

8 • Thinking in Words and Pictures

What I really like to do is have people think, to challenge people. We put the dots out there and you connect the dots. You participate in the advertising, that's what we like to do.

—RICH SILVERSTEIN, co-founder,
Goodby, Silverstein & Partners

Advertising is a relationship between language and imagery: words are tied to pictures. There are complications and exceptions, of course. In TV and video a soundtrack accompanies a series of images. In direct mail and e-mail the words frequently dominate, even exclude, the visuals. And in radio there are no visuals at all (except in listeners' heads, where there can be plenty). But fundamentally, the rhetoric of advertising involves some relationship between showing and saying: show people a picture, moving or still, then say something about it. Or say something, then show a picture about it.

Achieve synergy, not redundancy

Try to create a relationship—tight, almost molecular—between words and pictures. The word *synergy* has been applied to the desired effect between what you say and what you show.¹ (When two or more elements combine to achieve a total effect greater than the sum of their individual effects, they are synergistic; so too are great headline/visual combinations.) Each ad in figure 8.1 shows how its two halves—headline and image—can depend so utterly on each other that neither makes sense by itself, and their combined impact is stronger than a simple totaling of effects.

You can't always write an ad in which word and image depend that completely on each other. But you can avoid the Dumb Ad, which shows something and then says the same thing. Such redundancy flattens ads, makes them boring and too clear, and gives consumers nothing to do but bear up under the repetition. People

don't want to see an ad that says "Giant savings!" and shows a giant-sized product. But if it says "Giant savings!" and shows a little, bitty picture of the product, then things get more interesting, don't they? That's the key principle. Create some tension between word and image.

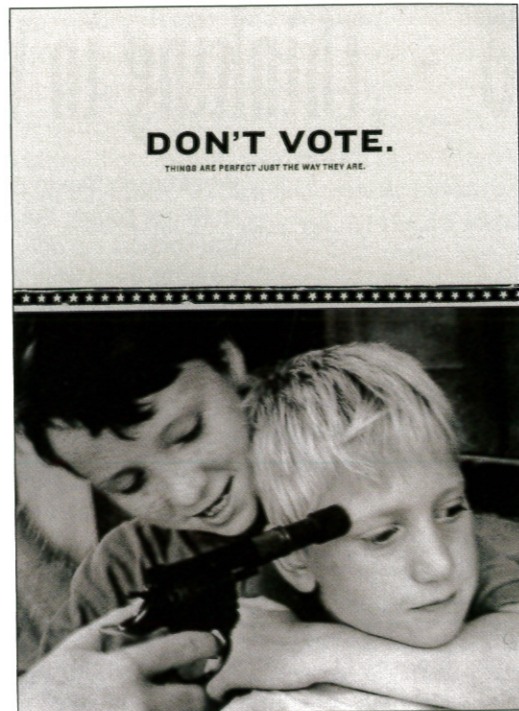
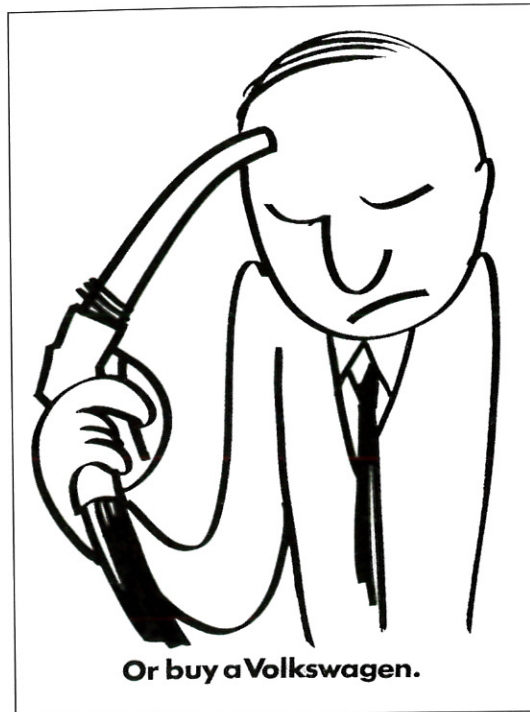
So get in the habit of asking, "If I say thus and such, what will I show? If I show thus and such, what will I say?" And never content yourself with merely repeating in words what you show. Following this rule isn't easy, but you'll know it when you do. William Butler Yeats talked about the sound a poem makes when it finishes: like a lid clicking shut on a perfectly made box.² Your ad should make a similar sound when you get just the right fit between headline and visual.

