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# Cure Your Typochondria

3 remedies for any project

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# How to Cure Typochondria

**Typochondria:** A persistent anxiety that one has selected the wrong typeface.
—Ellen Lupton, *Thinking with Type*

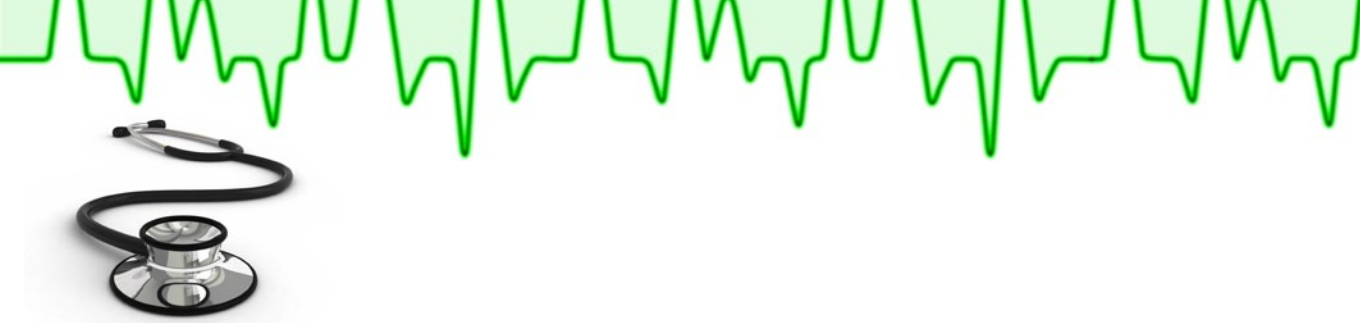
**By Pamela Pfiffner**

Choosing typefaces for a project can expose deep-rooted vulnerabilities within even the most stout-hearted designers. Font doubt may give rise to self-esteem issues and the perplexing malady that design educator and author Ellen Lupton calls "typochrondria."

If you've ever suffered from this affliction, you're not alone. As a designer, you know the basics: Don't mix typefaces that are too similar to each other but don't combine those that are too discordant, don't confuse styles and eras, and don't buy poor-quality fonts. But beyond that, what's the right way to choose type?

Unfortunately, there is no "right" answer. Xerxes Irani, who as creative director of Veer has close to 10,000 typefaces from which to choose when designing a project, says, "There's no magic sauce that we pour on the machine to get what works."

Nevertheless, there are ways to think about type selection that will give you more confidence when making those choices. In talking to designers of different types of publications, I came to the conclusion that choosing type can be distilled to three main considerations: project, personality, and preference.



### Let the Project Be Your Guide

The place to start when searching for typefaces is the nature of the project itself. "It's rare that the concept starts with a typeface selection," says Veer's Irani. "We almost always select fonts based on the personality that the piece is developing. Then it's up to the typeface (and the design) to further establish the character we're going for."

It follows, then, that the requirements for an annual report of a pharmaceutical company are very different than for an advertisement of a new line of snowboards. The typeface of an annual report must not only represent financial data clearly and compactly; it must also project stability and inspire investor confidence. Fonts in a snowboard ad need to reflect energy and derring-do as well as convey brand superiority and product availability. It can be a tricky balancing act.

Karen Gibson of Orange Creative Group in Portland, Oregon, worked on *Edible Portland*, a quarterly magazine about local foods, sustainable agriculture, and the people who produce and consume it (Figure 1). Although published by the Portland-based non-profit Ecotrust, it's part of a nationwide stable of publications licensed by Edible Communities. To retain *Edible Portland*'s connection to its sibling publications, Gibson had to incorporate several immutable features, such as the logotype, which is a combination of Garamond Italic and Trajan. Over time, the publisher gave her permission to rebuild the template and change interior typography.

The goal of the magazine's redesign was a homegrown look that would showcase farmers and


**Figure 1:** *Edible Portland* designer Karen Gibson cites this cover as her favorite because the type works well with the photograph. The headline face is Avenir while the logo—the one element she wasn't permitted to alter—is Adobe Garamond Italic and Trajan.

