5 type trends for brands to consider in 2020.

Your brand is your reputation.

Your brand is your reputation. More than just a color palette and a logo, branding can elevate a company above its competitors and build connections with increasingly design-savvy consumers. Design is a powerful tool for managing this, and at the heart of all this is type — without which no brand would be complete.

75% of consumers expect a consistent experience when engaging with brands.

According to Salesforce's report, "State of the Connected Consumer," 75% of consumers expect a consistent experience when engaging with brands,[1] but many companies are still failing to deliver. People are interacting with companies everywhere, from social channels and mobile apps to digital ads and traditional media, and they want every interaction to feel recognizable and cohesive. This places a huge burden on businesses, which need to express themselves across an ever-growing array of environments - including new mediums such as augmented and virtual reality (AR and VR, respectively).

Type bridges this gap. Typefaces can deliver a clear, consistent, and identifiable voice wherever they appear. The individual shapes of letters imprint themselves on us, working as an immediate cue. Consumers might not be able to explain what a brand's typeface looks like, but they'll know it when they see it.

A solid font system enables brands to express their creative identities, but there is also a strong, practical business case for investing in type. In fact, a recent McKinsey study showed that design-led companies consistently outperform their counterparts — with higher revenue and shareholder returns, regardless of the industry.[2] With so much to play for, it's clear that type is a powerful tool for communication, and something brands should be thinking about with care.

At Monotype, we have the privilege of working with many leading brands, agency partners, and the broader creative community. And while there are many trends impacting the world of design and branding, here are five key considerations brand leaders should focus on as they look to adapt to the needs of a modern market.

A strategic approach to global language coverage.

Doing business around the world comes with a whole set of practical considerations, not the least of which is how you communicate with new markets. More brands are going global and finding themselves in need of the right type to support their visual identity across different languages. As well as communicating with people in their native tongue, brands need to create typographic harmony in situations where two different languages are shown alongside one another (which is quite common in countries such as Korea and China), and ensure their brand is represented consistently across countries. This means companies require something that will work alongside their existing Latin typeface, or a font family that offers broad language support.

In the past, this would have been a purely practical demand, but there's an increased sensitivity to the stylistic and cultural side of things. It's no longer enough to settle for any given typeface in the language or script you need. Brands now want to find, or commission, fonts that actually work well together, and fit with their visual identity.
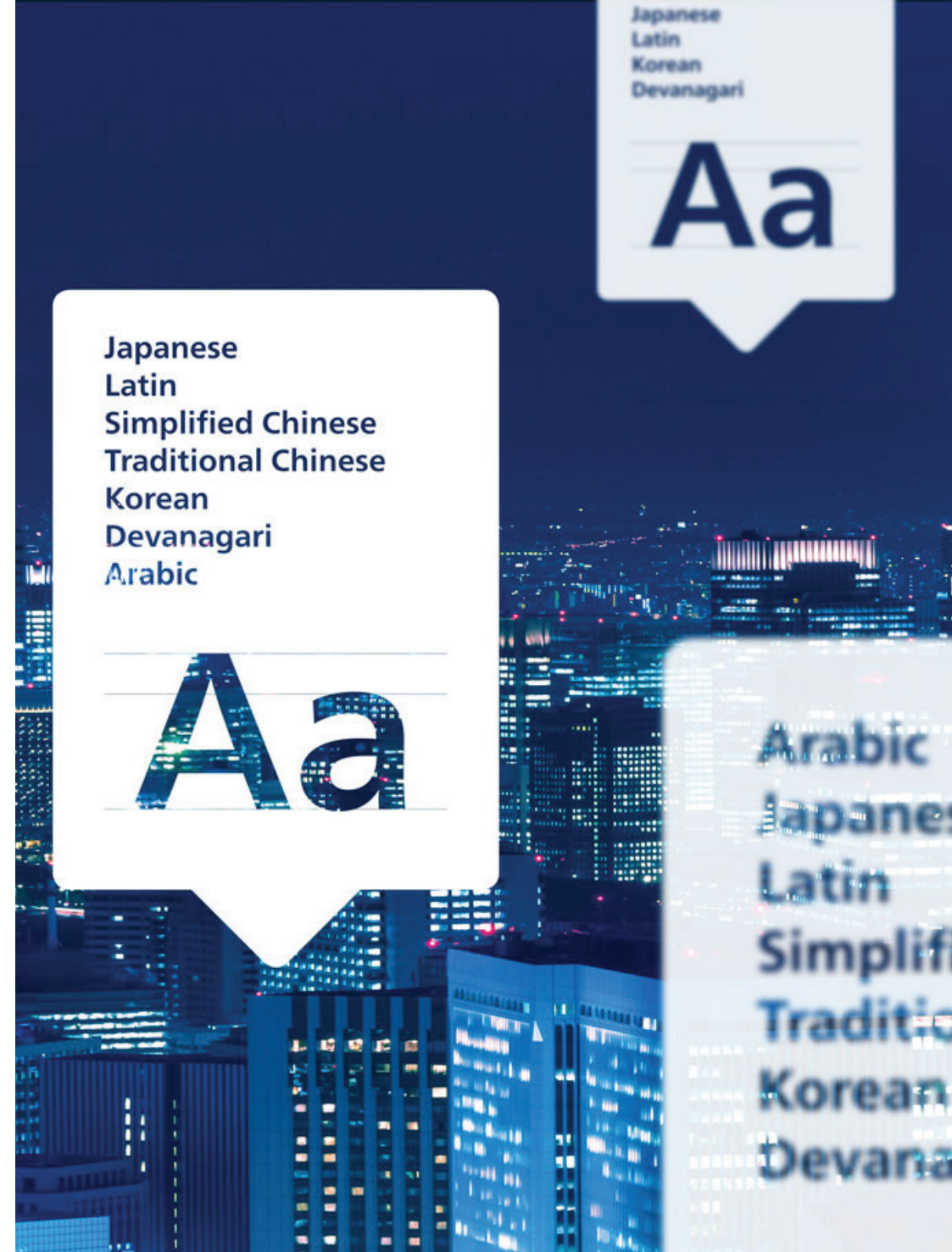
According to a recent survey of brand leaders commissioned by Monotype, while "consistency" was the most highly prioritized element in a brand identity strategy, only 44% of those surveyed report maintaining consistent typography, colors, and imagery within all of their customer touchpoints.[3]

