

THE PROJECT
MIT Home Page

THE CLIENT
Massachusetts Institute of
Technology

THE TEAM
Roger Black, Crystal Suggs,
designers

THE YEAR
2009

MY BEST WORK

ROGER BLACK

Your best work is always a result of relationships with the best clients. In Fall 2009, MIT introduced a new design for its website's home page, the door to hundreds of individual sites for schools, departments, research institutes, programs and the university administration.

There's nothing like having a client as smart as MIT. Moreover, my contact was Jason Pontin, who had commissioned my team four times before, starting with a redesign of Red Herring magazine 15 years ago. Jason is both smart and energetic, and he makes a terrific, sometimes terrifying client.

I always design two alternatives at the beginning of a project to frame the "design space" and to give the client a way to decide on the "design direction." My colleague Crystal Suggs did a brilliant version, which was favored by my studio neighbor, Jeffrey Zeldman, the web Buddha who agreed to consult on our efforts.

I did another version, a simply gridded modern page with the main surprise being the use of the font Franklin. Since I'm a partner at the Font Bureau, I was able to get a web license for ITC Franklin, designed by David Berlow. We were breaking ground here, but the result was exactly the kind of innovation that MIT is known for.

To my surprise, Jason and MIT picked my design. Usually a younger, internet-native developer/designer can design circles around me on the web. But the ITC Franklin made a less webby, more classically modern design come alive.

Web fonts have been possible for 10 years, but there's been no single solution for the different browsers. The type designers and operating system vendors could never agree on a format. Last year, Safari decided to go ahead and use the standard tag "@font-face" to browse standard TrueType or OpenType

fonts, and Firefox and Opera have followed. So now, if you're willing to provide and serve two formats, one for Internet Explorer and one for all the rest, and can get a license, you can use any font on the Web.

With the fast deadlines, the project stopped being fun for a while, and we rushed to finish it. And the web fonts turned out to be more of a challenge than I expected, particularly on PCs. Soon after launch, MIT retreated to Arial (gasp!), while David Berlow and the Font Bureau raced to "hint" fonts for the PC browsers to make them sharper and smoother.

Of course, we're hoping that we can systematically convert the whole Font Bureau library for web fonts on all browsers. Other foundries and new distributors like Typekit are trying to do the same.

As this issue of HOW goes to press, I'm not certain how quickly we'll have the Franklin in place. But go to mit.edu and mit.edu/newsoffice to see the result. The success of a web design, of course, depends more on how well it works than how good it looks. Let me know if this one does both. **HOW**

For more than 35 years, working with magazines like Rolling Stone, for newspapers like The New York Times and websites like Bloomberg.com, Roger Black has been developing ways to communicate content more effectively. A partner in the Font Bureau and Danilo Black, both celebrating 20th anniversaries, he works from a small office in New York City, Roger Black Studio. www.rogerblack.com

» FLASH BACK

Roger Black shared what he looks for in a portfolio on page 33 of HOW's first issue in 1985.