Investigating the power of imagery in marketing communication: evidence-based techniques

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Keywords

Advertising, Marketing communications, Qualitative techniques, Evidence, Psychology

Abstract

Visual imagery has potentially powerful effects on human psychology and physiology, affecting ideas, perceptions, beliefs, feelings, behaviour and health. It plays a central role in most advertising, especially posters, print and TV, but also radio through the ability of language and description to conjure up images internally. In order to investigate the effects of imagery and devise appropriate tools to analyse its influence on the consumer, we need an understanding of the mechanisms involved. Techniques that are grounded in knowledge and theory have greater validity and credibility as to their effectiveness, and can give clients more confidence when buying qualitative research.

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Introduction

Imagery is part of everyday experience, and has been since early cave painters and temple decorators. It surrounds and intrudes into modern life to a greater extent than in the past through popular and commercial art, pictures and calendars on walls, newspapers, magazines, advertising and packaging. It is not just a visual world that we inhabit, but one filled with selected, carefully cropped images that carry symbolic and emotional meanings. These images have been studied by many disciplines, including, sociology, media studies, semiotics and psychology.

It is the use and effects of imagery in advertising and packaging that are of particular relevance for market research. Its role is to understand, and predict, the way this imagery is perceived and processed, as well as its impact on mind and body. The reliance on imagery has grown sharply over recent decades, for a number of reasons, including:

- The drive for global marketing and the development of international brands, such as Coca-Cola, Levi-Strauss, Nike, or Mercedes (Segar and Brehm, 2000). To achieve consistent branding across many markets required advertising campaigns that could transcend languages and cultures (Lannon, 1991). As a result, imagery (and music) have come to play an increasingly important role.
- In a climate of intensifying competition, where there is little functional differentiation in product performance, and consumers have become more marketing-literate, articulate, powerful and even cynical, explicit brand claims and messages are scrutinised, deconstructed and dismissed unless they offer genuine news and credible benefits. Paradoxically, brand building has to rely increasingly on non-rational, implicit communication.
- With increasing legal restrictions on what can be said directly, images and symbols have become more important vehicles for communicating impressions and brand personalities. Advertising relies on visual devices, exaggeration, innuendo and humour (even self-parody) to covertly express the claim, as well as on images to create mood and carry conviction.

In this climate, market research has an important role in finding appropriate imagery to impress customers.

Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal
Volume 5 · Number 3 · 2002 · pp. 164–171
 · ISSN 1352-2752
DOI 10.1108/13522750210432977

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Volume 5 · Number 3 · 2002 · 164–171

Very often in qualitative market research, advertising has been investigated in focus groups, and much less often in individual interviews (Branthwaite and Swindells, 1997). However, a strong case can be made that group discussion is biased towards the social and rational responses to advertising. Verbal interaction focuses on judgements and cognitive interpretations, and largely overlooks the personal, idiosyncratic and intuitive effects by which brands build associations and character in the consumer's mind.

This paper looks for alternative tools to investigate the influences of imagery, which capture the richness of the effects from advertising. In particular, techniques that are grounded in knowledge and theory will have greater validity and credibility as to their effectiveness, and can give clients more confidence when buying qualitative research (as Shankar and Goulding (2001) have argued in relation to the interpretation of verbal accounts). This case is built here primarily on psychological evidence and theory.

As an aside, it is worth acknowledging that imagery is not only a target for market research (which is the focus here), but imagery can also be a tool in market research to act as a vehicle that enables consumers to express their ideas, intuitive perceptions and feelings about brands. Indeed, we frequently use pictures, collages, drawing and even clay modelling to facilitate the expression of brand personalities and subjective images (see Branthwaite *et al.*, 2001; Toiati, 2001, for illustrations of the techniques and analysis). These have a role in surfacing unconscious ideas and enabling comparisons across different cultures. However, this would be the topic of a different paper (Branthwaite, 1995; Branthwaite and Holme, 1999).

The power of imagery

The potency of imagery from the point of view of communication and persuasion is that it has the capacity to transcend the boundary between the outside world and what is happening inside us. External objects and events can impinge on us as if they are inside of us – the sound of a dentist's drill in another room sets our teeth on edge; another's sneeze, cough or a yawn seems to irritate our lungs or stimulate our facial muscles; while a gory image seems to strike at our own.

