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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, Univers 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.

▼ **1**

Hausschrift AEG
Hausschrift BASF
Hausschrift Bayer
Hausschrift BMW
Hausschrift Bundesbahn
Hausschrift Bundespost
Hausschrift Daimler Benz
Hausschrift Lufthansa
Hausschrift Nixdorf
Hausschrift Siemens
Hausschrift Sparkasse

▼ **6**

H bauen 15

▼ **7**

rr rrr

▼ **2**

Hamburg
Hamburg

▼ **5**

bauen
bauen
bauen

▼ **3**

d 45
g a

▼ **4**

nab
nab