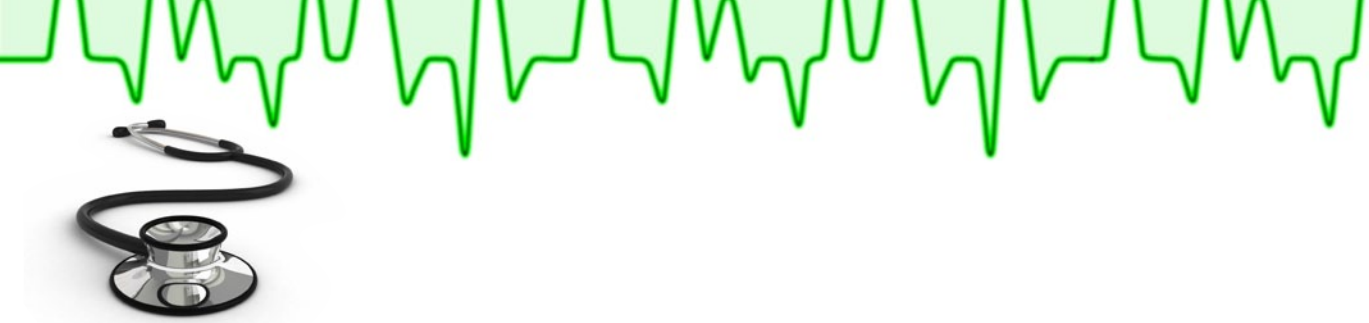

**Figure 2:** For the feature well of *Edible Portland*, Gibson selected Helvetica Ultra Light for its simple sophistication that doesn't distract from photography.


**Figure 3:** Gibson chose headline fonts to delineate the front-of-the-book departments from the feature well. Here Avenir anchors the department heads.

small businesses in a natural, positive light. Although the people featured in *Edible Portland* are down-to-earth, its readers are upscale urban dwellers. Other points Gibson had to keep in mind: Interior type must work with the set-in-stone logo. Headline type could not compete with, or overwhelm, the photography that's a hallmark of the publication (Figure 2).

Gibson decided on two sans serif faces for headlines that would differentiate the front-of-the-book departments from the image-heavy feature well. For the departments, Gibson chose Avenir as the headline face (Figure 3). "It's classic yet contemporary, and can be used in a number of different ways," she says, adding that its multiplicity of weights and styles gives her plenty of options. Feature-well heads are Helvetica Ultra Light. "The light weight makes it look more sophisticated," she says. "It's a classic face that's not trendy and yet not conservative. It stands the test of time."

With the display faces chosen, Gibson then turned to the body type. Her unconventional choice



of Filosofia from Emigre contrasts the tried-and-true headline fonts without venturing too far afield. Its compact form works well space-wise and it's legible at a variety of sizes. Gibson was also swayed by Filosofia Unicase, a style that gives lowercase letters uppercase height (Figure 4). It hasn't found is way into the pages of *Edible Portland* yet, but its charm and availability was a factor in her body-type decision.

The history of an established company or product is another factor when considering which typefaces are best suited for a project. When asked to create packaging for a candy maker, Craig Skinner, art director at OWEN in Portland, Oregon, started with the basics.

"First we tried to discover the one most relevant, positive aspect of the company that would separate it from its closest competition," recalls Skinner, who designed the packaging while working at Dallas-based Tractorbeam. "With McCraw's Confections, we focused on its origin as a nearly 100-year-old taffy maker from Farmersville, Texas. The company began as an honest, simple-ingredient, one-man operation and we wanted to reflect and leverage its roots as such."

The resulting design combines Knockout, a bold sans serif from Hoefler & Frere-Jones; Belizio, a sturdy serif from Font Bureau; and Collier, a strong calligraphic design.

## A Type Designer's Perspective

Thomas Phinney is program manager for type at Adobe. More than a techie, he is also a type designer. The full family of his first commercial font, Hypatia Sans, which he describes as "quirky but not too loud, and moderately formal with a humanist feel," will be available in 2009. He describes how type designers look at fonts:

"A type designer looks at type differently than a graphic designer does. The typefaces and the typography of our environment leap out at us. There was a video once showing how a type designer sees the world, with all the type in the environment annotated with little call-outs, and everything else was just blanked out. It was funny, but not so far from how I often see things: with the name of the designer, type foundry and date of its origin all floating in the air around the item.

