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OPINION

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RIES & RIES

Repositioning 'Positioning': The best way into the consumer's mind is not with verbal nails, but with a visual hammer

Forty years ago, Advertising Age published a series of articles by Jack Trout and my father, Al Ries, titled "The Positioning Era Cometh."

Almost a decade later, McGraw-Hill published their book "Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind." In the years that followed, "positioning" became one of the most talked-about concepts in the marketing community. In its 75th anniversary issue, Ad Age selected positioning as one of its 75 "top ad moments." More than 1.4 million copies of the book have been sold, including 400,000 copies in China.

As revolutionary as positioning was, however, it had a weakness. Invariably, positioning strategy was expressed verbally. You looked for a hole in the mind and then filled that hole with your brand name.

But the best way into the mind is with visuals, not with words. Visuals play a more important role in marketing because they hold emotional power that sticks.

In 1973, for example, psychology professor Lionel Standing conducted a research study in which he asked subjects to look at 10,000 images over a five-day period.

The images were presented for just five seconds each. When the subjects were showed pairs of images (one they had seen before and one they had not),



VISUAL HAMMER
LAURA RIES



SIX WAYS TO CREATE A VISUAL HAMMER



SHAPE (TARGET)

A motivating nail (cheap chic) and a memorable visual hammer help Target differentiate itself from Walmart. It may not be aesthetically pleasing, but in the retail category Target's target is undoubtedly the most-distinctive and most-memorable trademark. The utter simplicity of the design is what gives the Target hammer its visual power.



COLOR (CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN)

In 1992, French designer Christian Louboutin applied red nail polish to the sole of a shoe because he felt it lacked energy. The red sole is the hammer that has helped Christian Louboutin regularly top the Luxury Institute's index of "most prestigious women's shoes."



PACKAGE (POM WONDERFUL)

With a shape unlike any other, the Pom Wonderful bottle is unique. Other packages that double as visual hammers include the Heinz ketchup bottle, the Absolut vodka bottle, the Maker's Mark bottle with the dripping wax seal, and the Lea & Perrins bottle wrapped in paper and gold tape.



ACTION (TROPICANA ORANGE/STRAW)

Some of the best hammers combine surprising visuals, such as a straw sticking out of an orange, with an action, such as drinking from the orange. Tropicana's visual hammer reinforces its "Not from concentrate" verbal nail.



FOUNDER (COLONEL SANDERS OF KFC)

Harland Sanders, better known as Colonel Sanders, traveled the country in a white suit and black string tie promoting his secret fried-chicken recipe of 11 herbs and spices. The name change to KFC was presumably made to walk away from the perception of unhealthy "fried" food, but a better strategy might have been to call the chain "Colonel Sanders Chicken," forever locking the name of the brand with its unique visual hammer.



HERITAGE (WELLS FARGO STAGECOACH)

Consumers want stability and longevity, among other things, from a bank. The Wells Fargo name and stagecoach visual hammer provide both. Too many marketing people think "old" is bad and "new" is good. But "old" can sometimes be the foundation on which to build an up-to-date brand. Of the four largest banks over the past 10 years, the bank with the stagecoach visual hammer was the most profitable.

they remembered 70% of the images they had seen before.

I challenge you to try presenting 10,000 advertising slogans for five seconds each and see how many of them a person will remember five days later.

Now, here's a visual everyone can identify: a pink ribbon. Consider what that symbol has done for Nancy Brinker, who in 1982 started a foundation to fight breast cancer in memory of her sister, Susan G. Komen. Since then, the foundation has raised nearly \$2 billion.

In 2010, Coca-Cola spent \$267 million advertising its brand in the U.S. What was Coke's slogan? Most people don't remember. What they do remember is the "contour" bottle. Even though the company sells very little Coke in those bottles, the visual is strongly identified with the brand.

Today, Susan G. Komen for the Cure is the world's largest nonprofit source of money to combat breast cancer.

In contrast, the American Cancer Society was founded in 1913, yet most people have no idea what visual symbol the society uses. The Cancer Society has a trademark that is almost impossible to verbalize, while Susan G. Komen has a visual that is easy to describe.

I call Komen's pink ribbon its visual hammer because the interplay between

words and images is like a nail and a hammer. A strong verbal idea is a brand's nail, but the hammer that really drives home the idea is the visual.

This concept is even more important in today's global economy, where a strong visual hammer can cross borders without requiring translation.

In 2010, Coca-Cola spent \$267 million advertising its brand in the U.S. What was Coke's slogan? Most people don't remember. What they do remember is the "contour" bottle.

The contour bottle is not just a package but a visual hammer that emphasizes the idea that Coke is the original, the real thing. Even though Coca-Cola sells very little

product in contour bottles, the visual is strongly identified with the brand. And the company reinforces the visual-hammer effect by using the bottle image on its cans, cups, billboards, trucks and even business cards.

