

A picture is worth a thousand words

Angharad Wynne explains how good pictures for attracting all-important attention require thought, creativity and a keen eye

As the saying goes: 'A picture is worth a thousand words.' In today's society where we're constantly bombarded by media messages, a good picture that will attract attention has never been worth more.

But what makes a good picture? In this digital age, when even the most average photographer can take a good enough picture and enhance it with some software, it seems that almost anyone can – and will – pass themselves off as a photographer. However, only a few very skilled creative photographers are actually worth investing in.

A picture is only worth a thousand words when it captures a thousand words, i.e. a story. This requires more than simply shooting what is visible. It requires thought, a creative mind and keen eye to imbue the image with meaning. Portrait painters have been doing this for centuries. The portrait of Queen Elizabeth I known as the *Armada Portrait* was painted by George Gower in 1590. In this picture Elizabeth I is depicted with highly exaggerated shoulders and broad arms that powerfully remind the contemporary viewer of portraits of her father, Henry VIII. It also invites the viewer to think of her as broad shouldered and able to bear the responsibilities of royal office. She

wears many strings of pearls which symbolize virginity, purity and virtue and her narrow waist is a hint at her femininity, grace and attractiveness. In the portrait, the queen's hand rests upon a globe. In fact, her fingers rest over North America, where just before this painting was created the first English child was born at the English settlement in Virginia. The windows behind Elizabeth depict two scenes that did not occur at the same time. The right-hand window shows the departure of the Armada from Spain; the left-hand window depicts its famous defeat at the hands of the English fleet in 1588, which began England's long period of sea dominance.

This portrait in fact depicts a queen in her 32nd year of reign when she would have been 59 years old. Nevertheless, she is portrayed as powerful, beautiful, youthful of figure and virtuous. It communicates to her subjects the image of a queen at the height of her powers and promotes the idea that her influence extends far beyond the boundary of her small island kingdom. In this one image, George Gower – a PR man before his time – has managed to communicate many messages to the viewer in one snapshot.

In 2005 I was working as head of communications at the Wales

Millennium Centre in Cardiff. The Centre had recently opened and we'd generated a good deal of media coverage from a run of exclusive UK performances that year by the world-renowned Kirov Ballet. Shortly afterwards, the less well-known Australian Ballet were due to visit with their contemporary production of *Swan Lake*. It was difficult to get the media to take note. In their eyes, they'd just done the big ballet story for Wales Millennium Centre, and we'd attracted so much attention during the opening a few months earlier that, understandably, the media felt that they should focus on other venues. However, internally, the pressure was on to get editorial coverage for *Swan Lake* and support ticket sales. The images supplied by the company had been used in the pre-publicity months earlier, the story angles had also been used up so we needed something else to raise awareness. Photography provided the answer.

I had been working with a number of excellent photographers, but for this occasion I contacted Neil Bennet with whom I'd worked on a number of shoots in the past. We came up with the idea of creating an image to publicise the production that would be a literal representation of the ballet, i.e. a swan ballerina on an actual lake. It was a great idea and

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Neil Bennett

technically possible, if challenging. Photography permission was obtained from the local council and the park manager agreed to open the gates to us around dawn. Neil purchased a clear plastic coffee table and a pair of good waders and the obliging prima ballerina and her dresser turned up for the shoot along with a beautiful swan costume. The weather was with us. It was a bright, dry morning and the lake looked calm and serene. Neil placed the clear plastic table just beneath the water line and, in his waders, carried our Odette in full swan costume and ballet pumps across to it. Once in place, she went gracefully into pose, and then, magically, the lake's community of swans became interested in our antics and gathered around.

The image was stunning. It made the front page of a national Welsh newspaper, a magazine and two

regional papers. In addition to promoting the performances, the image generated editorial copy about how it was achieved. It was also taken up as a captioned photo story by three national UK quality broadsheets, one mid-market paper and numerous websites. In all, investment in the image had been a few hundred pounds, creative thought, a few hours organising the shoot, one set of ruined used ballet pumps and a very early morning call! At the time we calculated that the PR value that the image generated was close to £10,000.

Working with photographers should be a joy and it should be cost effective. Good photography is an investment. Don't just use photographers you've inherited from your predecessor. Ask around – speak to regional newspapers, media and design consultancies about freelance photographers they rate then meet

those photographers and look through their portfolios. Decide what you feel they're good at and educate yourself on the difference between really clever PR photography and someone who just snaps what's they're given with a digital camera – there's a world of difference. And one last thing: make sure you have a clear agreement with the photographer about how you can use the image. In most cases you will be purchasing a licence to use that image for marketing and PR purposes, but you cannot use the image to make money, so including it in a saleable calendar or even a saleable brochure may not be covered. If you need more advice on these licensing issues and how to go about creating an agreement with a photographer, check out the Association of Photographers website www.the-aop.org which has lots of free practical advice as well as paid-for downloads of relevant chapters from its in-depth publication *Beyond the Lens*. More than anything, enjoy working with photographers and developing your skill at identifying photographic opportunities and images that really will tell a thousand words and more. ●



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