Of course, achieving global consistency through brand typography can present a challenge in terms of time and investment. In some cases, brands may need to develop a truly global typeface, and in other cases, thoughtful pairing of existing type may provide the best solution. Neue Frutiger World is an example that demonstrates both strategies. Monotype developed this extensive family to cover over 150 languages and scripts while also pairing well with Monotype's M Xinghe Hei, Seol Sans and Tazugane Info and Gothic, which support Chinese, Korean and Japanese

"When designers make it clear, beautiful and vivid, typography powerfully amplifies both meaning and understanding. It turns information into words, stories and ideas. As our world can now be shaped and reshaped daily, 140 letters a time, what we say, why we say it and how we say it is more important than ever."

Brian Collins
Chief Creative Officer and Founder, COLLINS

The rise of variable fonts.

Variable fonts are the bleeding edge of typeface design, and as such are still in an early stage of development and adoption. While brands are taking an interest in what variable fonts can offer, the market is far from saturated and we expect their use to increase dramatically over the next five to 10 years. In fact, according to Monotype's 2019 Font Purchasing Habits Survey, 24% of respondents are optimistic that variable fonts will change how fonts are made and used in the future, while 39% still are not even sure what they are.

We expect variable font use to increase dramatically over the next 5 to 10 years.

For the unacquainted, a variable font is a single font that acts as many, including all the possible widths and weights of a font family in one file. It means less data to download and more range for designers to work with, giving them greater freedom when it comes to a website's design language and voice.

This flexibility is one of the key selling points of variable fonts. Rather than choosing and downloading a specific style, variable fonts work as a slider that allows designers to move up and down the stylistic variations to find the version that fits best.

In the past, designers might have been restricted to four or five fonts for a website, but variable fonts give them a much broader typographic palette, resulting in far greater control over a brand's identity. Some believe they could also completely transform the on-screen reading experience. "The possibilities are nearly limitless," commented designer Jason Pamental.[4] "By removing the performance barrier, we open the door for more interesting and dynamic design and far greater ability to express the true voice of the brand."

"Typography is essential for today's brands. It is a scalable and flexible tool that easily creates consistency and attraction for all communications. More so, it is the voice in which consumers hear when making split second judgements."

Blake Howard
Co-Founder and Creative Director, Matchstic

Emphasis on geometric sans serifs.

For many brands, geometric sans serifs are the go-to choice for legibility and approachability, providing a clean, modern, contemporary look. Not only do they offer companies a relatively neutral container for the message they need to convey, they also transition effortlessly across different platforms and environments.

