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How retail brands can compete in our new digital reality.

Modern retail brands suddenly find themselves in an era of unprecedented disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic. From clothing to electronics to health and beauty services, retailers have had to abruptly close their brick-and-mortar stores and, if possible, shift their business online. The result? Ecommerce spending spiked by 68 percent year-over-year in early 2020.¹

All that said, what retailers are experiencing is actually an acceleration of the inevitable. The past decade has seen a steady trend toward online business models across all sectors of the retail industry. This increased competition in the digital space means it's

essential to provide your customers with a frictionless customer experience and a consistent, polished brand identity. This is also a bottom-line issue: Establishing a consistent brand identity can lift revenue by as much as 23 percent.

Fonts play an important role in that effort to keep up. A brand's fonts give shape and structure to the user's experience, simultaneously delivering key messages, directing users through tasks and workflows, and maintaining a unified visual identity throughout every customer touchpoint.





How we got here.

Today's fonts have a lot to handle. They need to work everywhere: Websites, digital ads, HTML emails, print ads, in-store signage, LED billboards, the list goes on. They also have to work equally well on an enormous range of devices with varying screen resolutions. Oh, and in many cases, they need to cross geographic and language barriers as well.

Some fonts weren't built for this kind of workload. Fonts designed thirty years ago, for example, may not read well in small sizes for those shopping on smartphones. Fortunately, modern fonts are catching up, and many fonts designed or redesigned today are optimized to ensure clear legibility at tiny (and large) sizes in all uses. The problem is that many retailers are not making the most of these optimizations.

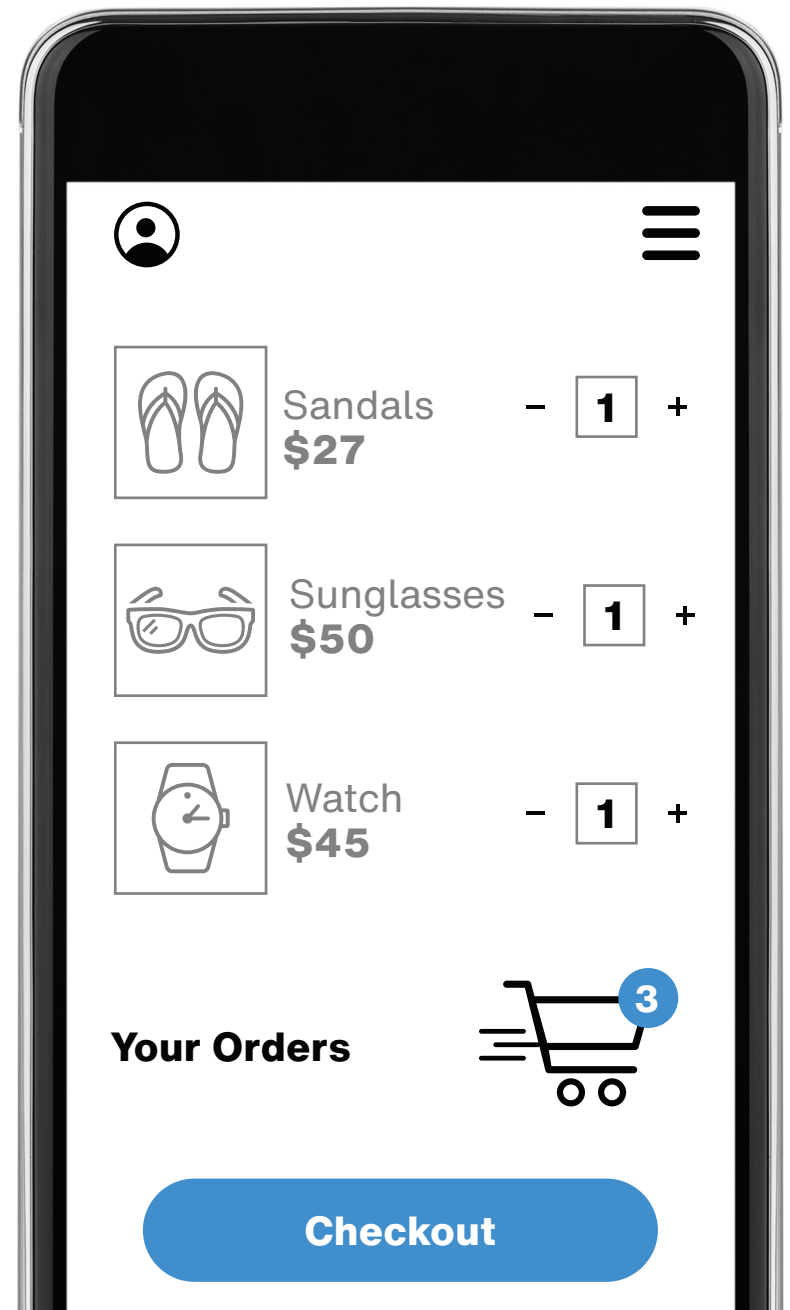
All that is to say, it's more important than ever for retailers to have the right fonts in place. Here are five key elements to consider if you want to make sure you do.

