Match the font to the task

Don't hammer that bolt—hand me the wrench

By Chuck Davis

Choosing the correct font can be an over-whelming task for the professional designer. When faced with an ever-growing list of fonts to choose from, one might simply throw up their hands and resort to standard typefaces such as Helvetica or Times Roman.

But wait! Every font has its own persona. Every font is a tool in its own right. Helvetica (yes, even Helvetica) has its rightful place. Let's call Helvetica the "hammer" in our toolbox of fonts. When presented with a design that calls for a screwdriver, would it be wise to use a hammer? When it comes time to turn a bolt, would a hammer suffice? You probably could hammer a bolt and budge it a bit, but it's not going to be a pretty sight and the hammer would not do as good a job as a wrench. (I can send you photos of my own home improvement projects to prove it.)

What's wrong with compressing?

Compressing a font is something typically done in an effort to retain the height of the message, but also to make it fit into a confined area (one where it don't wanna go). Sometimes this can be an attempt to appease the overbearing customer who exclaims, "Make it bigger!"

So what's so wrong with compressing a font anyway? Nothing. Nothing is wrong with compressing (or stretching) a font within its capacity. The problem arises when a font has been compressed beyond its ability to retain a pleasing and readable effect. Pleasing and readable—these two subjective terms illustrate the necessity for brutal honesty and self-awareness in a designer. (I smell another article here.)

The question is, where is the cutoff point? How do I know how much stretching or compressing I can do to a font? Much depends on the font itself. Generally speaking, though, if you can tell that the font has been stretched or compressed—you've overdone it.
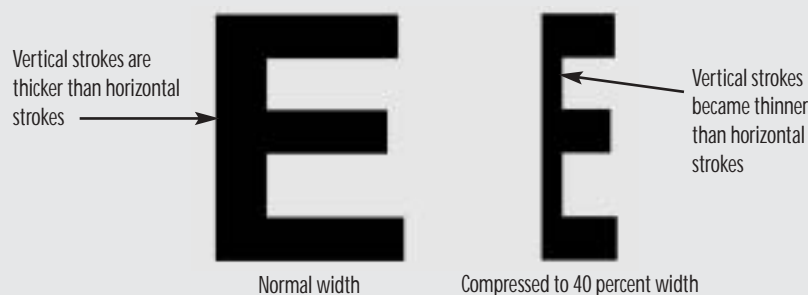
But there are concrete results we can point to when examining a letter to see if it's been compressed or stretched too much. One is a careful comparison of the vertical and horizontal strokes. Take the Helvetica E for example. In its natural state, the Helvetica E contains vertical (down) strokes that are thicker than its horizontal strokes. The reason for this design (in my opinion) is to improve readability. If the horizontal strokes were as thick as the vertical strokes, the cross strokes (which are crucial to defining this letter as an E) would not be as visible and the letter would appear as a solid block from a distance.

Another reason could be that traditionally, roman letters have always been slightly thinner on the horizontal strokes. Therefore, the eye expects that shape in order to help it tell the brain that this letter is an E.

Yet another reason could be that the thinner cross strokes serve to lead the eye through the message. Compare the compressed *Free Bagel* design on page 58 with the bottom one and you'll see what I mean. Whatever the reason, we can see that the compressed text is not as readable as the design that has not been compressed. When you compress a font beyond its ability, you've hindered readability. With signs, readability is usually crucial.

Choosing a font is like choosing a tool. So

Compressing Helvetica Bold can distort the letters and hurt legibility

Vertical strokes are thicker than horizontal strokes

Vertical strokes became thinner than horizontal strokes

Normal width

Compressed to 40 percent width

how do we choose the right tool for the job?

Digging through the toolbox   When you look through your list of 1000-plus fonts, it can be hard to know where to start. I believe examining the area you have to work with and categorizing it as a "horizontal" or "vertical" format is a good starting point. Once you have determined the shape of your area, you are free to choose a font that matches that shape.

For example, say your message is *Free Bagel* and your area size is 2½ by 8 ft. You could try using Helvetica for your message, but that doesn't really cut it. As the first example on the following page shows, it leaves awkward spaces above and below the message, and the letters aren't very big or bold.

