

Helvetica

"If you do it right, it will last forever."
– Massimo Vignelli

Typography is all around us, guiding us through corridors, or subliminally suggesting the next must-have product. Of all typefaces in existence, Helvetica is probably the most pervasive and well known. Its popularity has been a question to many. Some claim it was due to brilliant design, while others suggests it was pure luck and the public's bad taste. Regardless of one's opinion, Helvetica's history mirrored the development of our own cultural aesthetic and its use and non-use reflected the zeitgeist of each period. Helvetica's unyielding persistence seems to indicate that some hidden factor within its clean and modernist design resonates with the general public, and will probably remain with us for years to come.

Helvetica was developed in 1957 by Max Miedinger with Eduard Hoffmann at the Haas'sche Schriftgiesserei (Haas Type Foundry) of Münchenstein, Switzerland (Miedinger n.d.). The goal of the new design was to develop a new sans-serif typeface that could compete with the successful Akzidenz-Grotesk in the Swiss market (Miedinger n.d.). Helvetica was originally called Die Neue Haas Grotesk, and was closely based on Schelter-Grotesk (Miedinger n.d.). It was created specifically to be neutral, to not give any impression or have any meaning in itself. This neutrality was paramount, and based on the idea that type itself should give no meaning (Hustwit 2007).

When it was first introduced, Helvetica was considered an extremely progressive and modern typeface. It was flexible and could



1 - Negative Space

be used in many scenarios, as long as it followed the structures defined by the International Style. Helvetica design was primarily concerned with balance (Matthew 2013). It had an even stroke and regular letter width to try to maintain regularity (Matthew 2013). It also tried to minimize the difference between curves and straight lines because it wanted the space between the letters to feel regulated and even (Matthew 2013). Typically, curves of a perfect circle would pull away from the edge, creating more volatile negative space. The squared off curves of Helvetica make the transition to negative space a lot less harsh. The overall effect of this is to make the curved sides feel more like straight lines (Matthew 2013).



2 – Helvetica’s Spacing

The ultimate purpose of squaring off the round sides in Helvetica was to create a font where the space between round characters feels the same as the space between straight-sided characters (Matthew 2013). The negative space in the DOHI is more even than the space between the geometric shapes. As a result, the letters feel like a single unit, rather than a series of shapes (Matthew 2013).



3 – Grid Design

At Helvetica's core was the typographic grid, which was built as a flexible system to help designers achieve coherency in organizing the page (Matthew 2013). The seminal work on the subject, *Grid systems in graphic design* by Müller-Brockmann, helped propagate the use of the grid and the International Style, first in Europe, and later in North America. In addition to the straightened sides, all of the finials in

Helvetica have horizontal ends. The lowercase letters also use the same squared-rounds and horizontal finials in their construction (Matthew 2013). The tittles (dots) are also square rather than round (Matthew 2013).

Helvetica appeared to be the eventuality of the Swiss style and the modernist school of thought. Although it was designed with readability and legibility in mind, its eventual popularity would cause it to evolve into a cultural juggernaut not even their original inventors could comprehend. When Linotype initially adopted Neue Haas Grotesk, its design was reworked (Miedinger n.d.). After the success of Univers, Arthur Ritzel of Stempel redesigned Neue Haas Grotesk into a larger family (Miedinger n.d.). In 1960, the typeface's name was changed by Haas' German parent company Stempel to Helvetica in order to make it more marketable internationally (Miedinger n.d.). It didn't quite catch on at first, since the International Typographic Style was not easy to appreciate (Shinn n.d.). The use of asymmetric layouts and grid-designs were an acquired taste that required an educated design profession with savvy clients (Shinn n.d.). What made Helvetica eventually take on was the emergence in the post-war years of design schools throughout the western world based on the Bauhaus model (Shinn n.d.). Within that school, Helvetica was the house typeface of the International Style,



4- Coca-Cola ad from the 1950's

which was the foundation for a system of logic that was more teachable and eminently more applicable to corporate identities.



5 – Crate&Barrel logo

Helvetica would eventually become a national brand, an identity for the popular "Swiss style" of typography. From BMW, Bayer and Lufthansa in Germany, the Helvetica look spread to Bank of America, Knoll, Panasonic, Target, Crate&Barrel, JC Penney, Mattel, American Airlines, Sears, Microsoft and other corporations. It provided a safe haven for designers to leave the hectic, over stylized and visually overpowering advertisements of the 50's. Change your brand to Helvetica, and your company would be reborn sophisticated, and ready for the modern age.