Legibility.

With large numbers of customers shopping online and on mobile devices, it's more important than ever for your fonts to be optimized for on-screen legibility. It's especially crucial for ecommerce channels to focus on their entire mobile experience, including their apps and mobile website.

Customers use mobile web and apps fairly equally but in different ways. Historically, Amazon has had more unique visitors to its mobile site than to its app—152 million compared to 112 million, respectively, in 2019—but its customers spent far more time in the app than on the mobile site.² The implication is that customers are more engaged when using the app, whereas the mobile site may be more commonly used for quick price checks.

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Either way, these trends illustrate the need for a unified experience across all mobile properties, and indeed all digital properties. While branding is an important element of that experience the starting point must be the legibility of your text, which is grounded in a handful of underlying design principles:

Avoid crowding: Fonts with “closed” letterforms and tightly packed letters are harder to read, because it takes longer for the eye to distinguish one letter or word from another.

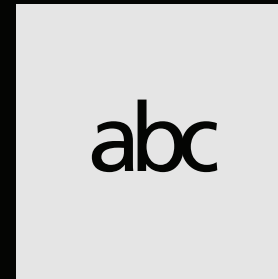
Ambiguous letterforms: Humanist fonts contain features we use to help distinguish similar characters like the foot on the lowercase L and the ‘flag’ on the figure 1.

Use all-caps sparingly: All-caps words are a two-edged sword. The letters are bigger and therefore easier to read, but using lowercase in multi-word cases helps the brain unscramble the homogenous word blocks by giving shape to words. The shapes are visual cues to what letters you’re looking at.

Font weight: There is a goldilocks effect where bold becomes too bold as crowding becomes an issue. The light can become too light with lower-res screens compounding the problem. Aim for a happy medium of structure and space for maximum legibility.

Contrast and polarity: These work hand-in-hand. Black text on a white or light background is most legible during the day, white on black or a dark background at night.

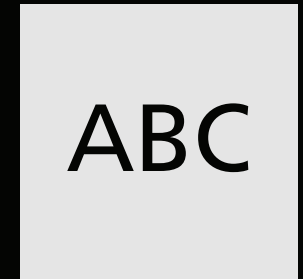
The reality is that you can never know if your customers are using a cutting edge high-res screen or a five-year-old phone with an outdated display. But in any and all cases, it’s your responsibility (and in your best interests) to provide the best possible user experience, one that won’t break under less than ideal situations or on older technology.



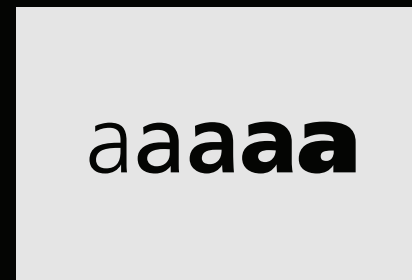
Crowding



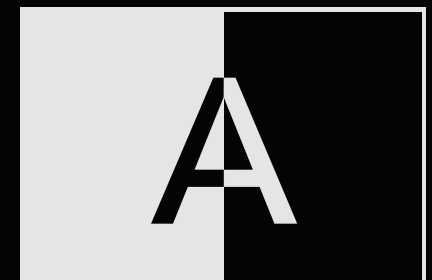
Ambiguous



Uppercase



Weight



Contrast & Polarity

Global demands.