Let the consumer do some of the work

"In baiting a trap with cheese, always leave room for the mouse."

—HOWARD GOSSAGE, quoting the
short story writer Saki

One way to hear box lids shut is to let the consumer do some of the work. The problem with Dumb Ads is that their redundancy belabors the point. Smart ads leave room for consumers to do something, and in the moment when they confront this not-quite-instantaneously-clear ad, they become involved. In figure 8.2, for example, readers look at an apparently incomprehensible headline but then quickly enough resolve it. This little do-it-yourself moment is a kind of pleasure. Readers are being respected for their intelligence and



8.1. Quintessential examples of synergy in a headline/visual. In each ad, the headline and visual depend so much on each other that neither one makes sense by itself.

given a chance to put it into play. They snap the lid shut themselves.

Combine overstatement and understatement

You can create synergy between headline and visual by combining understatement with overstatement. If your visual is wild and obviously excessive, then back off verbally. And vice versa. In other words, don't shout twice. This juxtaposition of loud and soft, big and little, really snaps that box lid shut (fig. 8.3). And it works as well in TV and video as it does in print—run one kind of soundtrack over another kind of imagery. If the car is undergoing a torture test, speak quietly about the “modest testing procedure” or play “Singin’ in the Rain.”

OVERSTATEMENT

Consumers have been hyped so much (“Greatest offer ever!” “Unbelievable performance!” “Spectacular savings!”) that such exaggeration no longer works, if it ever did. But intentional overstatement (hyperbole) can work; it can “prove” the product benefit without your having to prove it, get a laugh or a smile in the process, and create enough ripple on the page or the screen to get consumers’ attention.

A law firm wanted to position itself as eager to work for small clients. With the line “No case too small,” what to show? How about one of those tags from comforters, blankets, and mattresses—you know, the ones that say, “UNDER PENALTY OF LAW THIS TAG NOT TO BE REMOVED”? That became the whole ad: the torn tag and the line “No case too small.” (Notice how



8.2. Leaving room for the mouse: Acela, Amtrak’s high-speed rail service, cleverly announces one benefit of getting from point A to point B on the train. The ad puzzles for a moment, and in that moment the reader is caught.

How do you fit five elephants in a box?



First find someone who'll do the killing. Arm him with a machine gun and an axe. Send him off to slaughter elephants. Pay him for the tusks. And ship them away to be carved into bracelets and necklaces.

The African elephant is being driven from the face of the earth for the sake of consumer demand for ivory trinkets. In just 10 years, the population of African elephants has been more than halved. If this rate of killing continues, the African elephant could be extinct in just 25 years. The killers and the people who pay them don't care about elephant deaths. They don't hear the world's outrage. They just want money. They're the people we must stop.

Please join World Wildlife Fund's Elephant Action Campaign. Help us put these killers and the people who finance them out of business. Your donation of \$15 or more will help us support increased anti-poaching patrols. And supply equipment to those rangers who are already in the field—desperately trying to stop the senseless slaughter of one of the world's great species.

Time is running out. 143 African elephants are dying every day. So their tusks can be turned into jewelry. You can stop this. Before it's too late.

Call 1-800-453-6100 to make a donation.

YES! I'd gladly join World Wildlife Fund's Elephant Action Campaign. I've enclosed my tax-deductible gift of:

☐ \$15 ☐ \$25 ☐ \$50 ☐ \$100 or over

Name _____
Address _____
City/State/Zip _____
Phone () _____

Please send me your newsletter, annual report, and updates on WWF's work to protect elephants and other endangered species. I'll also receive information on the programs and products WWF promotes. (Cost \$2.00, payable to WWF, 3600 Market Ave., Suite 200, San Francisco, CA 94114. Credit 1-800-453-6100 and your VISA or MasterCard.)