Helvetica was the perfect typeface for corporations. It was neutral and efficient. The smoothness of the type made it seem



6 – Coca-Cola ad from the 1960's

human and endearing. Helvetica's grid-style and cleanliness created the perfect balance of push and pull. It conveyed the sense that your company was accessible, transparent and accountable (Hustwit 2007). These were all traits the modern corporation wanted in their consumer's eyes. The lull of Helvetica's figure/ground spacing reassured us that the problems that threatened to spill over from our lives are being contained. The font was 'clean', with no little extra strokes and accentuations. This cleanliness implied trust. (Savan 1994)

"You're offering a very nice courtesy to the general public who is bombarded with many messages everyday. And for a company not well-known, to ask the public to memorize more symbols... is fantasy" - Ray Poelvoorde, L&M VP (Savan 1994)

In a sense, the corporate migration towards Helvetica signaled a changing of the times. With the Swinging Sixties, came a sense of euphoria and optimism. With modes of production steadily improving, consumers demanded more from their products. The locus of the current economy was shifting, from that of the tangible products that of information and brand identity. Consumer attention was slowly becoming the new currency of trade, and the transition to a new attention-based economy had just begun. Helvetica would somehow be the new typeface to carry us into this new information age.



7 – MTA Signage

Companies couldn't afford many identity changes, so they would pick a typeface that would appear modern the longest. (Savan

1994) As more designers and corporations chose to use Helvetica, it bred the notion that it was somehow a default choice. If you wanted to appear modern, it had to be Helvetica.

 Department of the Treasury Internal Revenue Service	
(99) IRS Use Only—Do not write or staple in this space.	
Ending	, 20
OMB No. 1545-0074	
Your social security number	
Spouse's social security number	

8 – IRA Tax Form

Even the MTA used Helvetica. The crisply lettered signs lent them a sense of authority. They assured us that the train would come and diminish the chaos created by the graffiti-scrawled walls. (Savan 1994) Vignelli, chief designer of the MTA graphic system had even developed a system of "symbol signs" intended to standardize all sign systems around the world. These symbol signs were just simple silhouetted pictures, often with some form of textual support. Although the standard did not specify a specific type, it often deemed one typeface as "legible, aesthetic and compatible": Helvetica.

Governments and corporations relied on Helvetica because it makes them appear neutral and efficient, partly because its smoothness makes it seem human. (Savan 1994) NASA used it on their space shuttles, and the EPA had it on their logo (Savan 1994). Even the US tax returns used Helvetica. It seemed in their effort to gain our attention, the market forces of the new attention economy pushed everyone to use Helvetica.



9 – Government Signage in Helvetica

As with any design, Helvetica would succumb to the law of diminishing returns. As its usage became more and more prevalent, it gained notoriety as being dull and overused. By the late 70's it had lost all its value in the typographic and graphic design community. Helvetica was seen as part of a psychological enslavement. It was a subconscious plot: getting people to do think and say what you want. Helvetica eased us through mental corridors. (Savan 1994) Signs in Helvetica greeted us at all points of decisions. Helvetica lubricated our grooves of thought and taste. Helvetica toned down offensive messages. When you saw it, you perceived order. (Savan 1994) With order, you would have conformity and oppression. Helvetica had to go.

With the advent of the Vietnam War and the post-modernist movement, artists were looking to express their own subjectivity and opinions through their graphic designs. The general sentiment of the times was to rebel against the regime of corporate greed and unjust government oppression. Helvetica, with its rigid grid style and smooth corporate persona had to be thrown to the wayside. Designers like Carson shattered "the Modernist grid [that subverted] the personality of the designer to the primacy of the corporate." This meant eliminating the nice, the clean, and the readable in favor of scattered headlines and illegible text across overlapping photos.