Legibility not only concerns devices and reading environments, but language and geography as well. Retail is an increasingly global business, and whether you serve multiple countries or several languages within a single region, the clarity of your message and consistency of your visual identity should transcend language.

A thoughtful font strategy allows you to do both. You may not be able to use the same font in all languages, but a cohesive system of complementary, highly functional fonts, all of which support

your visual identity, can be just as effective. This demonstrates your focus on the details that directly affect the customer experience and shows that you are invested in that experience.

Uneven font usage risks not only losing the customer's loyalty, but could cause consumers to abandon their purchase plans. Consistent, cohesive font usage maintains and strengthens that essential connection between retailer and consumer, and creates the expectation of a reliable customer experience.



Reliability.

Fonts may not seem like a potential security vulnerability, but the fonts on your website and web properties are lines of code just like any other digital asset. This means it's important to procure your fonts from a reliable source.

Fonts purchased through established foundries and providers tend to be secure, and those sources will generally provide customer service in the event of a problem.

Free fonts, however, paint a fuzzier picture. While there are reputable resources for free fonts, many free font websites display spammy or even malicious ads, and could even host corrupted font files that contain malware. These worst-case scenarios are admittedly rare, but the risks are real and would cause serious disruptions to your digital properties.

A more common issue with free fonts is the possibility that font “breaks” or even vanishes entirely without notice. Since free fonts are exactly that—free software used without any sort of contract or formal agreement—there is nothing preventing the font’s designer from taking the font offline or making unexpected changes to the design.

Similarly, many retail companies prefer to self-host their web fonts, which not all providers allow (Monotype does). Self-hosting means you own and operate the servers delivering web fonts to your digital sites, or you can evaluate and select a third-party provider you trust. Self-hosting provides a measure of control and peace of mind that is especially important when dealing with shopper’s money and personal information.

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User experience.

Text is the most important aspect of any online shopper's journey. From researching products to leaving a review, text provides the guideposts your customers will follow from point A to point B. Clear, scannable copy will ensure that process is painless and never confusing.

Further, people almost always want and expect the quickest, most efficient path to completing their purchase. A study by the Nielsen/Norman group found that "on the average web page, users have time to read, at most, 28 percent of the words during an average visit;² 20% is more likely,"³ while other studies found that most people spend an average of 15 seconds on a web page.⁴

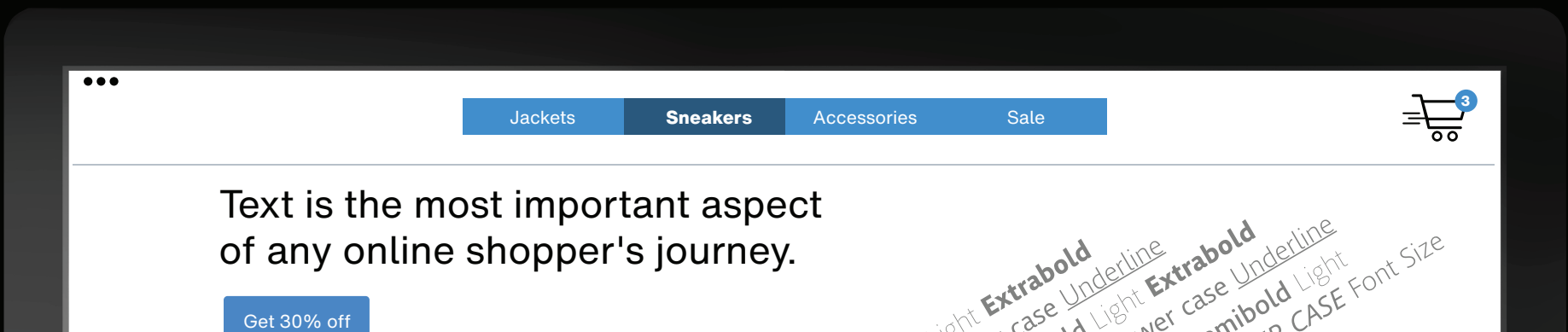
Fortunately, fonts make it easy to give your customers visual anchors throughout your text, whether it's a list of product features or your checkout page. Assuming you've chosen a legible font as described earlier in this eBook, thoughtful deployment of that font will make it easy for your customers to scan your text and find the information they need:

Text size: Simply changing the size of a line of text gives the eye a series of anchors throughout your content. The type scale becomes even more important as the screen size gets smaller, and the text begins to do more of the heavy-lifting over images and other UI.