Equally, we can imagine objects or places and project them outwards as if they were physical, real and external. In this way, we can view products and packaging from different sides and manipulate them in our imagination, or give directions as to where to find them in a supermarket. Extensive research has demonstrated that viewing real objects, pictures or scenes, and the same imagined objects have almost identical properties in the workings of the mind (Eysenck and Keane, 2000; Richardson, 1999). On a very different basis, the same conclusion has been drawn by Greenfield (2000, p. 73) using neurophysiological evidence that we use the same areas of the brain for vision and visual imagination – "imagination is vision running backwards".

Some illustrations will indicate the effects of visual imagery and the mechanisms involved.

Thinking

Imagery is used in problem solving, creativity and feats of remembering. Many scientific discoveries were produced as a result of imagery, such as Faraday's understanding of magnetism: "An image of invisible lines of force as narrow tubes curving through space which rose up before him like things". These images are now accepted routinely as part of a shared culture in the way we think of abstract physical phenomena.

Einstein arrived at his theory of relativity not by abstract thought or mathematical calculation, but by "visualising effects, consequences and possibilities", which he claimed to be his particular ability (Shepard, 1978). He did this by performing a mental experiment where he imagined himself travelling alongside a beam of light (at 186,000 miles per second!). This enabled him "to confront the paradox that the stationary spatial oscillation that he saw corresponded neither to anything that could be perceptually experienced as light, nor to anything described by Maxwell's mathematical equations".

Extraordinary feats of memory are achieved by visualising objects and placing them in sequence around familiar places (Hunter, 1964). The famous Russian mnemonic, Shereshevskii, could remember lists of a hundred and more objects, words in a foreign language, lists of geometrical figures, lengthy

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formulae, musical motifs. He could recall the sequence in the order it was given, reverse order, or if given an item at random he could readily say what came before or after in the sequence. He could recall certain series of words up to 20 years later. He achieved this through imagery, by taking a walk in his imagination starting from Pushkin Square and going down Gorky Street, placing the objects in notable positions – against a white wall, beside a street lamp, on top of a wall. Visualisation like this has the particular benefit of easily preserving sequencing and chaining of objects (because, as described later, it involves episodic memory).

In hypnosis, it is important to find the right imagery to engage the patient and enable them to relax and focus their minds (Heap, 1996). Neuro-physiological recordings during induction of hypnosis indicate a transition from frontal, possibly left-biased, hemispheric activation to more posterior right-brain, suggesting more imaginal and holistic processing (Oakley *et al.*, 1996). It is possible to observe whether children are responding to hypnotic suggestion by observing their narrowed, focussed attention and absorption in the images and fantasies (even though they may be still opening and closing their eyes or fidgeting). The imagery provides an "empathy bridge" (McKellar, 1957) between patient and hypnotist, which enables them to have control, through suggestions, over the subject's mind and feelings or to change and implant memories, ideas and attitudes.

Feelings

Seeing images of sadness, anger, or fear can be differentiated by cardiovascular changes in the viewer (Graham, 1990). Imagery of various kinds produces physiological effects on heart rate, pupil dilation, blood sugar levels, blister formation, etc. Imagining eating a lemon has a direct effect on output from salivary glands. That images can play a strong role in the control of autonomic and affective states has been used extensively in procedures for treating stress and phobias.

Research reported by the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, set up by the US Congress and President, documented more precisely than ever before, the potential of static visual images, movies and literature to arouse feelings. Research shows that there is not an automatic reflex response to pictures or symbols portraying erotic activity. Instead the imagery has to engage the reader and initiate thought processes (fantasies). It is this cognitive processing that brings about arousal. Giving increasingly difficult mental tasks to do at the same time as exposing participants to erotic materials (which progressively blocked their capacity for other thoughts) meant that they became progressively less aroused (Przybyla, 1983).

Sports performance

It is said that sport is played with the body, but it is largely won in the mind. Visualisation is recommended as a technique for concentration by athletes based on their experience in using them in tennis (Jim Courier), basketball (Michael Jordan) and figure skating (Nancy Kerrigan). This involves seeing and feeling a skill in one's imagination before actually executing it (Moran, 2000). The technique improves skilled performance by chunking the sequence of movements required, then rehearsing them to make them more automatic and smoother.

It is also beneficial to develop the habit of positive visualisation by imagining what needs to be done for success, rather than to avoid mistakes. The secret of effective visualisation is to focus on specific actions, that are relevant to winning, and under your own control. The effect is to raise confidence, boost effort and put the mind and muscles into direct synchrony.