"If you go to a restaurant with a bunch of type designers and typographers, you sit down to dinner at a restaurant and start looking at the menu. Sooner or later you'll have to insist that they read what's on the darn menu, because otherwise you may never get around to ordering! We typographers can analyze and critique the typography and typeface selection of the menu for a really long time."

INTRIGUING POSSIBILITIES

**Figure 4:** Filosofia Unicase

Along with clever copy and humorous, folksy illustrations—a cowboy riding a bucking peanut, a hula dancer twirling a lasso—the type choices create a story about the company, its products, and its down-home origins (Figure 5).

Not every project requires such colorful combinations. For New York-based book designer Scott Citron, font choices usually come down to one thing: legibility. "Advertising can be more freeform," Citron acknowledges, "but in a book readability is paramount. Novels should use type that is transparent, that doesn't draw attention to itself."


**Figure 5:** Designer Craig Skinner selected type that evoked a down-home, country-fair sensibility for the packaging of a century-old candy manufacturer in Texas. Collier, Bezio, and Gotham form the foundation of the piece while cheeky illustrations and clever copy fill in the story.

## Consider a Font's Personality

Matching a typeface to a project is like dating. You need to know the parties' personalities. Look carefully at a font and its character (pun intended) will reveal itself. Once you've discerned the type's traits, it's easier to see if it's a good fit for the project.

Matching personalities to fonts is a routine exercise at Veer, according to creative director Irani. For a recent promotional piece entitled "Face Off," Veer designers gave personal characteristics to more than 70 typefaces. You can get a good idea of what the font looks like just by reading the descriptions:

*"Buffet Script is beautiful at breakfast and wears a gingham apron; it smells like apple pie. The coffee is strong and the waitress is always there to top you up."*

*"Compendium has the attitude of Mozart and the bling of Liberace with a sprinkle of ladies' undergarments."*

*"Times New Roman works in a bank and wears a sensible brown suit; it has never gone skydiving."*

After describing the fonts' personalities, the team paired typefaces in interesting juxtapositions that spoke to a common theme. For example, to illustrate the concept of "balancing love for a sport with the big business aspects that commercialize that sport," the Veer team came up with this clever and telling combination:

*"Metroscript is a rookie baseball pitcher yearning for a major league endorsement; Newspeak is a high-tech, juicy sports mega-drink marketed by professional athletes."*

## Today's Combination Platter

I gave a list of display typefaces with strong flavors to former Adobe font program manager and type designer Thomas Phinney and asked what he would pick to go with them. Here are his answers:

**Black Oak:** "If the designer chose Black Oak because of its old west feel, a text face that's a historical match, such as De Vinne, Century Oldstyle, Cheltenham, or Bookman Oldstyle, might be a good companion. But if the designer chose Black Oak solely for its physical look, you can broaden your options to typefaces that are stylistic matches without being from the same period: modern serif faces such as Walbaum or Kepler, or more modern humanist slab serifs, from Chaparral to TheSlab [a face in Lucas de Groot's Thesis family]."

**Onyx:** "If Onyx was chosen for period flavor, I'd look at text faces from the 1920s and '30s. If it was more an aesthetic choice, I'd consider modern or slab serif text faces that are not too warm: Bodoni, Kepler, or PMN Caecilia, perhaps."

**Voluta Script:** "Because Voluta has an archaic feeling, I would tend to choose a text face that feels like it belongs to the late 1700s, or earlier. If you have lots of text, maybe Adobe Caslon. If you want the body text to feel archaic, maybe Celestia Antiqua. If you want classy, perhaps Garamond Premier."

As you can see from his answers, Phinney's choices were based on several considerations, such as how much body text would be set and at what size, and whether the text face appropriate to the content.


**Figure 6:** In this Veer "face off," the concept was to juxtapose gourmet sensibilities and junk food. The personalities of the typefaces: Mostra Complete represents an Art Deco South Beach [Miami] upscale restaurant; Candy Script represents South American packaging for junk food that's delicious and salty.

