Being digital, fonts are an ideal Internet product, and this fact has not been lost on the marketplace—there is a huge variety of places you can buy them from.

The field breaks down into a number of areas, and to understand the distinctions, it helps to know something of how the retail type business works. Here is a step-by-step summary.

1. THE FOUNDRY

In the digital era, the type foundry is the type designer's studio, and it's here that fonts are both designed and manufactured. The type designer creates not only the typeface (the shapes and details of the characters), but also the font (the software utility that is used by applications to produce typesetting in that typeface). This is because design and manufacture are combined in the commercially available font authoring tools, Fontographer and Fontlab, and in the proprietary systems used by a few companies like Adobe.

Once the font is made, it takes two steps to market it to the end user—publishing and retailing. So there is some parallel between type design and writing books.

2. THE PUBLISHER

The Publisher is the company which puts a typeface on the market, controls its brand and generally owns its trademark. This is sometimes apparent in the actual name of the typeface, for instance, *Adobe Caslon*, *FF Meta*, or *ITC Garamond*.

3. THE RETAILER

The retailer sells the fonts to the end user; however, as fonts are software, the correct term is licensing.

I have no data as to what the average split is, but typically the retailer takes around 50% of the license fee paid by the end user, the publisher takes 30%, and the designer gets a 20% “royalty”.

The Internet makes it possible for a very small business—a solo designer, even—to design, make, publish and retail its own fonts. Those that take this direct route to market most likely also sell their fonts through retailers, and often sell the fonts of independent designers not interested in starting a font business.

After they’ve been in business a few years, publishers amass a pile of fonts. As the saying goes, “He who dies with the most fonts wins.”

Nothing is ever deleted from the catalog. And the product never ages. (The oldest font on my hard drive is *Helvetica Condensed* from 1987—and it works like the day I first used it.) The Internet contains a timeless, living museum of digital type, and every new typeface added to this pool of data is instant history.

Here are some of the creator-curator-merchandisers:
faces, freeware promotions, and gosh-darn hucksterismo. Like others who rode the grunge wave, he’s matured his product line (a bit). Latest offering of Chank.com is the Psychedelic-Maori font stylings of NZ legend Joseph Churchward.

fonts.com
Publisher, Retailer, Distributor.
The type site of Agfa-Monotype is a bland hodge-podge of mixed material, fronted by a retail-style home page that is tacky, but not enough so. For that, there’s the broad parody of a guy like Chank, or the slick schtick of House Industries (see below.) One would expect Monotype, with its legacy of classic typefaces, to have a classier web site than this.

emigre.com
Foundry, Publisher, Retailer.
Zuzana Licko is the typographic genius of the age. Her faces (Base, Oblong, Matrix, Mrs Eaves, Filosofia, etc.) span a vast range of functionality while artfully exploring the issues of culture and technology. With partner Rudy Vanderlans, art director of Emigre magazine, Licko has led by example. The site design is an ultra-minimal all-html understatement that screams “it’s the content, stupid.” As well as Licko’s work, Emigre publishes fonts by offbeat designers such as sign painter John Downer, counterculturalist Jon Barnbrook, and iconoclast Edward Fella.
Another pioneer of digital fonts, the German company FontShop International, has a chain of retail franchises around the world (including Canada), and publishes its own exclusive “house brand”, the FontFont library—that includes such major faces as Erik Spiekermann’s Meta, Martin Majoor’s Scala, Jan-Albert Pool’s DIN, and popular Canadian-designed faces such as Val Fullard’s Mambol and my own Fontesque.

In addition to FontFonts, FontShops sell the products of other publishers. These are carefully selected and tested, for, as Canadian franchise owner David Michaelides puts it, “we test, guarantee and support what we sell online, otherwise it’s just a price game.”

With this marketing philosophy, FontShop is also able to avoid the redundancy found at some large retailers, which end up selling many versions, by different foundries, of the same classic typeface.

“The hope is that FontShop bridges the gap between the major publishers which have all the fonts, and the individual foundries,” says Michaelides.

fontshop.ca
Publisher, Retailer, Distributor.
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houseindustries.com
Foundry, Publisher, Retailer.
Masters of retro Americana popcult lettering, House boasts the sweetest assemblage of “brushed” curves anywhere ever, not to mention the totally ill Crackhouse, which is the typeface that put this Delaware crew on the map back in the day. House has recently taken a more traditional typographic direction with the precisely-engineered House Gothic, the hoax-modern Chalet and the cleverly evolved OpenType family Simian, without missing a beat.

ITC’s line of tall x-height faces was the look of the ‘70s. Recently, their approach has varied, from the fascinating size-specific ITC Bodoni to Mark van Bronkhorst’s distressed technoface Conduit (used in R.O.B. magazine). Two strong features of this site are the U&lc online magazine, and Euripides, arguably the best “test drive” utility on the Web (see headline).

A vast resource for matters pertaining to digital fonts. Also the place to download Microsoft Core Web TrueType Fonts (e.g. Matthew Carter’s Verdana, Georgia), which everyone should have—resistance is futile. Microsoft’s Links, News and Contacts page is also worthy of regular visits.

microsoft.com/typography
Foundry, Retailer (of free Web fonts).

A unique strategy for a font business: types inspired by art, history and science, marketed in museums and foundations. Online are fonts derived from such classics as Théo van Doesberg’s 1917 De Stijl lettering, and Edward Johnston’s influential London Underground alphabet.

myfonts.com
Retailer, Distributor.
Bitsstream’s Myfonts offers a service for the small foundry, and presents the shopper with an interface that works like an interactive technical manual, with ingenious specimen-generating software, including a full-font character map (detail above, showing Euro symbol). And a list of the site’s top 50 sellers. Brilliant.

p22.com
Foundry, Publisher, Retailer.

A unique strategy for a font business: types inspired by art, history and science, marketed in museums and foundations. Online are fonts derived from such classics as Théo van Doesberg’s 1917 De Stijl lettering, and Edward Johnston’s influential London Underground alphabet.

philsfonts.com
Retailer, Distributor.

These three US retailers (whose names
coincidentally begin with the same letter, it's not as if there are scores more like this) offer fonts from a variety of foundries, mostly independents. Phil's also distributes the Adobe and FontFont brands. They are a good place to check out a variety of contemporary type designs.

www.typography.net
Jeremy Tankard (UK)
Foundry, Publisher, Retailer.
Hot European sites. All have English text, although Storm's is pretty dismal. Each is a class act with lots of brilliant, unique typefaces. If you're jaded, visit somewhere exotic and see what the locals are up to.

t26.com
Foundry, Publisher, Retailer, Distributor.
Carlos Segura's foundry built a reputation for grunge fonts in the early days of digital, and has kept its edge with a techno lineup such as the Identikal faces. Above is a new type from prolific UK graphiste Rian Hughes. The hip selection of foundries sets T-26 apart from other distributors.

thirstype.com
Foundry, Publisher, Retailer.
Like T-26, Rick Valicenti's Chicago outfit is supercool. Fonts by Chester (a Montrealer), Toronto's Paul Sych, New Yorker Barry Deck, and Italian Claudio Piccinini.

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