World Wildlife Fund

WELCOME TO NEW YORK.



8.3. Strong, ironic relationships between headline and visual: one funny, the other tragic.

quiet that headline is.) The ad is funny and persuasive, at least of the law firm's claim to take on small cases. It "proved" the point, without ever getting into the land of belief—or, these days, disbelief.

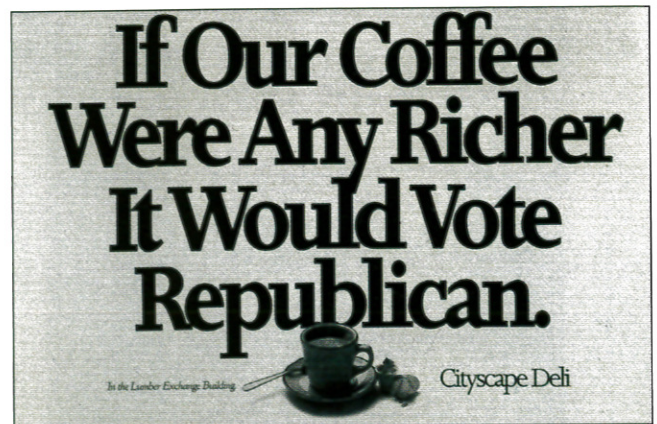
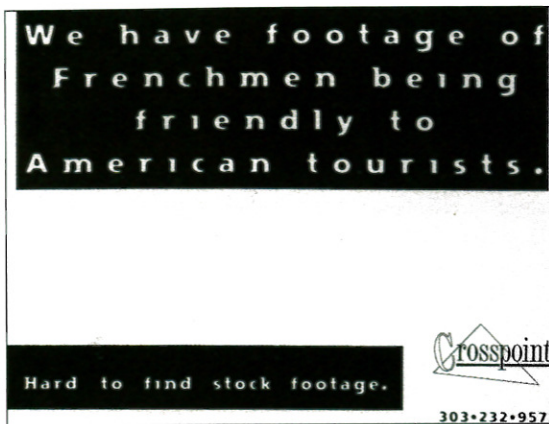
How to overstate? Find your product's benefit and over-exaggerate it. What's the strongest thing you can think of, especially out of category? Or find its ideal user (or nonuser) and exaggerate him or her. Or find a hyperbolic image or headline for the worst possible consequence of not using the product. Pick the point you want to make and then blow it out the top. Exaggerate that claim to ludicrous extremes. Put your claim or benefit in a "It's so . . . that . . ." or "If it were any more . . . , it would . . ." format, and voila!—there's your hy-

perbole. You can run the exaggeration in your headline or in your image. And once you've shouted, back off in the other half of the ad.

Usually, if not always, you're making a joke and sharing a wink with the consumers. They don't "believe" the claim literally—they're not being asked to—and that's why it works (see figs. 8.4–8.6).

UNDERSTATEMENT

Don't over-exaggerate things; under-exaggerate them. Say or show less than the situation calls for. Consider this example from real life: after a tornado leveled a town, one family spray-painted a sign on the garage door of what was left of their house: "Just another



8.4. Exaggeration becomes a kind of truth telling.



8.5. Whimsical hyperbole: a bottled water becomes its own hors d'oeuvre.



8.6. First Bank's mobile alerts inform customers if there is suspicious activity on their bank accounts. These two TV spots dramatize that benefit by overdramatizing the problem: the "suspicious activity" is both way out of category and over the top. Then the benefit enters quietly, typographically: "Know about trouble before it happens. Mobile Alerts." Nice combination of loud and quiet, crazy and sane.

Watch the two TV spots at [fig. W-8.6](#).





8.7. The headline states the last thought that would occur to most people seeing the ad. But because it states the first thought of the ad's speaker, it demonstrates the monomaniac's true belief—and readers find themselves impressed by his conviction. The joke makes its point.

weekend with the grandkids." That's the saving sense of humor in intentional understatement. Do the same thing with your ad: write a dry line that kicks.