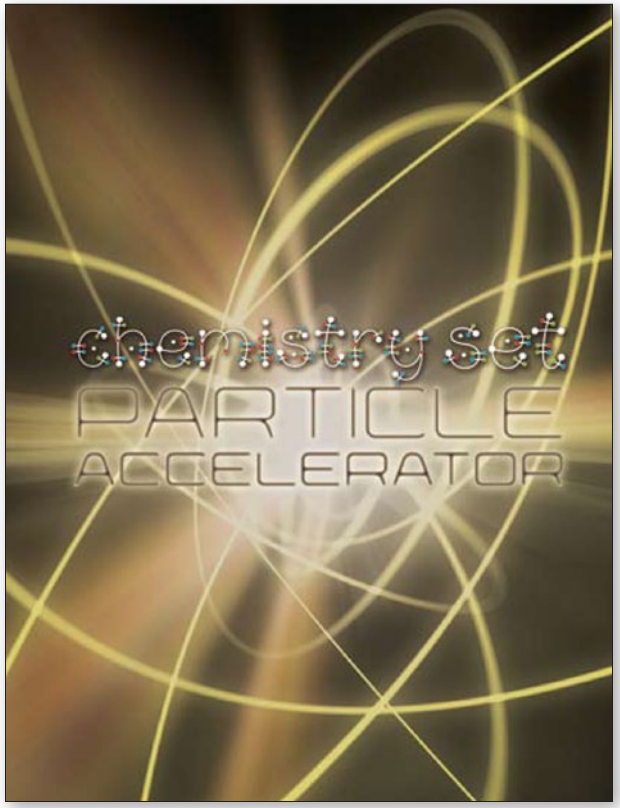



**Figure 7:** For this Veer "face off," the idea was to represent how kids that grew up playing with chemistry sets and microscopes became vanguards on the cusp of today's amazing scientific discoveries. The personalities of the typefaces: Frizzle Frazzle is like a kid's bedroom science kit and experiments with soda pop and baking soda; Yumi has attributes of particle accelerators and hyper-modern, mind-bending physics, all in the name of scientific progress.

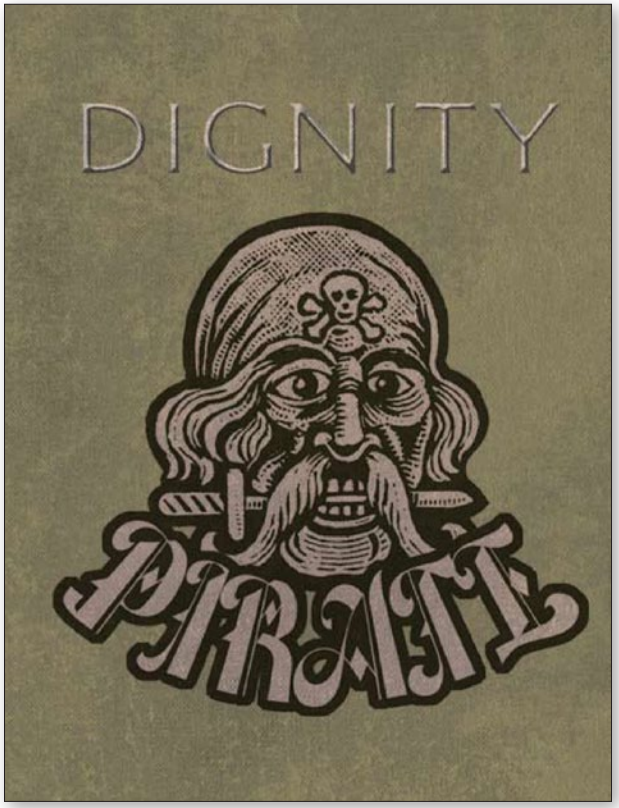



**Figure 8:** To explain the concept for this "face off," Veer's Xerxes Irani says, "We overheard the phrase 'Dignity Pirate' in the office and loved the incongruity— the classic icon of thievery wresting that most precious of virtues from others." The personalities of the typefaces: DF Seabright Monument is a classic, British institution with a stiff upper lip; Agitas Gallery could be the font of National Pirate Day. It's rated "Arrrr."

For more examples, see Figures 6, 7, and 8. Or download the entire "Face Off" promo piece as a 3.7MB PDF from http://www.box.net/shared/static/1b9ko0lg99.pdf.

These personality exercises get to the heart of a typeface. You may feel perplexed by the historical classification of a typeface, but imbuing it with human traits or situations could give you a fresh angle. Think of it as selecting type with the right side of your brain.

