



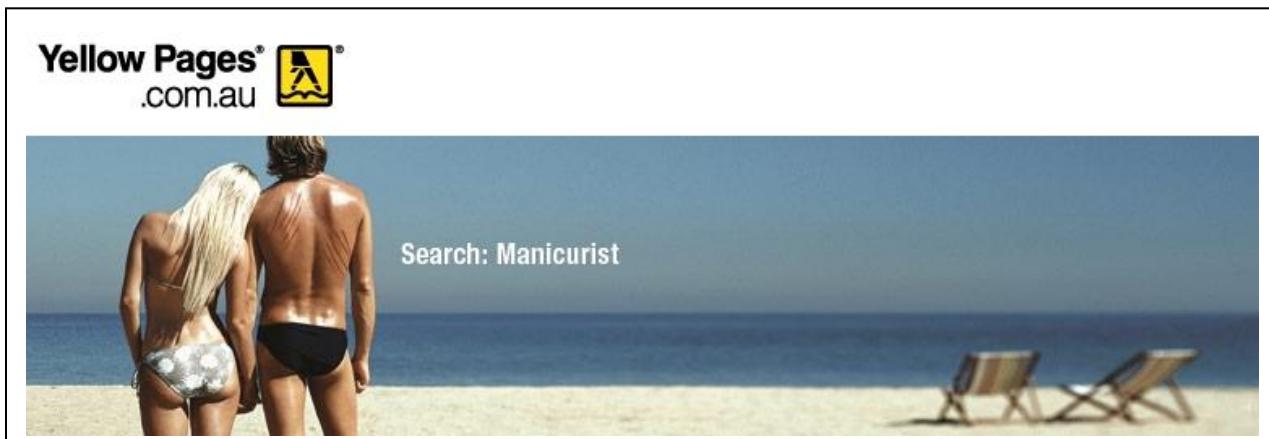
Imagined Actions: Yet Another Way to Create Advertising Impact.

By Max Sutherland

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The impact of an ad comes not just from what you communicate but also how you communicate it. Last month we explored the psychology of double-meaning and word-play and how they increase the impact of an ad (see [A Pun is its Own Reward](#)). Now, here's yet another way to engage the audience - using imagined actions.

Here's a banner that sits on top of the Yellow Pages web directory. It is 'subtle' and for that reason it takes some risk that the audience might glance at it quickly and move on without really 'getting it'. But if visitors do 'get it', it sure has impact - because of the imagined action.



You have to note the fingernail scratch marks on the man's back, and mentally connect these with the copy line that says "Search: Manicurist" (in the Yellow Pages). It doesn't take much imagination beyond that to realize how he got the scratch marks and why the need for a manicurist.

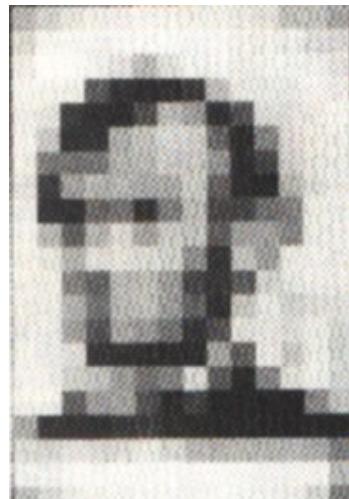
Having the consumer self-complete the picture with an imagined action is a strong form of audience engagement. The imagined action not only gives the communication impact, it helps it lodge more firmly in memory. These are the ads that often win awards.

Imagined actions tap into the broader tendency of our minds to use whatever information there is around to self-complete what we are seeing or hearing. By our nature, we are enticed, almost compelled, to try to self-complete patterns and try to make meaning out of what we are experiencing. Sometimes, as in the Yellow Pages example, it takes considerable cognitive work to do this. Other times, with the interpretation of simple images for example, the self-completion may be more instant and take little conscious effort. But it is all part of the same natural tendency that our minds are endowed with.

Look at this pixilated and blurry image for example and you instantly make out a person. Try viewing it at a distance of five feet or more and your mind creates an even more unmistakable, Abraham Lincoln. Ask yourself how much of that interpretation is in the image itself and how much of it is in self-completion by your mind?