How to do it? Give yourself a crazy visual and then ask, "What's the quietest comment I could make about it?" Or if you write an outlandish headline, then undercut it with the visual.

If you start with a visual about which there appears to be only one thing to say, consider saying something else (fig. 8.7). For example, if you're selling dental floss or toothpaste, you may show an old guy with no teeth. But then what to say? The obvious choices would be things like "Do you want to be this guy?" or "Don't let this happen to you!" But they're too obvious. What else could you say? "Relax. Baby food tastes better than it used to." "Think of the time you'll save not chewing." Or "Smile. No more dental bills." If, on the other hand, you show a smiling person with beautiful teeth (probably the visual cliché of the toothpaste genre), provide an alternative meaning: "Too bad he didn't use Crest." And explain in the copy that his teeth only look okay.

Learn to look at any visual and say not the expected thing, but something off to the side, especially something that intersects your client's product or brand.

For more on comic misdirection and the art of the headline, see chapter 16, How to Write a Headline.

Emphasize one idea per ad

Always pick one selling idea and let it dominate the ad. Even though you'll often be tempted, don't try to say several things at once. Your readers or viewers will simply get confused, and you'll dissipate the power of one thought driven home. Chip and Dan

Heath use this metaphor in *Made to Stick*: "When you say three things, you say nothing. When your remote control has fifty buttons, you can't change the channel anymore."³

A Vancouver advertising agency, Rethink, provides another helpful metaphor with its "Ping Pong Ball Theory":

It's simple. If we were to throw one ping pong ball at you across a table, you'd probably catch it. If we were to throw five balls at the same time, you probably wouldn't catch any of them. Most advertising messages have at least five ping pong balls. We strive to keep our messages single-focused, with just one ping pong ball per ad. This means there's a far greater likelihood that our message will be seen and absorbed.⁴

You *can* sell more than one idea at a time, if you make them feel like one idea, if you roll them together in the carpet. In the following headline the copywriter connects two different selling ideas—the car is sporty yet sensible—with a psychological metaphor, making two arguments seem like one:

A sports car for both sides of your brain. The half that's seventeen, and the half that's retired and living in Miami. (Subaru SVX)

For years Miller Lite beer promoted itself via the slogan "Tastes great, less filling," attempting in that phrase to say two things at once. Secret deodorant created a theme line that has driven the brand for

over fifty years: "Strong enough for a man, but made for a woman." Two ideas again, but rolled together nicely.

The questions are these: do consumers hear you (or are you just making noise)? And do they believe you (or are you claiming too much to be credible)?

How to write a headline

Who knows how you write one besides just basically think it up? I'll give you techniques and suggestions, but finally you're alone inside your own head.

One way to jump-start yourself, though, is to write down in a straightforward way your advertising strategy, the promise you plan to make to the consumer—the benefit(s) of the product, the problem(s) it solves. What's your selling argument? Say it as many ways as you can. This is your starting point, conceptually. These arguments are *what* you want to say; they're probably not *how* you want to say it yet.

You can be wrong at this level (that is, by choosing the wrong strategy), but if you're making the right appeal, then the problem with most of your sentences is that they're not stoppers—they're too flat, too bald, too boring, too blah. No one will be compelled to consider them. So take each one and try to say it another way; spin it sideways, heat it up. Get that idea in readers' faces, push it, use slang, take chances. Wrestle that reasonable idea out of its middle-of-the-roadness and into the ditch. Ogilvy & Mather's Steve Hayden puts it this way: "To me, the secret of advertising is to make an irrational presentation of a rational argument."⁵

The benefit has to be on-strategy, but its expression has to be a little twisted, lateralized, freed from cliché, or made more specific, more interesting. The dead clichés are usually right there in the middle, the first things you think up. Keep going. With this technique you must still supply the necessary wit and ingenuity, of course, but at least you have given yourself a method of operating and clarified your task.