"To use a phrase that's floated around, 'type is clothes for words,'" adds Irani. It's up to you and your client to decide if words are wearing polar fleece or Armani.

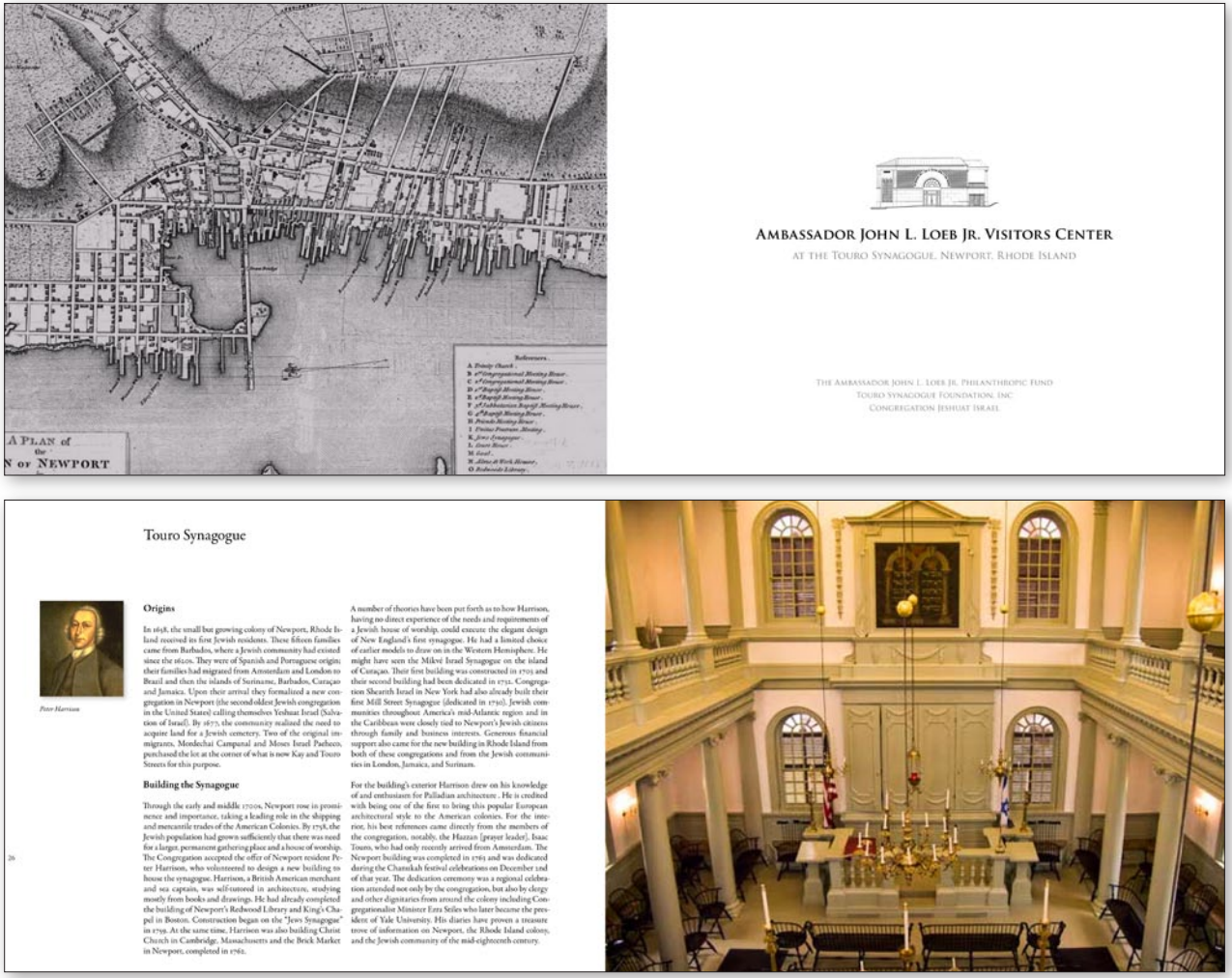



**Figure 9:** Book designer Scott Citron's preference is for understated typography, such as his use here of Adobe Trajan Pro for headlines and Adobe Garamond Premier Pro for body text. These typefaces also suit the nature of the project: a booklet about the history behind a visitor's center at the country's oldest synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island.

