

# Seeing the Light

By Nick Shinn

Graphic Exchange

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The Sony Cyber-shot. This could be fun.



Headline, size as. (See the whole ad below)  
Futura Book (URW), 9 pt., tracked +30

# Seeing the light

A digital camera and a cell phone.

Small, hefty boxes crammed with circuitry.

For both, the typeface is a light sans serif.

But beyond this similarity the creative directors—Sam Sitt for Sony; and Jane Hope for Clearnet—pursue different paths to extreme typographic conclusions. **By Nick Shinn**

It's common for art directors to have the same basic idea at the same time. In professional problem-solving, the solution is, up to a point, self evident. Clients and consumers expect something that's appropriate, something contemporary which captures the essence of the product. Fine sans serif type fits the bill—it's a style in the spirit of the age, for the products of the age.

However, the light sans serif is only an idea, a beginning.

It's a category of typeface, not a specific setting. What's special about a piece of typography is the execution—the exact font, the exact size, the leading, the tracking, the setting that's precisely one out of millions of possible permutations, a delicately shaded signal that works in the context of the page, the campaign, the marketplace, and the culture. As Taxi's Jane Hope puts it, "Design trends come and go; what matters is to support the [strategic] idea, to have aesthetic relevance."

And if your design is on strategy, then an act of daring, like 12 pt. Helvetica Ultra Light text type, makes perfect sense.

With Clearnet, it began with a marketing strategy: a distilla-

tion of desirability into the two words, "future friendly." From this personalization of the product spring other, supporting qualities, which flesh out Hope's description of the Clearnet image, "Purity, simplicity, an uncomplicated spirit, simple and approachable." These are qualities that Hope admires in a certain kind of Japanese design, and Clearnet carries the vibe loud and clear.

A minimalist, she advocates "design in support of an idea," and defines the Clearnet motif with this 3-part formula:

- a large, close-cropped image of flora or fauna.
- a palette with lots of white space, bright green, and a dash of purple
- lower case Helvetica Ultra Light

That's all there is, and it's a brilliant formula. It works consistently, as long as it's not diluted or altered, and to this end Taxi maintains control of the brand image by handling all Clearnet's marketing materials—advertising, direct mail, and packaging, either directly at Taxi, or by working closely with Clearnet's in-

clearNET™

what you get  
what you pay



features +  
service plans



Cellular phones are great for keeping in touch. Unfortunately, they haven't always been very affordable or particularly easy to purchase. Until now, that is. Introducing Clearnet PCS. It's a truly affordable, easy to buy wireless phone. That means

digital  
pcs

Clearnet brochure by Taxi, Toronto, 1996  
Front cover, size as.

Creative Director: Jane Hope. Photographer: Shin Sugino

Inside text detail, size as.  
Helvetica 25 (Ultra Light), 12/16 pt.

“The light weight is friendly. The white space within the type is a breath of air and freshness.” —Jane Hope

## As light as it gets

ALMOST WEIGHTLESS  
almost weightless

Agency Thin (David Berlow, after Morris Benton, Font Bureau, 1989)

ALMOST WEIGHTLESS  
almost weightless

American Typewriter Light (Joel Kadan, Tony Stan, ITC, 1974)

ALMOST WEIGHTLESS  
almost weightless

Avant Garde Gothic Extra Light (Herb Lubalin, Tom Carnase, ITC, 1970)

ALMOST WEIGHTLESS  
almost weightless

Bodoni Egyptian Thin (Nick Shinn, ShinnType, 1999)

almost weightless

Cirkulus (Michael Neugebauer, 1970)

ALMOST WEIGHTLESS  
almost weightless

Glypha Thin (Adrian Frutiger, 1979)

ALMOST WEIGHTLESS  
ALMOST WEIGHTLESS

Light Classic Roman (Anon., 1900)

ALMOST WEIGHTLESS  
almost weightless

Neue Helvetica Ultra Light (after Max Meidinger, 1983)

ALMOST WEIGHTLESS  
almost weightless

Interstate Hairline (Tobias Frere-Jones, Font Bureau, 2000)

ALMOST WEIGHTLESS  
almost weightless

Romeo Skinny Condensed (Jill Pichotta, David Berlow, Font Bureau, 1991)

ALMOST WEIGHTLESS  
almost weightless

Saginaw (S.A. Cypress, Headliners, 1992)

house design and production staff.

The ingredients of the formula are exact. Says Hope: “There’s a fine line between simplicity and losing its personality.”

