improving speed and quality while lowering costs. Everything from handheld devices to stadium entertainment systems have benefited from this trend. Pretty soon you'll be saying "remember those mobile phones with coarse black-and-white displays?" The bitmap fonts on these devices are typically a non-descript sans serif and often were very jagged-looking. But on today's handheld displays we have vibrant colors, high-resolution displays and the functionality of a desktop PC, including scalable fonts.

### From bitmap to scalable fonts

The change from bitmap to scalable font formats opens a



Today's ATMs feature colorful, high-quality screens and have the ability to display sophisticated graphics and the same fonts we use on our personal computers, thus giving brand managers another avenue to extend their brand.

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world of creativity and flexibility to UI designers. Aside from the ability to use fonts in various sizes, a much larger palette of retail and custom fonts can be used to select from and many more languages can be supported. Behind every UI screen is an operating system driving the display. There are a wide range of open and proprietary systems in today's devices, including ones from Blackberry, Palm, Microsoft and Sun. While Type I (and now PostScript-OpenType) remains the font choice for creative professionals, TrueType has long been the dominant font format for home and office computers. And now TrueType is becoming widely used in devices with higher-quality UI screens.

Unfortunately, it may be that technology has advanced quicker than the branding teams at many companies. There are many devices on the market with high-quality screens that have bland UI fonts or designs that don't reflect or resonate the brand. Let's hope companies will correct this lost opportunity in future versions of their UI.

One example is the Apple iPod. The original iPods had a low-resolution monochrome display. The font used was Chicago, from the old Mac OS. The iPod Photo has a higher-quality color screen and the UI font appears to be more like

Apple's branding font, Myriad, than it does Lucida Grande, which is the UI font in Mac OS X. Lucida Grande and Myriad are slightly different sans serif designs.



The original iPods have very low-resolution monochrome screens. They used the "Chicago" font reminiscent of the old Mac OS systems. The iPod Photo uses a higher-resolution color screen. This allowed Apple to use the "Myriad" font which is part of Apple's branding system. Now the type on the screen reinforces the type on the packaging, advertising and other touchpoints to resonate Apple's brand.

## Branding font considerations

Implementing brand fonts in a UI has many considerations: type design and licensing issues, font formats, screen display resolution, screen technology and language support. Fonts

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can seem so simple on the surface, but when you peel away the layers and dig deeper, you find many issues that can be problematic if not addressed.

## Type design and licensing issues

Since most companies and products have established brands and typographic systems, the existing fonts must be considered for implementation in the UI. Fonts licensed from retail type foundries are governed by software licenses that typically restrict their use to five personal computers. You need to purchase a multi-user license to deploy your brand fonts throughout your company. More importantly, you can't copy the fonts into your products for use in the UI without negotiating a separate license.

The alternative to retail fonts is to have custom fonts designed for your exclusive use. In the past, this tended to be afforded by only the largest multi-national companies. But now it can be more cost effective to have custom fonts developed if you have more than 20,000 users, or if you want to deploy the fonts in the UI of your products. Custom fonts allow a brand to achieve its desired personality without the constraints and restrictions of retail fonts, and provide the flexibility to use and distribute the fonts as desired.

## Font formats

Today's branding fonts must address a wide variety of formats. The introduction of scalable, outline font technology has not rendered bitmap fonts obsolete. There are still many devices that use monochrome or lower-resolution displays. Bitmap fonts are very economical on system resources, especially when only a few sizes or styles are used, but creating a bitmap requires care and expertise to achieve optimal legibility.

PostScript Type 1 format remains the preferred choice for creative professionals while TrueType is dominant in home and office computing systems. OpenType is quickly gaining traction as the font format of the future. What is OpenType? Think of it as the best of Type I and TrueType: a single font file that can be used on both Mac and Windows systems with an architecture that allows for extensive typographic and multilingual character sets. To take full advantage of OpenType "Pro" fonts, you need the latest operating systems and application software such as Adobe's Creative Suite or the upcoming QuarkXPress 7.0.

## Screen display technology

There is only so much you can do typographically on a screen that is a tad larger than a postage stamp. Luckily technology is rapidly advancing and the UI screens on products from handheld devices to consumer appliances are becoming larger, more colorful and of higher quality. This increase in real estate and

resolution has a dramatic impact on the options available for the UI fonts.