There's a certain kind of association this style has developed as well. "It seems the geometric sans serif has become a kind of identity for the digital world, tech companies, startups and such," type designer Gunnar Vilhjálmsson told Creative Review magazine. "By using the same style of typeface, companies immediately link themselves with this world, and all of its associated relevance and innovation."[5]
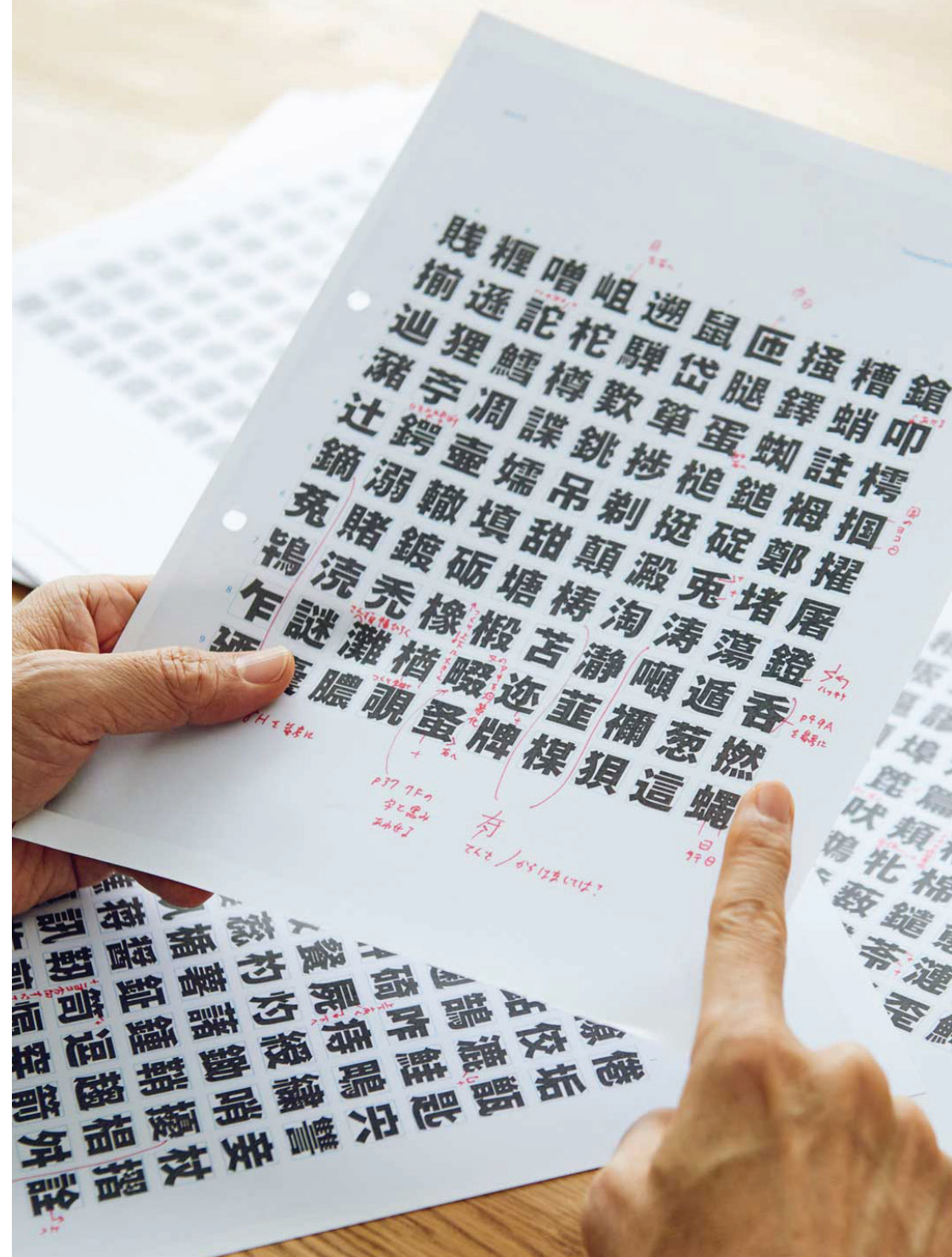
However, wherever there's a trend, there's a brand intentionally bucking it. You only need to look to companies like Chobani and its use of a soft retro-feeling serif, or Mailchimp's use of serif typeface Cooper Light. It's likely that we'll see other brands also rebelling against design trends and embracing more quirky alternatives to the geometric sans.