Helvetica the mundane, the ubiquitous, the oft derided, most institutional of faces succeeds here because, within the context of the magic formula, it both plays against stereotype, and acts at face value. Against Helvetica’s stodgy reputation, its Ultra Light weight is surprisingly delicate and handsome. Pretty, even. At face value, Helvetica’s oh-so-subtle curves speak not of blandness, but finely engineered precision—in contrast to the large, natural images.

“If we didn’t have nature here, then suddenly the Helvetica would have a totally different life,” says Hope.

All this we know, and it makes sense—after the fact. Hope cautions that type should be chosen intuitively: “I’m not a big believer in rationalizing. The way something comes to life through design, every designer has a personal attitude. Rationalization is only as strong as the design’s credibility.”

### BROAD JOKE, ARCH TYPE

Sam Sitt on his roughs: “Whenever I present layouts I try and do it in the bone-ass simplest way.”

This has two benefits. First, it concentrates the discussion on the concept, not the execution. “Sony has a tone of voice as opposed to a specific look,” he says. And secondly, it establishes the layout as a blueprint that can be modified. As he points out, “Whenever you jot something down on a piece of paper, that doesn’t mean it works in reality.” You can see how the position of the headline and product have moved, from the prosaic rough layout, to a more considered position top right.

The Sony Cyber-shot is a \$1400 camera targetted at consumers with the slogan “This could be fun.” (Future fun, like future friendly, is, I would guess, the love-me-please marketing theme of a great many digital thingies.) But if fun, why not Fontesque instead of the über-rational Futura? Proving once and for all that context is king and type choice a subjective matter, Sitt says, “It felt like a fun typeface.” When pushed, he adds, “Controlled fun, to match the conceptual aspect of Sony products...both technical and novel.” And if you think about it, he’s right, there is a sense of the pure *play* of form in Futura’s basic geometry, a happiness in its profusion of circular shapes.

Not fun like a Barbie-cam. It’s a question of tone, and with a slick, expensive, silver brick of a camera, no matter Sony’s reputation for novelty, given the broad humour of the visual joke, the type has to play the straight man: fun that’s neat and discreet.

Hence Sitt’s understated choice. And with a headline so tiny, that’s fearless understatement.

He prefers traditional faces with the novelty worn off. “If I had picked a typeface that was any bolder or more outrageous, the eye would be drawn to it.” Nonetheless, he specs types with strong personality, like Futura and Clarendon, but he uses them



Sony magazine ad by MacLaren McCann, Toronto, 2000.  
 Creative Director: Sam Sitt  
 Copywriter: Andrew Anthony  
 Photographer: Bruno Crescia  
 Designer: Christian von Seydlitz



Sam Sitt's deliberately rudimentary layout – as presented to the client – focuses attention on the concept, not the execution.

Introducing the Sony Cyber-shot® DSC-P1 digital still camera.

Text detail, size as.  
 Futura Light (URW), 9/26 pt.  
 The URW Futura has characters that are identical to the usual Futura fonts, but the nominal size is smaller and the metrics a little more spacious. This looks like a typical 8 pt.

Pushed too far  
 The previous examples are campaign showpieces. But the effect occasionally falters. At right is some body copy from a newspaper version of the Sony ad, and some text from a Clearnet accessory leaflet. In both cases (reproduced size as) the requirements of the layout have shrunk the type to squintworthiness.

Introducing the Sony Cyber-shot® DSC-P1 digital still camera. It's one o

Rugged Phone Case  
 Made of durable nylon material with multifunctional belt attachment. Heavy duty velcro straps

small. That works—the balance of familiar, strong faces in a low key setting is readable in a way that ordinary faces at the same size would not be.

**SOCIO-TYPOGRAPHIC CRITIQUE**

These pieces are targeted at the young and affluent. For other sectors of the population, their legibility is problematic.

Never mind legibility, how about literacy? In Canada, adult literacy is dismal: 22% of Canadians have serious difficulty with any kind of printed material; a further 26% struggle with all but the most simple of reading and writing tasks (StatsCan, 1996). From a social perspective, fine sans serif type is ageist and elitist. But then, so is Snell Roundhand. The issue is not whether any-

one would want to read type unattractive to their demographic group, but whether they're physically able.

If you're an art director working on high tech accounts, you're lucky. Bring on the superfine sans serifs!—the type looks great at 400% in Quark, and the high res printing is really sharp. However, if you're working on non-cyber stuff for an older or a wider demographic, you'll have to crash the party, because you weren't invited.

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