Design doesn't live in a vacuum, either. Typefaces also reflect the current zeitgeist. For example, expect to see even more instances of Tobias Frere-Jones's Gotham in 2009. As the official font of President-elect Barack Obama, Gotham will be associated with success, transformation, and leadership and will be seen in those contexts. On the other hand, the current economic climate may create a demand for fonts with a more somber mien. Exuberant, florid scripts may seem excessive during an era of austerity. Keep cultural factors in mind when poring over online type catalogs.

## Do You Have a Preference?

Some designers have favorite faces they return to again and again. Whether the motivation be habit, experience, preference, or expense, using a narrow or refined selection of fonts can make a lot of sense.

Scott Citron, who wrote about typeface selection in his book *Professional Design Techniques with Adobe Creative Suite 3*, advises that you choose type as if shopping for a meal: Buying top-notch ingredients usually yields a better-tasting dish. "If you choose typefaces that are proven classics, you'll decrease the possibility of setting a bad-looking page," he writes. As a book designer himself, Citron gravitates toward time-honored faces (Figure 9). "I tend to stick with convention. Trendy type comes and goes," he says. "I like Bodoni, Bembo, Garamond, Franklin Gothic, Trade Gothic, and Minion. You can keep all the others. They're nice, but unnecessary to me."

Karen Gibson acknowledges that her font quests start at home—by looking at what's already loaded

on her Mac. If it's available on her drive it's there for a reason: she's used it before and is willing to do so again, or she tried it before and plans to not use it again. It's an obvious approach but one that's often overlooked in the pursuit of novelty.

If you're looking to breathe new life into an old favorite, consider upgrading to the OpenType version of that font. Many OpenType fonts include extended character sets that expand your typographic creativity, so much so that two designers using the same OpenType font could come up with two very different results (Figure 10). "Because OpenType faces have a lot of alternates, we have more choices than ever before," Xerxes Irani agrees. "There will be an 'e' with nine alternates, a 'y' with seven tails, and so on." These options change the way designers approach what they can do with type. "We are not just using the letters the typeface has," Irani says. "We are actually designing words."


**Figure 10:** Because it's an OpenType font, the Ministry script from Veer's Umbrella collection has many alternates that imbues individual words with different flavors..

OpenType is just one of many ways in which typography has changed since the advent of digital publishing technologies. You might think that so many options—from number of available fonts to the range of accessible software tools—would make it easier to select typefaces. In truth, it's harder.

That's why those with a lot of experience selecting type offer simple advice. Stay focused on the project at hand and be informed about the character and context of a typeface. And finally, trust your instincts.

**Pamela Pfiffner**, founding editor in chief of *InDesign Magazine*, is a writer and consultant in Portland, Oregon.

## Web Resources

When your own reserves fail you, the Internet may point you in the right direction. Web sites and blogs devoted to type aficionados, designers, and font foundries are great sources of inspiration as well as information. A few examples:

The **Type Library section** of the Adobe Web site lets you search for fonts by use. Typefaces appropriate for newspapers are described as "sturdy designs that convey style, information" and include such bread-and-butter fonts as Adobe Caslon Pro, Kepler, Officina, and Palatino.

Each typeface on the **Font Bureau Web site** includes a list of comparable and compatible fonts. So if Cyrus Highsmith's new sans serif Scout intrigues, you can see that good choices for companion faces would be Benton Modern or Miller, among others.

Most foundry Web sites gives you the capability to test drive a typeface by entering a string of text to see it set in that font. Web sites like **MyFonts.com** and **Identifont.com** go an extra step and try to find typefaces for you, based on answers to a series of question or by optical recognition of an uploaded image.

Independent blogs such as **Typophile** are populated with type-savvy folks who will give advice on font usage, identify orphaned fonts, and steer you toward little-known fonts that may have escaped your attention. For example, a designer looking for a "confident yet feminine looking font" received scores of suggestions including lesser-known designs, such as Feijoa and Odile.

Blogs associated with type foundries that don't just flog their own products are great resources as well. A wonderful post on **FontFeed**, the blog affiliated with FontShop, explored alternatives to Helvetica with helpful background about the suggested typefaces and detailed characteristics that distinguish them from Helvetica. Next time you reach for Helvetica, the blog suggests, try Heldustry or FF Schulbach.

## Just What the Doctor Ordered

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