Style: Use different font weights and styles like italics or outlines to set blocks of text apart.

Type system: This idea of using style to create contrast is becoming a large part of many site's visual strategy. Today, it is not uncommon to employ two, three, or sometimes up to five different fonts, each used exclusively for different purposes.

Lastly, choose web fonts that load quickly. Nothing frustrates customers more than waiting for a page to load, and web fonts are a primary cause of bogged down websites. As you know, in eCommerce, every fraction of a second counts.



For retail companies, none of this is worth much without a compelling, cohesive visual identity. In a time when consumers crave authenticity, retail brands must be able to deliver their messaging in a way that resonates with their audiences and stays true to who they are. Selecting or creating a distinctive, durable font is one of the most important and challenging choices retailers make.

“All typefaces have a voice,” says Monotype Creative Type Director Steve Matteson. “Using that voice consistently is key to bringing more engagement to your brand.”

For retail brands, that voice often reflects the perspective of their customers and their lifestyle or values. The clothes people wear, the products they use, and the food they eat all represent who they are or who they aspire to be.

So, when it comes to settling on a collection of fonts for your brand, the conversation begins and ends with one overarching question: Who are you? Who are your customers? What impression do you want to make? What values do you want to reflect? What emotions do you want to evoke? Invest time in an honest, thorough assessment of how the characteristics, values, and even the social causes you support factor into the fabric of your brand. Think about how your customers view your brand and are involving it in their lifestyle choices. Then bring your work to your type designer, agency, or creative team to find or create a typeface that reflects those qualities.



Prepare for the future.

The one consistent thread through each of these topics is change and the challenge of keeping up with technological evolution and shifting consumer expectations.

Retailers have felt this change more than perhaps any other industry, even before COVID-19 turned the world upside down. The last decade has seen a complete paradigm shift in the way people shop for just about everything. Millennials have grown into adulthood almost entirely within the mobile era, so there's no reason to think they'll change their behavior any time soon, nor will the generations that follow.

Now that shopping online is even further entrenched as the status quo, ecommerce retailers need to find new ways to connect with specific audiences and provide the products they want. This could mean launching sub-brands aimed at specific target audiences;

establishing distinct social media voices based on the expectations of different platforms; or simply updating your existing visual identity to stay on trend. Each of these ideas requires a new UX, possibly new branding, and a design that satisfies each of the topics covered in this eBook.

In such a fast-paced, competitive landscape, retail brands need to both jump on these opportunities and do so quickly. This means having a defined type system that includes dependable, legible fonts and enables easy experimentation with fonts for future products, campaigns, etc, managed within a system that allows your teams to collaborate across projects and mediums. It also means having a font management system that gives your teams easy access to both, so they can focus on responding quickly to new requests and exploring ways to deliver the experiences your customers expect.



Embrace the challenge.

What to do with all this information? First of all, don't panic.

Chances are your company is already doing some of what's discussed here. That said, a good first step is an audit of your fonts and font usage. You can do this internally or work with a font provider who can assess the current state of your fonts and make recommendations for improvement.

As part of that process, take a look at your font management processes. Font management is an oft-overlooked component of the creative process that, if not handled efficiently, can introduce roadblocks to your workflow, as well as the potential for fonts to be misused.

Third, look to the future. How has your customers' behavior changed during the pandemic? What are they telling you, either through their actions or through direct feedback, about their needs for the future? What are your competitors doing? A simple roadmap can help determine if your current font resources—both your library of brand fonts and your ability to experiment with new fonts—is up to the task.

Fonts aren't a miracle solution—a lot goes into creating a successful modern brand—but they are a core part of how a brand communicates with the world, and how the brand's message is shaped and delivered.

Sources:

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4. <https://time.com/12933/what-you-think-you-know-about-the-web-is-wrong/>



Monotype can help ensure your business is ready for our digital-first future. Contact us today to see how. Visit monotype.com/products/mosaic to learn more.