The screens in mobile phones have evolved from monochrome to grayscale to color, and the sizes and resolutions are increasing as well. The technologies used to render fonts on these screens keep improving. Just as creative professionals have grown accustomed to Adobe Type Manager to render Type 1 fonts on screen, there are a variety of technologies used to make type look good on different systems. Anti-aliasing is a common technique used to smooth the appearance of letterforms on grayscale and color displays. For color LCD screens subpixel rendering, such as Microsoft's ClearType, enhances the rendering of text by manipulating the RGB pixels.



Handheld devices such as PDAs and mobile phones are rapidly evolving from monochrome to color with higher-quality screens. This makes the font choice in the UI even more important. Who decides what font is used—the product engineers, product managers or the brand champions?

The impact of technology on the user and brand experience can be seen through the evolution of mobile phone screens. Early models of mobile phones were like first generation Pong games compared to the PS2 and Xbox games we have today. Another example of improvements in screen technology is seen in the Palm Pilot: the original screens were monochrome 160 x 160 pixel resolution. Now they feature twice the resolution and color. Advances in LCD, OLED and "e-paper" screen technology will continue this trend toward higher-quality displays on consumer devices.

## Language support

We live in a very connected world and brands are more global than ever before. This is increasing the demands on branding fonts to address the various languages and scripts where the brand or product is marketed. The bad news is that most retail fonts only have basic Latin-1 character sets, but the good news is that many fonts are coming to market with expanded character sets. OpenType supports the Unicode standard which enables type designers and software

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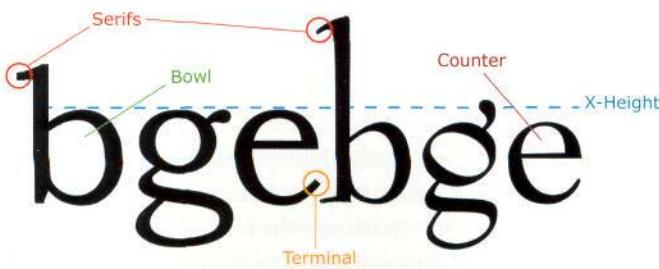
Microsoft commissioned a custom font for its branding system. Segoe was designed to address the wide variety of uses, from computer screens to signage, and the many languages and scripts around the globe where the Microsoft brand is used.

developers to create comprehensive fonts that can address these language and script challenges.

Many global brands have invested in creating character set extensions to their corporate fonts. Microsoft created the WGL4 character set to help companies doing business in Europe to support Western, Central and Eastern European communities. WGL4 fonts have 652 characters for Greek, Cyrillic, Turkish and Baltic in addition to the base Roman characters. Having a single font with all these characters is possible with OpenType, unlike the cumbersome Type 1 format which required numerous separate font files. Some OpenType "Pro" fonts from Adobe also contain Greek and Cyrillic to support Central and Eastern European character sets.

## UI font considerations

One of the first considerations for a UI font is the type design itself. Many fonts in the arsenal of creative professionals were designed for the print environment and do not render well on low-resolution screens. Type that displays the best on screen will typically have the following attri-



Characteristics of letterforms

butes: consistent color and contrast; economical width; large x-height; open counters and bowls; and shortened terminals.

The debate of a serif vs. sans serif type becomes less of an issue with higher-resolution display screens. But on low-resolution screens the limited amount of pixels to display a character makes a big difference. Thus sans serif designs will probably remain popular because of the need to support legacy environments.

When corporate typefaces are adapted to the UI there inevitably are some modifications that

must be made to the type design to address small sizes or low-resolution screens. In the case of Apple's Myriad or Microsoft's Segoe, the UI fonts have subtle differences from their print versions to improve their readability on-screen. Whether starting from scratch or with an existing typeface originally designed for print environments, all the attributes of the font as defined above should be considered. This may require either minor or extensive work to improve font display in challenging UI display environments.

## Summary

In his book *The Brand Gap*, Marty Neumeier states, "A brand is a person's gut feeling about a product, service or company. It's not what you say it is. It's what THEY say it is." The most successful brands have a distinctive personality and they use type as part of their visual identity. Because of the expressive nature of fonts, they are very powerful tools when used effectively. The evolution of screen display technology is making it much easier for the branding fonts to be implemented in the UI of a company's products, and thus turn the product into powerful touchpoints that reinforce how customers perceive the brand.

Brand managers must harness the potential of migrating their brand identity, including the fonts, inside their products. With high-quality color screens becoming commonplace in almost every consumer device, the UI becomes a very compelling environment in which to extend and promote the brand. Creating high quality, legible fonts for the UI requires a combination of typographic design and software development expertise, as there are many technical and aesthetic issues which are unique to every product. The most successful brands and products in the marketplace will be those that understand and embrace the potential of the UI as a brand touchpoint. **CA**