Still, when it comes to the demands of branding, the geometric sans serif is undoubtedly a workhorse, and it's likely to remain the popular choice for some time yet.

"There's still a strong sense, in a corporate rebrand conversation, of getting things minimal and trustworthy, and those same conversations often turn into a geometric sans."

Carl Crossgrove
Monotype senior type designer

Type as icon:
Inline and engraving.

As brands embrace hard-working geometric sans, there's a movement in another direction towards more decorative type. The domination of technology and all of its sans serifs is possibly playing a role in this, with designers keen to give consumers a little more typographic 'texture' to enjoy.

This trend can be seen in the rebrand of rental listings company VRBO, which embraced gloriously stripy type for its new wordmark. Other companies are exploring ways of using single letters from their logo as an icon, in a way that's reminiscent of decorated drop caps.

This is being driven, in part, by improved technology. Screens now offer far more pixels per inch (PPI) than ever before, meaning details that may have been lost on a phone or computer screen in the past can now be shown with greater clarity. The legwork of actually creating these styles has also been somewhat reduced, with automation playing a role in the process.

HM Amperserif was developed in Display, Reglar and Text as well as Italic. It was designed in 2013 by The Studio in Stockholm and produced by Monotype UK under the direction of the H&M Marketing department. It has the qualities of a modern serif typeface with a dramatic contrast between the thicks and thins of the letterforms. Inspired by classics such as Didot and Bodoni which have a long history within editoral design for fashion.

All of this adds up to a moment that's ripe for the return of inline fonts, as well as other decorative styles. Minimalism has dominated design for a significant period, meaning the inevitable backlash and move towards detail, quirkiness and flourish is surely on the way.

"As the interactions between brands and audiences have proliferated and attention spans have reduced — the need for immediate brand recognition through differentiation and the flexibility of how brands are expressed have come under pressure. Font design has the unique duality of not only building instant recognition, but also enabling that recognition to permeate the myriad of experiences that brands have to create and manage today."

Andy Payne
Global Chief Creative Officer, Interbrand

A.B.R. or always be rebranding.

The rapid evolution of technology and emergence of new devices has also forced businesses to think differently about the way they approach rebranding. Gone are the days when companies could rely on the same visual identity for decades at a time. Modern brands need to be proactive and account for constant change within their overall brand strategy. "We've never faced such a relentless phase of growth," says Monotype Senior Director, Creative, James Fooks-Bale. "Brands have to evolve at a rapid and continual rate, whether that's a technological shift, new audience or way of segmenting, a new market or localisation."

A traditional rebrand, which can take a substantial amount of time, doesn't often fit into the pace of a modern marketplace. After all, brands must engage with consumers in new channels, merge the online and offline experience, and for many, operate in new geographical markets. Instead, maintaining consistency across the brand identity requires a strong but malleable creative foundation. Colors, iconography, logos, and fonts must work together to simultaneously add structure to a brand while granting flexibility to expand into new environments.

"Customers are in more places than ever, from geography to the device or surface they're using," says Fooks-Bale. "And by the time you think you have things set, a new device, platform, or form of content creation has been added to the pile."

Fortunately, type, which is one of the most important aspects of a rebrand, can also help to thread your visual identity through each new potential touchpoint. Consistent, branded type relieves the pressure on other brand assets and allows your design language to be flexible. As such, your font strategy shouldn't be seen as a fixed, rigid object, but rather a scalable tool that enables you to reshape your brand in real time. You can build a font strategy that guarantees legibility and functionality in all environments while layering your visual identity on and around it.

No one knows what new trends or technologies will emerge in the next few years, but you can be sure your customers will embrace them. A more adaptable approach to branding enables you to maintain a unified visual identity while leaving space for new ideas and unexpected changes in direction.

"In recent years, we've debated whether advancements in technology are pushing us toward the end of print, and with that we've questioned what this means for the future of typography. Today, more people interact with type on a daily basis than ever before, and with that comes the need for well-crafted and thoughtfully applied type. Type in this new era needs to unify the varied experiences people have with a brand, and adapt seamlessly to each channel and application."

Rodney Abbot
Senior Partner, Lippincott

Embrace the future.

We know that consumers will continue to demand more from brands, including personalization, consistency, and alignment with their core personal values. And while many elements will be needed by brands to address these challenges, type has the potential to drive brands forward, acting both as a unique expression and a practical connector across varying markets, channels, and audiences.

Monotype can help make sure your brand is ready for whatever the future holds. Get in touch today at info@monotype.com to find out how.

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