

FONT COMPLIANCE

Respect Your Fonts

Fonts And The Law

Frank J. Martinez, Esq., MBA

Fonts and design are inextricably intertwined. As with many other digital assets, the internet has become woven into the practice of design and is now a foundational element of the business of design. The anonymous nature of the internet, and the ease of sharing files online, makes it easy to lose track of the proprietary nature of font software.

Stated simply, someone, usually a lone designer/artist, created the font and someone owns the rights – including the right to license the use of the software. When fonts and licenses are misused, the implications for a designer and the designer’s clients are monumental, the largest of which is liability.

Software Compliance Must Include Font Compliance

Computer software is protected as a form of intellectual property. It is the role and responsibility of IT and management to ensure that software is legally licensed.

A critical point that is often overlooked is that fonts are also covered by various licensing, intellectual property, and trademark laws. These protections raise the legal importance of font licenses to that of computer software.

Problems with font compliance have led to some prominent legal cases, so it is important to understand these risks. Font compliance violations typically come from those who don’t read or respect the terms of font licenses – and they can come from anywhere in your organization.

Understand Font Compliance Risks

We surveyed professional graphic designers, and while there is a growing trend toward using fonts that are appropriately licensed, there are still ways that unlicensed fonts can enter your workflow. Risks include:

- + Using older licensed fonts that don’t include rights for modern digital usage.
- + Distribution of fonts to unapproved external resources, such as printing.
- + The prominent use of a single glyph of a typeface without foundry approval. For instance, logos and dust jackets.
- + Converting a font from one format to another – even the conversion of older PostScript to OpenType formats.
- + Using a font as a web font without licensing for it.
- + Any user in your organization, even outside the creative team, bringing in and using unlicensed fonts.
- + The use of “free” fonts where commercial use is not explicitly permitted.
- + Not enough licenses for your team.
- + Font “sharing” between employees.

Best Practices To Mitigate The Risk

Established creative teams often have massive font collections, with a lot of uncertainty around historic font purchasing and licensing. Follow these tips for more effective font compliance:

- + Audit your font collection.
- + Manage your fonts centrally and control user access.
- + Create a policy and process for purchasing fonts.
- + Deploy a font management solution to every desktop.
- + Always read your font license agreements.