Choosing the Right Type Translates into Cash for Your Cause

Don't leave it to chance. Your choice of typeface will affect your bottom line.

BY THOMAS K. KELLER

"I've got bigger fish to fry," thinks a charity administrator when asked if the typeface used in a fundraising piece is okay. "Besides, this is basic stuff. Surely the graphics people know what works best."

Does It Really Make a Difference?

If the final printed piece looks good, how much difference can the choice of one typeface over another really make? The difference was *half a million dollars* in a recent nationwide test mailing done by the Disabled American Veterans (DAV).[1] As that single fact shows, typography can be bottom-line stuff.

Choosing a typeface may be basic, but some art directors may unintentionally be robbing charities of needed dollars by following their personal tastes. According to the DAV's experience, good type selection matters. It's vital for managers to pay attention to the typefaces used in fundraising letters, brochures, case statements, and other communications with donors.

With an active contributor file exceeding eight million names, the DAV has a donor universe large enough to justify extensive market research. The organization tracks how contributors react to many factors in direct-mail fundraising. Market testing includes graphics, colors, copy approaches, copy length, package components, stamping methods, and just about anything else a fundraising package designer could imagine. The results of all that testing tell the DAV exactly how many dollars and cents each package component adds to or subtracts from response rates and average gift size.

Few charities have a universe large enough to do such extensive testing. So they may want to look at what the DAV has learned.

To Serif or Not to Serif: That's the Big Question

With the DAV's enthusiasm for market research, it's no surprise that this large charity ignored graphics professionals' pontification concerning serif vs. sanserif type. Instead, the organization subjected the controversy to market testing.

Oh yes, some may be wondering what serif and sanserif typefaces are. Serifs are the little lines extending from the angles of letters in most type styles (as in the words in this article, for instance). Sanserif typefaces don't have those little lines. (For example, the title of this article is sanserif.) The last half century has seen a proliferation of sanserif faces, which many graphics professionals see as more aesthetically pleasing.

So, what did DAV's testing show? Contrary to what many graphics professionals claim, the results are clear: Sanserif faces rarely win out in market tests. The strong winners, consistently, are serif faces—and that includes the recent DAV mailing in which typeface alone boosted bottom-line results by nearly $500,000. That the use of serifs could make so much difference is a sobering thought at the end of a century that has frequently defined its spirit in the clean lines of sanserif type.

There's a reason why those old serifed standards—the great families of Caslon, Garamond, Century and Bodoni—have become classics. They work. In the world of typography, they're the survivors of the evolutionary process. (This article, by the way, is set in Century.)

Those faces are also very expressive. They have personality. Their forms, shapes, and letter heights can support a message in clear, understandable ways. Century Schoolbook has an elegant simplicity that has seldom been matched, an elegance that Goudy takes a step further. What about the dignified presence of Bookman, or the fundamental work-a-day utility of Times Roman?

Adjectives like those simply don't apply to many of the crisp modern faces. The most important of those faces, Helvetica, is based on an aesthetic that has little if anything to do with personality. As we consider the longevity and durable popularity of those old standards, though, let's not forget that Helvetica has itself become a classic since its introduction during the 1950s; so has another oft-chosen sanserif, Universe.[2] Further, remember that we said sanserif faces *rarely* win in DAV market testing; we didn't say they never win.

Also, while DAV's testing reveals *what* is working, it remains silent on the question of *why* it's working. Others who've considered the serif-vs.-sanserif question over the past half century, however, have taken up that question. One study concludes that "the neurological structure of the human visual system benefits from serifs in the preservation of the main features of letters."[3] In citing this research, Rolfe F. Rehe notes, "Since words are perceived by their outline shape, single letters with serifs, having a

CREATIVE FUNDRAISING IDEAS

Have a Theme

Even when dealing with complex or global issues, you will raise more money and create more interest if your fundraiser has a specific focus. Don't just hold a run or walk. Have a theme. Examples: Run So Youngsters Can Play (theme—to purchase new playground equipment), Walk So Fish Can Swim (theme—to purchase a new aquarium for the sea life center). You now have your theme from which to launch your event, and one that will greatly appeal to potential donors.

Play on Words

If your event is an auction, use plays on words to create a mental image of how participants' funds will be used. Examples:

Bid for the Cure (focus—on a particular disease needing funds for research); Bid for the Babies (focus—on the need to enlarge a nursery wing at the local hospital); Arts for Smarts (focus—on funds to build an education wing at a university). For details on these and other creative fundraising ideas, see *The Fundraising Manual*. To order, see page 26 of this issue.

Look for the Hook

Help donors visualize how their contributions will be used. Never hold a fundraising event simply to "raise funds" for your organization. Make your request as specific as possible. For example, suppose your singing troupe needs new uniforms. If you simply appeal for funds for uniforms, you may get some donations. But if the singing troupe were performing at a local hospital in a particular wing during the hospital season, you now have your "hook."

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more distinctive outline shape over sans-serif letters, may also be more easily perceptible than sans-serif letters."[4]

Such explanations have a plausibility. In the end, though, the question designers must answer as they place the morning's first cup of coffee next to their computer screen is this: "What typographic approach will work best for the donors we're approaching today?" The answer to that question will always involve a whole lot of art and, if it's available, a little bit of science. And that little bit of science should never be sacrificed to some higher aesthetic, because our first goal is always fundraising effectiveness. Remember the words of former NCR Corporation advertising director Roy J. Ljungren: "It's not creative if it doesn't sell!"

Applying the science of statistics, the DAV has gained a clear picture of what works for the audiences it addresses in its fundraising mailings, and science is helping the organization refine that picture on an ongoing basis. The DAV's findings strongly support the conventional wisdom that serif faces are, as a rule, more legible and effective than sanserif faces.

Even so, it's still a question: To serif or not to serif. Even if the DAV's research results do corroborate what most graphic arts professionals believe in their hearts, those results are still specific to a given donor audience and its sub-markets. Be forewarned that they may not apply to another donor audience, perhaps one very different from the DAV's donors.

So What Should You Do?

In the absence of research similar to the DAV's, you might want to depend on conventional wisdom in approaching an audience with unknown visual biases. Then again, you might want to follow the legion of designers who have turned to Helvetica over the past 40-plus years, putting their faith in a typeface that seems incapable of contradicting the tone of any copy message, bar none.

A better approach, however, might be to look at what you can learn about the visual biases that exist in your market. A designer working on a brochure might, for example, check out the experience of others who have specified type for the same organization, asking what faces they've used and why. You might also want to take a look at what's working for other nonprofits in your field. What typefaces are others finding successful in approaching the same donors or donors who are very similar?

In any event, don't take typestyles for granted if you want to maximize the results of your message. Selecting a typeface is a dollar-based decision. ■

Footnotes

[1] In-house DAV market testing concluded in 1996, currently in roll-out to the DAV's entire donor market.

[2] See *Typographic Design: Form and Communication* by Rob Carter, Ben Day, and Philip Meges, Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, New York, N.Y., 1985. p. 173.

[3] "Why Serifs Are Important: The Perception of Small Print," by D.O. Robinson and M. Abbamonte, in *Visible Language*, 4, Autumn 1971, pp. 353-359.

[4] *Typography: How to Make It Most Legible*, by Rolfe F. Rehe, Design Research International, Carmel, Ind., 1984, p. 32.

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These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center. For ordering information, see the Society's *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue, or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).

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