Medicine and healing – mind/body interaction

Images can induce changes in blood sugar level, white blood cell activity and immune function (Walker, 1997). The use of imagery in shrines serves to alter the perceptions and expectations believers have of their state of health, and this serves to bring about physiological effects (Achterberg, 1985). The pack imagery and branding of some well-known medicines can increase pain relief by half as much again as the analgesic ingredient (Branthwaite and Cooper, 1981).

In Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, people are introduced to the source of their phobia in the form, for example, of a plastic spider or picture of a snake, and encouraged to move as close to it as they can. These images still have tremendous power to induce fear or anxiety and the corresponding autonomic reactions (heart rate, blood pressure, dry mouth). Using this therapy, patients are given help to

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reframe the image so that, by altering their perception and expectations of the object, they are enabled to control their fears.

Imagery is a very successful way of assisting insomniacs to get to sleep. Picturing a pleasant and relaxing scene enabled them to fall asleep 20 minutes sooner (on average) than if they did nothing. Vivid and engaging scenes that were also relaxing, such as a waterfall, beach, breaking waves or a favourite holiday destination were more effective than counting sheep, which *delayed* the onset of sleep (Harvey and Payne, 2002). Using imagery blocks out the repetitive verbal ruminations of practical thought. It enables detachment from reality and present concerns as well as transference of mood from the imagery.

The number of white blood cells in circulation, levels of thymosin-alpha1 (a hormone especially important to T-helper cells) and other indices of improved immune function are enhanced through imagery (Graham, 1999). These included humorous movies and a compassionate film about Mother Teresa's work caring for the sick and poor. Reporting on this study, Pelletier and Herzing (1989) comment that information and suggestions may enhance immune function regardless of whether we are outwardly aware of an effect or emotional reaction – "visualisation translates an abstract idea into a concrete experience" that produces emotions within us. These, and other findings, prompted awareness that it may be possible to control physiological functions, formerly thought to be involuntary or autonomic, by means of imagery.

The mechanism of imagery

Imagery is a powerful tool for changing the state of mind and body, and obviously much used in advertising for this reason. We see from these examples that imagery has a strong role in control of autonomic and affective states and can have effects on ideas, attitudes and feelings. This is not surprising in the evolution of human psychology, as the face and non-verbal gestures are critically important for perceiving emotions, inferring reactions to our actions and words, and anticipating others' responses.

The mechanism for processing images is different to that for verbal material, and this distinction has been incorporated into many theories of perception and information processing (Branthwaite and Swindells, 1995; Richardson, 1999). In particular, images have a more direct connection to feelings and unconscious ideas. Some of these differences in the way images and language are processed are summarised in Figure 1.

Images have an immediate impact, as they are perceived holistically rather than in the linear-sequential fashion of verbal accounts. Whereas verbal messages are processed rationally and consciously, visual imagery is perceived and partially processed pre-consciously.

There is evidence that pre-conscious processing is very powerful by evading critical scrutiny through conscious, rational appraisal (Eysenck and Keane, 2000):

- Images affect our impressions of people and places without awareness, as illustrated by the following experiment. Happy or angry faces were flashed on a screen for four milliseconds (subliminally) or one second (when they would be consciously seen) while people were looking at Chinese ideographs which they were rating for liking (a form of projective technique). The liking ratings were influenced by the facial images only with the shorter exposure, when they were "seen" unconsciously so there was no opportunity for conscious, rational evaluation or control over feelings.
- The affective qualities of an image (mood, feelings) are processed much faster than the cognitive meanings we derive. There is evidence for two distinct processing systems – the affective and semantic.
- The fast, non-conscious emotion circuit links sensory information about emotional properties of an image (analysed in the thalamus) directly to the amygdala – "the brain's emotional computer" (LeDoux, 1996). The slow, cortical emotional circuit, sends information from the thalamus to the amygdala via the cortex, where more detailed analysis of the emotional meaning is conducted.

Imagery is processed episodically (Branthwaite and Swindells, 1997) in terms of situations, participants, what is happening, an on-going event, the emotions and experiences

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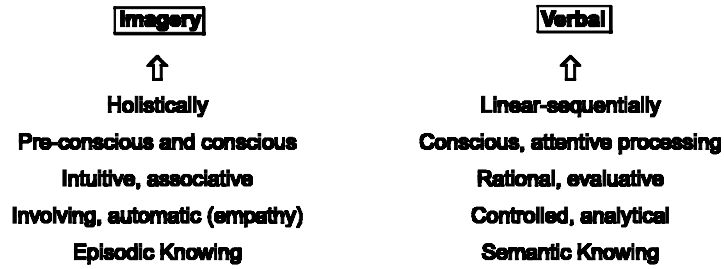
Figure 1 Comparative processing of imagery and words



of the people. Images have greater potential to engage and involve. Visualisation translates an abstract idea into a concrete experience. We relate to the emotions of the situation and participants through the characteristics and qualities of the image (Figure 2), and connect ourselves to the scenes and events that are happening (as demonstrated all too dramatically by the TV pictures of the air strikes on New York's Twin Towers).