If Coke's contour bottle says "the authentic cola," what does Pepsi's "smiley face" trademark—introduced to much fanfare in 2008—say? Pepsi's smiley face says "Pepsi." In essence, it's a rebus, a visual symbol that's a substitute for a

brand name. PepsiCo's management, like many others, seems to think that a visual hammer is nothing but a glorified name for a trademark. That's why executives tend to spend a lot of time and money perfecting their trademarks rather than searching for visual hammers.

In fact, almost all trademarks are rebuses. After years of constant use, they can be recognized as symbols that stand for brand names. But trademarks don't have to be meaningless.

Nike, for example, has "the swoosh," a powerful visual hammer. The swoosh doesn't just say "Nike." The swoosh says "leadership." Nike was first in its category, giving it permission to create a visual hammer out of a rather mundane checkmark that has been streamlined. Today, everybody knows what a swoosh looks like, but how many people can rattle off a description of Reebok's trademark?

The advertising industry is hung up on trademarks and logotypes, but in reality they account for only a small percentage of visual hammers. Anything associated with a brand can become a hammer—color, packaging, demonstrations, founders, celebrities, even the product itself.

Color often plays a role in creating memorable visual hammers. Think: Tiffany's blue box, the Masters' green jacket, Nexium's purple pill, Christian Louboutin's red soles.

The product itself can play that part—a Rolex watchband, the grille of a Rolls-Royce, the Absolut bottle or the polo player on a Ralph Lauren shirt.

Symbols can act as hammers to visualize "invisible" products: Travelers' red umbrella, Wells Fargo's stagecoach, Geico's gecko.

And, finally, company founders can do this as well—think Colonel Sanders, Papa John, Frank Perdue, Orville Redenbacher, Paul Newman.

McDonald's is another leading brand with a visual hammer. By naming its symbol "the golden arches," the company moved beyond the rebus idea and turned the "M" into an effective visual hammer.

Not every brand gets it right. Despite \$5.1 billion in annual sales, Red Bull doesn't own a visual hammer. The energy-drink brand had the opportunity, but its visual is too complicated for a small can. "Two bulls and a sun" make a weak hammer. Furthermore, its blue cans undermine the Red Bull name.

In spite of these examples, why do many marketing people work exclusively with words, when the real power is with visuals? Don't get me wrong, the objective of a marketing program is to "own a word in the mind," and visuals shouldn't come before some well-thought-out positioning planning. But to consider words independent of how they



The global economy makes it even more important to have visual hammers, which often require no translation.

might relate to a visual would be a mistake.

BMW, for example, owns “driving,” an achievement that turned the brand into the world’s best-selling luxury vehicle. The visual hammers that etched “driving” into the minds of BMW fans were its distinctive TV commercials showing happy owners maneuvering BMWs over winding roads.

In 2009, BMW switched its focus to “joy”—a verbal concept that broadens the appeal of the BMW brand. But how do you visualize it? Like many other high-level abstract words (happiness, enthusiasm, customer satisfaction, quality) joy cannot be visualized in any meaningful way.

Is it a coincidence that for nine years in a row, from 2001 to 2009, BMW led archival Mercedes-Benz in the U.S. market and then, in 2010, after launching the joy campaign, fell behind Mercedes? Luckily, this year BMW ditched joy to go back to its driving nail.

Of course, advertising is loaded with visuals, but most of them never become hammers. They might be funny, but if they’re not also functional they do little for the brand.

A good example is the frogs from the famed 1995 Budweiser Super Bowl spot, often listed as one of the best commercials in history. The ad shows a swamp at nighttime with three frogs rhythmically croaking “Bud”... “Weis”...

“Er.” But where’s the verbal nail?

Frogs, lizards, dogs—Budweiser has used them and more. All the while, the brand has the ultimate visual hammer that it brings out only occasionally. That visual is the Clydesdales pulling an old-fashioned beer wagon, which reinforces the authenticity of the brand: the King of Beers.

But instead of using a hammer and nail it already owns, Budweiser keeps searching for new ideas for Budweiser and Bud Light. “Drinkability,” “Here we go,” “It’s what we do” and “Great times are waiting.” All verbal ideas that are impossible to visualize.

Visual consistency is even more important than verbal consistency. You can sometimes successfully change a verbal nail, but not a well-established visual hammer. Look at what happened when Tropicana tried to drop its straw-in-the-orange image.

For decades, marketers have sat in meetings developing positioning statements for their brands. But sorry, Dad, today that’s not enough. Today, marketers also need a visual hammer to build their brands. A visual hammer that connects emotionally, authentically and credibly with consumers.

➔ Laura Ries is president of Ries & Ries consulting. Her iBook, “Visual Hammer,” is available at Apple’s iBookstore

**The best way into the mind is not with words.
It’s with visuals. But not any visual.
You need a visual that “says something.”**

**The “lime” that says Corona Extra is the authentic Mexican beer.
The “contour bottle” that says Coca-Cola is the original cola, the real thing.
The “cowboy” that says Marlboro is the masculine brand.**



**Read my book and find out how to create
a Visual Hammer for your brand today.
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