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A new logo concept by Eric Doctor

What does “Nordstrom” mean?

When we are creating a new identity for a company (and especially a retailer), it is important to first determine the current identity of the company. How do customers perceive this company? What are its core principles, in the minds of consumers? In essence, what are the strengths of this brand that we cannot afford to diminish with a new visual identity?

Quality. Consumers are absolutely certain that they are receiving the highest quality merchandise when they shop at Nordstrom.

Service. Nordstrom’s liberal return policy and reputation for customer service assure customers that they will never leave the store with a bad taste in their mouths.

Ubiquity. Nordstrom operates 112 full-line department stores and is expanding quickly. Customers are assured that they will receive the same experience at any Nordstrom store.



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Where does Nordstrom fit into the current retail landscape?

Nordstrom maintains one of the strongest public images of all retailers to their customers. They are synonymous with impeccable customer service and clothing items to create the foundation of a professional wardrobe. Nordstrom has built this relationship with its customers based on trust and value, and the expectation that it will meet, if not exceed, its customer's needs.

Nordstrom places incredible amounts of trust in their employees, famously issuing them Nordstrom's Employee Handbook, which contains 75 words and charges its employees only with exercising the best judgement in all situations. This goodwill is then passed on to the customers, who then spread Nordstrom's reputation through word-of-mouth, which is the most powerful type of endorsement.

So why change Nordstrom's visual identity, then? Although Nordstrom has arguably the strongest brand equity in retail, its visual identity is not the strongest part of its brand. A company's visual identity should reflect and enhance its brand, while Nordstrom's current wordmark does neither.

Even with all of this strength of brand, Nordstrom has a few potential pitfalls. Nordstrom is seen by many as an affordable luxury brand, which is a difficult line to tread. It is not a bargain brand, so it is inaccessible for a large segment of the population. It is also not explicitly a luxury brand, either, so high-end customers may instead go to other stores to feel more "special." Essentially, Nordstrom runs the risk of appearing too safe, and perhaps boring.

A new wordmark for Nordstrom needs to maintain the strength of the company's current image, while keeping its visual identity fresh. Ideally, we will bring in new consumers — perhaps young professionals looking to build a wardrobe that can last them a lifetime.

Standing out

Perhaps the single most important trait of a good wordmark is its ability to stand out against its competitors'. Script wordmarks are very common in high-end retail — Saks Fifth Avenue and Neiman Marcus, perhaps the two retailers most associated with luxury, use custom scripts. On the lower end, unadorned sans serifs are more common. The exception is Bloomingdale's, a high-end retailer that has made its geometric sans serif wordmark its own.

What makes these wordmarks work, however, is a sense of history. Saks' wordmark conjures up images of posh, 1970s Manhattan — customers feel like they're taking a trip back in time and up in income. The Bloomingdale's wordmark has existed for so long that it is now synonymous with their brand.



What's in a typeface?

The basis of any wordmark (except a custom one, but that's a whole different kettle of fish) is a solid typeface. With Nordstrom, it might make sense to start with a **script** typeface because of the connotations of luxury scripts carry with them. However, scripts often appear stuffy, almost saying that the customer should feel honored to have the privilege to shop in that store — which runs counter to Nordstrom's values and trust. Additionally, Neiman Marcus and Saks already have established script wordmarks, and any attempt at a script wordmark would seem like an attempt to emulate those stores.

A **sans serif** typeface, like *Helvetica*, is also problematic, because of its associations with the low end of retail. A sans serif wordmark would ultimately cheapen Nordstrom's brand equity. This is not to say that it would be impossible to use a sans serif, but there are much more appropriate options.

We could perhaps use a **flared sans**, like *Optima*, but this is too similar to Nordstrom's existing wordmark. It would seem like an unnecessary change and would dilute Nordstrom's brand.

This leaves us with **serif** typefaces. Serifs are a bit trickier and have a lot more variety and sense of history than sans serifs. However, if we use a serif effectively, we can maintain Nordstrom's current brand equity while enhancing its sense of history and associations.

We are now left with a decision of case. The obvious choice appears to be standard capitalization. However, this looks a bit too plain, and ultimately looks more befitting of a boutique than a department store.

All-caps looks a bit more established, but now we're running into the problem of Nordstrom's current wordmark — it's a bit boring. Establishment is a good thing, but not when it is off-putting.

What about small-caps? A bit better, and a bit more elegant, but the N is given a false sense of importance. It almost seems as if the other eight letters are too timid to stand up to this bully.

We could try all-lower case. This seems a bit more playful and forward-thinking, but ultimately it looks too young and aloof, and perhaps even trendy, for an established brand like Nordstrom.

What, then, is there left for us to do?

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A new wordmark

The new wordmark, which uses a unicaser alphabet, looks established yet contemporary. The small-capital N anchors the name. Eliminating the ascender on the D by pulling it down into a small-cap eliminates the visual disruption that the ascender creates.

The wordmark is contained in a neat rectangle, reflecting the establishment and authority of an all-caps wordmark, but the letterforms vary like an all-lowercase, which keeps the wordmark lively. The ascender of the t breaks this rectangle, but only slightly, which prevents the logo from appearing stuffy.

Modifying a classic

The wordmark is created from a modified Hoefler Text, which was one of the first true digital text faces. Hoefler Text is based on the Aldine letterforms of the fifteenth century, but it is very much a contemporary face, designed to demonstrate advanced typesetting technologies.

The serifs have been softened and made more robust to stand up in a display setting. They have also been made shallower, so as not to distract the eye. Round letters like s and o have had their optical corrections lessened, to make the wordmark work in larger sizes than the text sizes for which Hoefler Text was originally designed. The N and D have been heavily modified to fit in with the lowercase.

An additional identifier

Although the wordmark will serve as the primary identifier for Nordstrom, it is wise to have a secondary identifier that will work in other environments. One thing that is consistent through almost all Nordstrom stores is the façade — a marble entryway standing as a monument to retail. We can use this façade and its strong associations with the Nordstrom brand to our advantage.

A simplified version of the entrance, containing the custom N, recalls the inviting experience that any Nordstrom store provides. Inside customers will be greeted by impeccable customer service, soft piano music, and high-quality garments to create the foundation of any wardrobe.

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