Researching the effects of advertising imagery

Imagery, in advertising, as elsewhere, has the potential for wide-ranging effects, as illustrated by the examples earlier:

- Bypass rational defences and evaluations.
- Foster a richer, more direct emotional experience.
- Increase positive self-beliefs and improve coping skills (reduce stress).
- Create relaxation and enable psycho-somatic control between mind and body.
- Clarify goals and ideals.
- Enhance feelings of control and self-actualisation.
- Stimulate self-persuasion, produce self-fulfilling fantasies and empowerment.

In advertising, the expert use of images provides an effective route to building and sustaining customer relationships, providing it is done successfully.

Using this model (Figure 3), the key features of imagery to be assessed are:

Figure 2 Facets of an image (the 4 Cs)

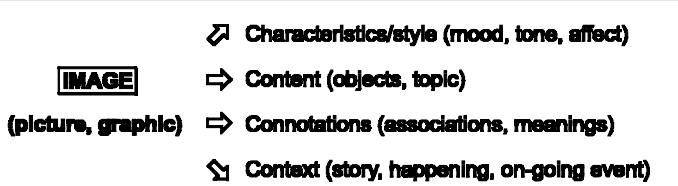
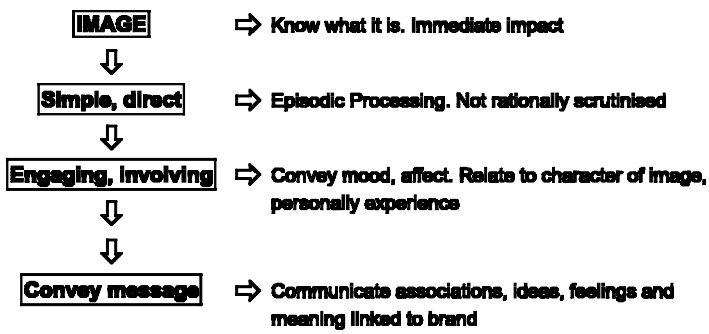


Figure 3 Perceiving ad images



- Clarity as to what the image is. The focus of the image should emerge boldly.
- The image should be simple and direct. While having interesting detail and depth, there should be a clear "figure-ground" relation. This is important to avoid cognitive/semantic analysis and thereby rational scrutiny and evaluation.
- The presentation should engage and communicate mood, emotion and the brand message.

Qualitative tools

Qualitatively, what is needed are research tools to assess the potential of imagery in advertisements, packaging, or logos for their effectiveness. Obviously, to understand the powerful effects that imagery can have, it is not good enough to ask simply whether viewers like or dislike the advertising – in either case, they may still be moved by the imagery into re-evaluating the brand's position. This requires specific elicitation methods to assess the effect of imagery in advertisements on feelings, intuitive ideas and purchasing intentions. As Jung pointed out, a symbol possesses specific connotations in addition to the conventional and obvious meaning – it implies something vague, unknown or hidden from us (Jung, 1977).

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Research tools should tap into episodic processing at lower levels of consciousness, and avoid raising rational scrutiny. To achieve this, imagery itself is more likely to provide an effective tool, as it is more closely related to the expression of the unconscious than words. So responses are less likely to be filtered through the conscious critical apparatus because language has to be consciously understood before it can expressed. Also, the "mindless" commentaries that often parallel our actions (e.g. talking aloud while working) as well as rapid word-associations that are unconnected and disjointed, are less consciously controlled than introspective, reflective discourse, and so partially evade semantic censorship.

