Stop Stealing Sheep and Find Out How Type Works (Graphic Design & Visual Communication Courses)

By Erik Spiekermann

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In this third edition, acclaimed type designer Erik Spiekermann brings his type classic fully up to date on mobile and web typography. He also includes scores of new visual examples on how to effectively communicate with type and a full selection of new typefaces that are used and referenced throughout the book.

If you use type — and these days, almost everyone does — Spiekermann's engaging, common-sense style will help you understand how to look at type, work with type, choose the best typeface for your message, and express yourself more effectively through design. Compact, yet rich with anecdotes and visual examples, the handbook's multilayered design not only makes for a fun, fast read; it also invites exploration, ensuring you learn something new each and every time you open it up.

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Stop Stealing Sheep and Find Out How Type Works (Graphic Design & Visual Communication Courses) By Erik Spiekermann Bibliography

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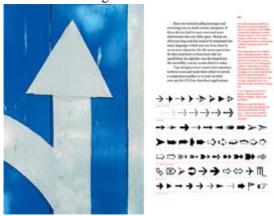
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A Q&A with Erik Spiekermann

How did you first become interested in typography?

A printer in our neighbourhood gave me a small tabletop platen press and some type when I was 12.

Do you have a favorite typeface? Which one is it and why?

Historically it would be Berthold's Block, because that was the first one I ever looked at closely and later redrew one of its variants as one of my first excursions into typedesign. But my favourite typeface of the day is the one that works really well for a project, whether it's designed by myself or by one of my colleagues. It helps that I am friends with a lot of type designers, so using their faces is also very personal.

Your book, *Stop Stealing Sheep*, is celebrating its 20th anniversary. How has the design world changed over the past 20 years?

Do we have 500 pages and doesn't everybody know the answer? Seriously, that is too big a question to answer in one paragraph. The good news is that design becomes ever more important as the world grows more complex. Designers are interpreters: we need to translate the world to people by making complex issues and processes visible.

Your book is now available in its 3rd edition. What new information will your readers learn in this edition?

Type is read on screen as well as on paper. We have new technologies and type has always adapted to technology. Choosing the right type hasn't become any easier, so a few new conditions and rules are explained.

Your book isn't a tutorial on typeface, but rather an invigorating jaunt filled with history, examples, and opinions. Whom did you write the book for?

The original brief from Adobe back in 1992 was, (in their words, not mine) the "average secretary" who now had type at her fingertips.

Which companies do you feel make the best design and typeface choices?

Those that are aware of their true message, know who their public is, listen to outside experts and are not afraid to go out and try something new. Bullshit has never been a good adviser.

What's a good example of a company or product using the *wrong* typeface?

All those that hide behind well-tried, popular choices without considering the actual situation, the readership, the intended impression. I think Apple could do better than using Helvetica which is neither original nor suited to small screens.

What elements do you consider when making a typeface decision?

Tone of voice, languages that need to be used, technical constraints, readership, cultural constraints (i.e. particular reading habits), the media involved, the budget...

You were quoted in the Design Council as saying that the staff of The Economist were "the best clients I've ever had." What makes a good client and how does this help you as a designer? What can a designer or agency do to help create good clients?

Not take part in pitches (my company, Edenspiekermann, does not do pitches), listen carefully (which you cannot do within a pitch situation), have an opinion and not be afraid to voice it, do your homework, avoid doing things because they're "in", don't perform for your peers. Be honest, learn to say no, consider yourself a partner and not a vendor. And don't be afraid to ask for proper payment for the value you create.

You were a signatory on the *First Things First 2000: A Design Manifesto*, which proposes "a reversal of priorities in favor of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication - a mindshift away from product marketing and toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning." How have you incorporated the tenets of the manifesto into your work as a designer?

We have published our own manifesto and we will not work for clients whose aims we do not agree with. But that has to do mainly with their attitude, not their products. I call it the "asshole rule": we do not work for assholes, however cool their product may be.

You say of Helvetica that it doesn't have any contrast to it. But you have also called it beautiful. Can you please clarify your position on Helvetica?

It is perfect for what it is. Helvetica was designed to have no specific character and the designers achieved that. So it is beautiful in that sense, but not suited to a lot communication tasks that require an attitude, a voice. Neither is it suited to be used small on screens because too many of its characters can be confused with each other, like l and I, 3 and B, or rn and m.

In your keynote conversation with Jeff Veen at Gigaom, he commented that there is a tremendous amount of fashion involved in typography, which changes all the time. What's the latest fashion in typography?

By the time you read this, it'll have changed. Right now, we have many fashions going on at the same time. One that'll be around for a while is the handmade look. Even electronically generated typefaces are made to look like there were printed letterpress from damaged type, or handwritten with wobbly pens.

In your book you mention that typefaces that were legible only a few decades ago can hardly be read by modern audiences -- that it has to do with cultural perceptions, not the physical properties of the typefaces. Based on trends in modern typefaces, are there certain typefaces today that will be barely readable in another 50 years?

Perhaps those that depend on the look of a technology, like bitmaps. But all type that has its origin in writing will be legible because we'll still have hands and pens. Or will we?

Other than your own book, which resources would you recommend to someone who is interested in learning more about typography?

There's a list in the back of the book, too long to repeat here. There are great websites and blogs, just google "type" and "typography" and you'll be surprised.

Why do you own 13 bicycles?

Because they're all different. Some have different uses, like for racing, for the city, for carrying loads, for going cross country. And some are just plain beautiful.

You have a fondness for vintage Leica cameras. Why, and do you actually use them or just collect them?

I never collected, I just bought an old one back in the 70s because I couldn't afford a new one, then upgraded to a new M3, then to a new M6 (all analog film cameras), then a few digital Leicas which weren't all that good (nor too expensive), then the first really useful digital M8 and recently the new M. Okay, perhaps there are a few old ones in that I found and had to rescue. But I never went looking, don't belong to a collector's club. I don't know the serial numbers of my cameras and I can use every lens I ever bought because Leica hasn't changed their standard.

You appear very fit. Do you attribute this to your love of type?

It's all the long-distance reading.

What are you most excited about regarding your upcoming TYPO conference, to be held in San Francisco on April 10-11? What do you hope people get out of it?

Find out that there are other typomaniacs out there, that typography is not a closet activity anymore. It is great to listen to inspiring lectures and hang out with your peers. We all need to get out and see what's happening.

About the Author

Erik Spiekermann is an information architect, type designer (ff Meta, itc Officina, ff Info, ff Unit, LoType, Berliner Grotesk, and many corporate typefaces), and author of numerous books and articles on type and typography.

He was founder of MetaDesign, Germany's largest design firm, as well as FontShop, a company for the production and distribution of electronic fonts. He is a board member of the German Design Council and past president of the International Society of Typographic Designers (istd), as well as the International Institute for Information Design (iiid).

In 2001, Spiekermann left MetaDesign and now runs Edenspiekermann with offices in Berlin, Amsterdam, London, and San Francisco.

In 2011, the German Design Council gave Spiekermann its highest award for Lifetime Achievement. That year, he also received the tdc Medal and the SoTA award. In 2012, the German Art Directors Club gave him its Lifetime Achievement Award.

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