You could compress the font to better take up the space above and below. This certainly makes the letters bigger. But are they readable? A better solution would be to select a compressed font (tool) that has been designed specifically for this purpose. In this case I've chosen Swiss Ultra Compressed. The letters are bold enough to attract the eye, yet readable. It's interesting to note that even in this compressed state, the E contains thinner horizontal strokes since the original designer of the font created it that way on purpose. Compare this with the Helvetica Bold example at left.

To stretch or not to stretch   Say you have a very long area to fill with a short message. In the *Humanist* example at the top of page 59, you can see stretching (extending) a font to fit a space can also cause a loss of legibility. The horizontal strokes have become much too thin—to the point of almost disappearing if you're flying down the road at 50 mph. It isn't as quickly read as the Microgramma version, which better fills the area.

Microgramma is a bolder font and has been designed to fill spaces like this. It attracts the eye better because of its bold strokes, but is also more readable than the

The right font fits naturally in the format

FREE BAGEL

Using Helvetica Bold at 100 percent doesn't utilize sign area well and creates awkward space above and below message.

FREE BAGEL

Inevitably when presented with the first design, the customer exclaims, "Make it bigger!" But is stretching the font the answer to the problem?

FREE BAGEL

Changing the font to Swiss Ultra Compressed allows the message to fill the area more logically.

Humanist version. This is not to say that you can't stretch a font a little to better suit your needs. In this example you may notice I used Humanist instead of Helvetica. I did this because, quite frankly, Helvetica looked too good when stretched and I wanted to better illustrate the point. It seems Helvetica can take stretching better than compressing. But this also can be taken too far.

MicrIogramma can tolerate quite a bit

Extending a font can also compromise readability

Horizontal strikes too thin, does not read easily

"A" is now noticeably wider than other letters

"G" is too wide

FREE BAGEL

Humanist stretched to 200 percent width

FREE BAGEL

of horizontal stretching. I have on occasion stretched Microgramma nearly 200 percent and it retains its readability and boldness. This is due mostly to the fact that the characters do not contain any round portions (save for the corners) that would give it away as having been stretched.

The G in the Humanist example is a dead giveaway the font has indeed been stretched. Originally the G was carefully designed so that it appeared balanced when placed next to other characters. To accomplish this, the designer thickened the curved portion and widened the character a bit. Stretching it to this extreme completely destroys the careful balance the designer placed into the G and subsequently the rest of the message. Can you say, "Hammering a bolt?"

Stretching any letter horizontally always thickens the vertical strokes while thinning the horizontal strokes (and of course makes the character appear wider). Compressing a letter has just the opposite effect. Compressing always thickens the horizontal strokes while thinning the vertical strokes.

It stands to reason then that the more uniform strokes a letter has (that is with horizontal and vertical strokes of similar thickness), the more it can tolerate being stretched or compressed. For this reason Microgramma, with its nearly uniform strokes, is a good candidate for stretching horizontally. In fact, in my opinion, it looks better stretched. It contains no round strokes (except for the corners, which are the giveaway to over-

stretching). And the letters are nearly of the same width, so stretching doesn't enhance one character over another. The same goes for Swiss Ultra Compressed and fonts like it.

Most scripts can also be manipulated to great degrees, but then scripts are another category entirely. Their hand-lettered appearance enables them to get away with more and thus the flaws are more easily overlooked.

Go ahead: play with type   Having said all this, I find myself stretching more than compressing since stretching thickens the vertical strokes while thinning the horizontals. It seems the eye is more comfortable with this pattern. (See my half-baked theories above.) Anyone who says no font should ever be manipulated is not fully exploring the creative possibilities available to them.

By all means stretch it, compress it, twist it, turn it. I am always pleasantly surprised when we create a font and see how others have stretched or compressed it and how that actually improved its appearance. While in your virtual workshop (staying with my "tools" theme), don't be afraid to try all the tools at your disposal; it's the product that goes through your doors that matters. •SC

Chuck Davis is the founder of Letterhead Fonts [www.letterheadfonts.com] and lives in Palmdale, California. He can be reached at support@letterheadfonts.com.