In part, these criteria can be achieved by the way questions are posed when applying classical projective techniques, for example:

- The use of *bubble drawings* representing the consumer in the shopping situation or using a particular product. By encouraging respondents to imagine themselves in that situation, and to spontaneously note down what is running through their mind there, we can look at how imagery from an advertisment is going to echo in the consumer's mind at the point of sale or when using that brand.
- *Laddering* is also valuable as a tool to probe the symbolism and associations of advertising imagery for the individual. Laddering involves a chain of questions that, in effect, ask the respondent: what are the key features of the advertisment (pictures, words, etc.) and then repeatedly probing these to find out what each means to the individual, and why that is important/interesting to them. Systematically repeating these questions, reveals the hierarchy of associations and attractions to the consumer in terms of consequential benefits and ultimately their intangible life values. To be effective (while not becoming intrusive, tedious or boring) requires good rapport with the respondent, where the interviewer becomes a collaborator or accomplice to investigate the significance of the elements in a spontaneous and uncensored way. This probing reveals the linkages between the advertising imagery, the ideas and feelings conveyed, perceived product benefits and consumers' motives and values.
- "*Metaphysical thinking*" to force non-rational expression of inner personal and intuitive reactions to the images. For example, if the advertisment had some magical spell, what would it be?

These techniques for assessing advertising imagery are better conducted in individual interviews rather than group discussion (Branthwaite and Swindells, 1997).

However, to examine more directly the effects of visual imagery there is another approach that may be even more fruitful, based on *synaesthesia*. This literally means "experiencing together" and people who have strong imagery often experience this overlap in sensations across different senses. For example, listening to music may give rise to sensations of colour or images of patterns. Shereshevskii, the mnemonist we met earlier, had particularly pronounced synaesthesia. For him, visual forms were experienced as emitting characteristic sounds and having taste; sounds had colour, taste and tactile qualities (Hunter, 1964; McKellar, 1997). Not everyone has such strong experiences, so in some circumstances it may be desirable to recruit specifically for this aptitude, although that raises questions about the representativeness of the findings.

There are eight sensory modes: sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell, pain, temperature and kinaesthesia (the sense of bodily posture and orientation). These give us many possibilities to explore perceptions and associations to imagery by translating experiences from the visual modality into other channels. For example, we can ask respondents to describe visual imagery in terms of other senses:

- What is the smell of this image? What scent or perfume does it have?
- What sound does it emit? What music would go with it? What musical instrument does the image evoke?
- What bird or animal sound does this image emit?
- What is the texture that fits the image. Find something in this room that has the same feel?
- What feelings on your skin or inside your body do you get when seeing this image?
- Make a gesture, with your hands, face or body, to fit with the advertisement (this is sometimes known as "Sculpture" in counselling work).

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Alternatively, a matching technique can be used, especially for respondents with less florid synaesthesia, by giving them varieties of colours, textures, sounds, etc., to chose from to represent their experience from seeing a press advertisement or outdoor poster. The stimulus material for this matching test can be devised on the findings from research with strong synaesthesics to ensure that it is relevant and appropriate to capture the effects of specific advertising. The matching approach is, of course, open to quantification on larger samples.

Conclusions

Imagery is a powerful tool, in advertising or real life, for implanting ideas or suggestions, eliciting emotions, giving hope and confidence or turning an abstract idea into a real and credible product benefit. Imagery works in a different way to verbal persuasion, that is based on rational evidence or claims. In the verbal domain, there is always an implicit question as to who is speaking, what is their authority, and what is their motive and interest. Imagery appears to be objective, and is about experiencing something directly, for oneself, which takes on a personal reality for each viewer.

In conducting qualitative market research to detect the influences from packaging or advertising imagery on consumers' ideas and feelings, the techniques should operate in the same modalities as imagery itself – personal, pre-conscious, intuitive: sensing and feeling rather than thinking and knowing. Viewers and readers of advertising do not respond as art critics, analysing and reflecting on the images that are presented to them. Research shows that we react to images by experiencing them directly and inwardly, in terms of emotions, mood, and intuitions.

On the basis of how images work and the effects they produce, qualitative tools have been devised that are appropriate to evaluating advertising imagery. Successful techniques elicit episodic rather than semantic processing – in other words, tap into the advertising as experienced in order to reach pre-conscious processing of images, without stimulating conscious scrutiny and evaluation that would lead to artificial evaluations and critical assessment.

In particular, techniques are recommended for use in market research based on: imagination and the suspension of reality; translation of sensations across different sensory modalities; and projection into particular circumstances through cartoon imagery and visualisation. These enable the consumer to communicate their experience of advertising imagery in metaphors, analogies, feelings, and a stream of associations and fantasies. This output transcends the constraints of reason and rational interpretation to provide richer and more direct impressions about their perceptions of advertising imagery and symbols.

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