Type design studio Dalton Maag on why digital brands are opting for custom typefaces

Netflix unveiled its custom typeface 'Netflix Sans' last week. The video streaming service is yet another digital company choosing to design a custom typeface in-house, rather than paying millions in font licensing fees. The cost is no secret. Netflix, who worked with type design studio Dalton Maag to create the unique font, says with the global nature of its business, font licensing can get expensive. But is it the best idea for everyone?

We looked at eight other digital brands that have chosen to design bespoke typefaces in-house, including BBC's Reith which launched at the end of 2017, Samsung, Apple, Google, *USA Today* and Nokia. At least three of these brands opted to collaborate with Dalton Maag. The type design studio works with clients and their design agencies to modify and develop typefaces for print, desktop, app and mobile environments. Previous clients of Dalton's also include BMW Intel, HP, Lush and AT&T.

In this feature Dalton Maag operations director Richard Bailey explains what fees are involved designing a custom typeface and what the collaboration process looks like. He also explores why some foundries are moving towards 'impression-based licensing' – a relatively new approach – for typefaces in many digital advertising spaces.

Dalton Maag worked with the BBC to design 'Reith', seen here, which rolled out on BBC Sport initially

Why commission a custom typeface?

When a digital brand such as Netflix commissions a custom typeface design, it’s usually due to a mixture of reasons involving functionality and cost, says Richard.

Sometimes it’s a matter of not being able to find the right expression or functionality from “off-the-shelf” fonts, language coverage problems or legibility – or simply wanting a font that can be an “owneable” part of their brand.

Dalton Maag begins its custom font development process with a collaborative workshop.

“Stakeholders from the client and their design agency help us explore the brief, look closely at their creative expression, and identify the practical problems that they need to solve.

“Throughout the development process the aim is to try to ensure that all stakeholders are happy with the direction in which we’re heading and with the decisions being taken,” says Richard. “We want people to want to use the fonts when they roll out.”

A “small-end” project – such as a single weight, English-only font – could take around six weeks from initial sketches to delivery of the final font file.

But a typical project usually includes Roman and three Italic weights, providing coverage for the Latin-script languages of Western Europe. This project would take three to four months from first workshop to final delivery. Longer projects can take up to a year. Each process also includes screen optimisation and client feedback time.

Dalton Maag worked with Nokia to design ‘Nokia Pure’

What costs are involved in designing a custom typeface?

For custom font development, Dalton Maag charges for studio time only, with all intellectual property being transferred to the client as part of that fee. The studio has no licensing fees, no limits on how the client can use the fonts, and no requirement to choose Dalton Maag for future extension of the fonts.

Other studios may separate pricing into execution and licensing/IP fees.

However, whether or not a custom font works out to be less expensive than licensing depends on how a brand will use it, says Richard.

“Every font foundry is different but typically the more users of the fonts, and the more exotic the media in which the fonts are to be used, the higher the licence fees,” he says.

“As our approach to custom font development is a fixed-fee regardless of how the fonts will be used, there is almost always a size of user base, scope, or diversity of media at which custom becomes more cost effective than licensing, and the savings increase from there.”

Although Richard says brands still can end up with fonts that can look great but can’t be used thoroughly without “additional and sometimes substantial fees”.

Dalton Maag worked with USA today to create two font families, Unify Sans and Unify Serif

Custom typeface versus font licensing

If you’re a digital brand weighing up the cost of font licensing over designing a custom typeface, start talking to an experienced typeface design studio as early as you can. This will help you to explore your options and listen to practical advice.

“Custom font development isn’t always the right solution and we don’t steer every enquiry towards it as an answer,” says Richard.

If you’re about to say yes to a licence agreement, check you’re not limiting your future options, and check what happens if your requirements grow over time.

Dalton Maag worked with Lush and Method to translate its handwritten style into a digital font

What’s impression-based licensing?

Impression-based licensing for digital media is a relatively new approach used by some foundries, Richard says. Essentially it’s paying more for wider “use”.

Digital font libraries offering impression-based licensing for digital ads include Linotype and MyFonts, both owned by Monotype.

For example, MyFonts says you can use a ‘digital ads’ type of license to embed fonts into digital ads, such as banner ads. MyFonts will supply a kit containing webfonts which may be shared with third parties who are working on your behalf to produce the ad creatives, however you are wholly responsible for it. It’s much less expensive to use a digital dds license rather than a webfont license for this. If you know the number of impressions the campaign requires, that amount can be ordered before the campaign begins.

Dalton Maag created a typeface based on Tatil Design de Ideias’ logotype

Each font foundry is trying to find a pricing model which gets their fonts widely used but covers their costs and allows them to reinvest.

“For some brands this approach makes economic sense as part of campaign spend, for others a one-off fee or ownership of the fonts would be more economical,” says Richard.

If you licence a font you’re not just paying for the specific file you download, you’re making “a small contribution to supporting the development of the whole library”, Richard explains.

“For this to be a sustainable model for a font library, and for fonts to remain accessible to all, there does need to be an element of paying more to use it more.”

https://www.digitalartsonline.co.uk/news/typography/type-design-studio-dalton-maag-on-why-digital-brands-are-opting-for-custom-typefaces/