

Visual persuasion

Heather Maitland asks, 'How do you choose the best image to use?'

Research shows that images are the most powerful tool we have, working in some unexpected ways. Banking websites that have no images are seen as untrustworthy.¹ The image on that postcard sent by friends or family evokes strong emotions which really do make us want to travel.² Emotive images inserted in political TV ads for just 30 milliseconds impact on viewers' evaluation of candidates.³

Why do they work so well? Neuroscientists have found that emotions are used as a kind of indexing system for memories. The reaction is physical: when our potential attendee, visitor or participant looks at an emotionally arousing picture, their blood sugar level rises which means they remember it. Images that are merely pleasant don't have this effect.^{4,5}

Images need to be this powerful. Packets in a supermarket catch a consumer's eye for just three-tenths of a second yet in that time each has to grab attention, say what is inside, appeal to the consumer's psyche and show how the contents will meet their particular needs.⁶

Sandra Niehause suggests these guidelines for choosing an effective image:

- Does it convey the right feeling for your brand and message?
- Does it add information?
- Is it (at least fairly) unique?
- Can you crop out any unnecessary details and make sure the key element is front and centre?⁷

But it's much more complicated than this.

Everyone has a different experience of the images we choose. It depends on pre-existing knowledge that comes from their cultural background and traditions, childhood experiences, previous advertising material they have seen, their understanding of the purpose of our marketing material and the social context in which they are reading it.⁸ This previous experience is important. Our readers prefer images that seem familiar because their brains have already built neural pathways to memories that have been processed in a similar way, have triggered similar emotions and are stored nearby.² Where we give them a lot of information to process rapidly, we should put pictures on the left and words on the right because the part of the brain that deals with emotions more easily perceives material on the left-hand side.

So, effective images need to trigger pre-programmed, emotion-laden responses to visual cues.⁹ But how can we choose images that will do this?

Colour is a vital ingredient. Pink, peach, cream and lavender signal sweet tastes and scents while icy blue, green and blue-green are linked to cool refreshment.⁶ Ever wondered why fast-food outlets are themed in red and yellow? Because yellow attracts attention and red stimulates appetite. Posh restaurants want their customers to relax and linger so their décor uses hints of blue – but not too much as blue can be an appetite suppressant.¹⁰ We can't rely on any kind of universal colour code, though, as response to colour is largely cultural: Chinese people associate red with royalty and happiness and purple with poison and

danger, but people of English origin associate red with danger and purple with royalty.¹¹

The intensity of the colour (its saturation) and its brightness (whether it looks as though it has white or black mixed in) are also crucial. Ads with highly saturated colours trigger greater feelings of excitement and liking while pastel colours trigger feelings of relaxation.¹² Cool pastels are most effective in getting people to trust online banking services.¹

The placement of the viewer in relation to the objects or people in the picture plays a role, too. So does texture, for example blurring can be used to induce feelings of fear.¹³ Even the composition can trigger emotions: sharp angled shapes feel powerful and dynamic, right angles evoke solidity and stability and curves gentleness and smoothness.⁹ Simplicity, symmetry and unity mean that images are easier to perceive and so are more likely to trigger positive feelings of familiarity.

But the most important emotional cue is the image content. Images with identical pigments, saturation, brightness, form and texture can trigger different emotions just because one shows a baby and the other a tiger.¹³

Images in advertising have two more roles apart from eliciting emotions: to represent an aspect of the product or experience and to make a less literal link between the product and something else.⁹

Although people perceive familiar images more easily and can more readily retrieve the positive emotions that are linked with them, too much familiarity is boring. The more novel



and complex the image, the more exciting the viewer's response and the more they engage with and like it. But only up to a point. Engagement and liking decrease if the image is too novel and complex.¹⁴ Headlines that give a clue to the meaning of complex visual metaphors increase viewers' liking and comprehension. Headlines that explain the metaphor increase comprehension but viewers dislike them because they don't get the joy of working it out for themselves.

We use rhetorical tricks in our copy to make it more effective. Viewers respond more positively to images that use the same kinds of tricks like repetition, puns, metaphors and antithesis. They seem to have no problems understanding them, unless they are specific to a culture different from their own. This kind of visual rhetoric allows marketers to say the unsayable. Researchers have explored the limited success of anti-smoking campaigns. They found that cigarette advertisements using images that imply active, healthy lifestyles and pristine environments have created such a strong subconscious link that it undermines health warnings.

When a tool is that powerful, it's worth using well. So my New Year's resolution is to spend a bit more time choosing images that are emotionally effective as well as visually appealing. ●

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