This 'self-completion' principle applies to words as well as pictures. That's why it is so hard to proof-read your own material. Try dropping out a letter or two in any well known advertising slogan (e.g. *BMW... The ultim_te driving mach_ne*) and chances are that people will still read it without difficulty.

When an experimenter did this many years ago, he discovered in a later recall test that the partially incomplete slogans that he exposed people to, were better recalled than the slogans that he left intact. Mental engagement results in enhanced memory. Just as packaged cake-mixes sell better if you get the consumer to participate ('just add eggs'), so ads work better if they engage us in this self-completion process.



Memory enhancement effects show up even when the amount of conscious effort is only token. But as the amount of conscious effort increases, the memory effect usually gets correspondingly greater (provided you get the consumer to stay with the ad rather than making it 'too hard' and forcing them to switch off). In other words, the more the reader, viewer or listener is enticed into self-completion, the more impact it usually creates, and the more firmly the communication seems to lodge in memory.

Imagined Action

When you get audiences to imagine an action in order to make sense of a communication, the level of engagement can be quite high. The Yellow Pages banner is a good example.

Here's another example. After you note that the sign is not intact, the words on this sign '*Beware of low flying aircraft*' definitely have enhanced impact. Imagining the sign being hit by a low flying aircraft is very likely to increase awareness of the message and memory for the sign.



One from the great image library at www.worth1000.com

On the next page is yet another example - an ad for cat food that you have to work at a little but importantly not *too* much. It is quickly apparent from the dirty paw marks on the vehicle that the cat has been jumping up on the car to try to get to the Whiskas cat food. Just stop for a moment and picture this same ad *without the paw prints on the car*. It would be a dull piece of communication and a weak ad. Having to 'fill in' the gaps in a storyline with an imagined action can be a powerful form of engagement.

Discovery

Whether by imagined actions, simple visual images or double meanings, when an ad presents at least a token 'challenge' to the audience to discover its full meaning, it is likely to enhance memory.

People also appreciate the cleverness of such ads.¹ The ‘aha’ reaction that I discussed in another earlier column, “[Making Clever Ads Work](#)”, indicates that a further mild reward is being delivered to the pleasure centre of the brain. It is not unlike that experienced when you think of the answer to a crossword puzzle clue. [Brain scanning evidence](#)² suggests that when a little ‘work’ has to be done in the making of a discovery, there is even greater activity stimulated in this reward centre of the brain.

One with the lot!

Let's look at an ad that is exceptional in that it brings *many* of these things together. This is a road safety billboard that urges us to wear seat belts. The message "*No Belt. No Brains*" is reasonably clear but the communication is *not* particularly engaging. That's because I have altered it and removed the self-completion imagery device that this ad so brilliantly incorporated.

Before you see it and see how the ad really looks, think what you might do to enhance engagement by using this principle of 'self-completion' either through an imagined action or a second meaning.



The *actual* billboard is shown here at right. The windscreen is smashed and it takes barely a second to realize it has been smashed by a person's head careening into it. I'm sure you agree it is a powerful piece of communication. It has:

- A gruesome draw card that taps our morbid curiosity (the smashed windscreen).
- Self-completion. The audience imputes an action (the driver's head has careened into the windscreen).
- The imagined action visually reinforces the verbal message.

And as a bonus the ad incorporates:

- Discovery of a second meaning in the message - one that is extremely emotional ("Here are your brains if you don't wear a seat belt").

The audience now discovers a double meaning in the line '*No belt. No brains'*' and that second meaning is highly emotive. The ad exploits multiple sources³ of self-completion and discovery; as an ad, it is the Big Mac of billboards - one with the lot!



This is a great illustration of how the impact of an ad comes not just from what you communicate but also how you communicate it. In the theater of the mind, imagined actions are a powerful way for an ad to engage an audience.

References

¹ McQuarrie, E. F. and D. G. Mick (1996). "Figures of Rhetoric in Advertising Language." *Journal of Consumer Research* (March).

² Berns G., McClure S., Pagnoni G, Montague P. (2001) "Predictability modulates human brain response to reward". *Journal of Neuroscience*, (April) 15;21(8):2793-8.

³ Sometimes described as 'layering' see Phillips, B. J. and E. F. McQuarrie. (2002). "The Development, Change, and Transformation of Rhetorical Style in Magazine Advertisements, 1954-1999." *Journal of Advertising*. 31(3): 1-13.