10 – "Don't mistake legibility for communication" - David Carson

Even with the rejection of Helvetica by the postmodernists, its popularity persisted. The arrival of the personal computer propelled Helvetica's popularity even further and put it to the forefront of modern design and typography. In the early '80s when Adobe developed the PostScript page

description language, it was no surprise that they chose Helvetica as one of the basic four fonts. By the late 80's, desktop publishing came into full swing. Apple's LaserWriter featured Times and Helvetica as the core of their font selection. In the late '90s Microsoft was selling a million copies of Word each month and gave away 14 fonts with its program along with its knock-off of Helvetica called Arial. Again, the early proliferation of the Internet was also dependent on the massive free distribution of the Microsoft Core Web Truetype fonts, bundled with Explorer. Times and Helvetica were again front and center, set as the default fonts available to the users. With only such a small pool of fonts to pick from, there was a visual blight of Times, Helvetica and Palatino in the early days of digital publishing. Helvetica's tight grip on the typographical world would not let go.



11 – Arial vs Helvetica

Helvetica was the perfect fit for the digital age. Helvetica's and its large family of imitators, in particular the very lightweights, gave it a great digital appeal. The ease with which a high-resolution workflow handled type of finer detail sparked a renewed interest in the san-serif fonts. Ironically, even with the advancement of production and digital technologies, we have settled with the defaults presented to us. Just like how ornament continues to reemerge from the ashes of modernism and the Bauhaus, Helvetica has survived the post-modernists and their fight against conformity.

Helvetica has found new life in a generation of new and bold designers. With the help of new digital technologies, Helvetica is being used in new and innovative ways, no longer restricted by physical limitations. A prime example is “Experimental Jetset” a graphic design collective from the Netherlands, who uses Helvetica predominantly in their designs. They explain that finding new typefaces is time-consuming and frankly, extremely difficult (Hustwit 2007). Helvetica, being a somewhat established font, was sufficient and it wasn’t really needed to find something else. They weren’t against the school of post-modernism, and their new modes of experimentation. They were just experimenting with Helvetica.

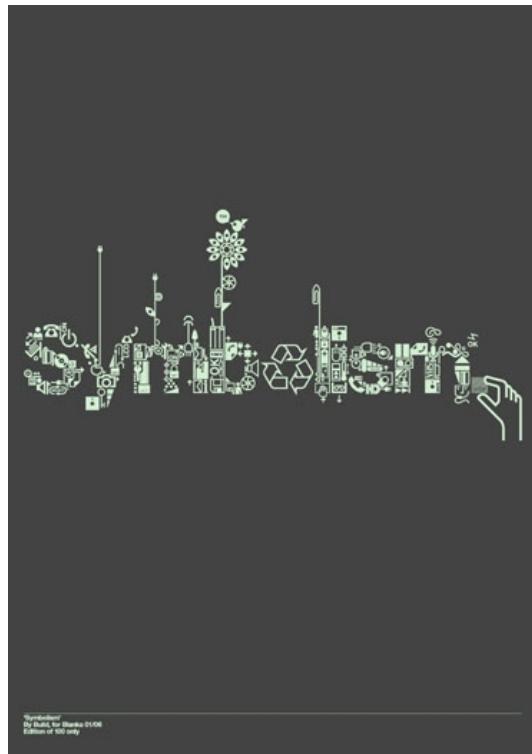


12 – Experimental Jetset Exhibit

Helvetica has continued to thrive despite the reactions against it and what it stood for. Part of the reason for this is that it now stands for something completely different of its original intentions. It is now not only the vehicle of conformity, but also the messenger of nonconformity. Billboards, posters, and other platforms are using Helvetica to spread messages of individualism, crisply and clearly. Why not communicate the ideas of post-modernism with the relentless efficiency afforded by modernism as Experimental Jetset has done? Perhaps there is something more to Helvetica than its clean and grid-based design. Its persistence seems to indicate some underlying factor that resonates with our human psyche. Helvetica has absorbed

the cultural and societal values that propelled it into prominence and sunk it into artistic purgatory. It has become intrinsically tied to its sign value and has evolved into a cultural object well beyond its original designs. Helvetica has showed us that the designed object transcends beyond its pure functional form. It’s sign value and its interaction with society and other objects defines it more than its original design and functional form. Perhaps Baudrillard was correct, in that the object no longer has much meaning except for its relations within a system of objects. Helvetica is nothing without its history and cultural links with advertisement and corporate conformity.

What is in the future for Helvetica? Will it continue to be the poster child for modernism and conformity? Will it become the new tool for post-modernists and new designers to fight against structuralism and regulation? It is hard to say, but Helvetica will probably persist in our cultural mindset for years to come.



13 – Symbolism - Michael C. Place

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