Remember: always try to express the selling promise as a consumer benefit; see it from the consumer's point of view. For example, in a contest for a membership to Scandinavian health spas, the big headline was "Win Yourself a Brand New Body." The smaller subhead explained, "Enter for a Free 1-Year Membership." That's the way to say it. Why sell just a membership when you can express the benefit so much more powerfully? The big promise dominated, as it should, with the subhead or copy clarifying the offer.

As you discover when you work on advertising

problems, you often lose the selling idea in the act of trying to express it creatively. There's a continual struggle between being on-strategy and being clever. Each wants to pull you away from the other. Your job as a thinker and problem solver is to keep both in mind, to spin the strategy without losing hold of it. As though to indicate this truth, the two most common rejections of your ideas will be "I don't get it" and "I've seen it before." In other words, it's either too weird or too obvious. That's why the great ones don't come easy.

VISUAL ADVICE

You can show almost anything, of course, but here are the most frequently used visual approaches:

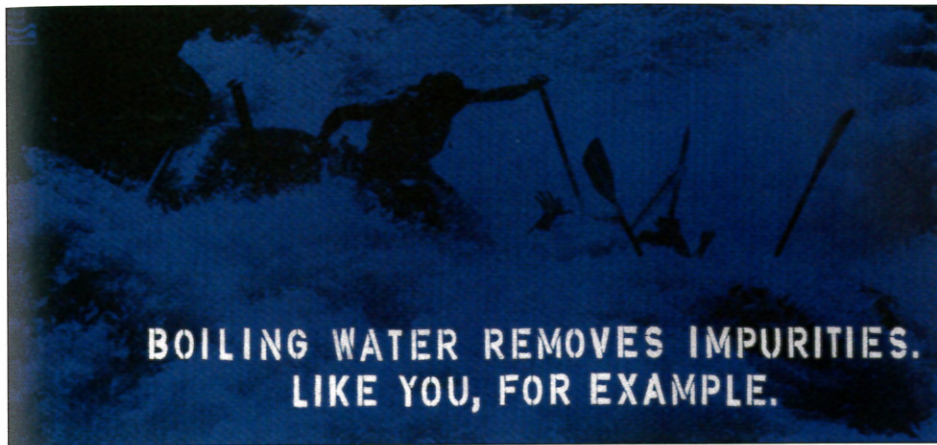
1. Demonstrate the product in use. If it's got some motion or drama, show it (fig. 8.8). Show it being spread on something, handled through the turn, driven into wood, repelling water, or otherwise demonstrating what it does. In an unusual promotion, a detergent brand sent a box of its detergent through the mail, wrapped in a white T-shirt. Recipients were invited to use the detergent to clean the now-dirty T-shirt. Simple and surprising.

2. Show the product itself, unwrapped or still in its package. Great importance rests, in this case, on what you say about the product. One technique is to be metaphorical: talk about the product in terms of something else; express its benefit via language usually associated with something else (see fig. 8.8 again). For a discussion of this popular, powerful headline approach, see chapter 23, Verbal Metaphor.

3. Present a close-up of some critical part of the product. Show the springs on Nike Shox, the three stripes in Aqua-Fresh toothpaste, and so on. This is a sensible strategy for any feature-oriented approach (fig. 8.9).

4. Emphasize a visually interesting aspect of the product story. Maybe it's the unusual plant it's made in, the founding city or founding father or mother, the valley where it's grown, a piece of historical data that captures the consumer's mind and eye.

5. Emphasize not the product but a person connected to it. This person may be a celebrity, an authority figure or expert, someone from history, a pop culture icon, even an invented character like Tony the Tiger or the Keebler elves (see fig. 8.10; see also chapter 19, Testimonials: The Power of Personality, and the voice discussion in chapter 9, Words I: Establishing Voice).



BOILING WATER REMOVES IMPURITIES.
LIKE YOU, FOR EXAMPLE.

8.8. Conveying the motion and drama of the product—in this case, white water rafting. The headline is a terrific example of verbal metaphor, talking about the product in language people associate with other contexts. Another headline in the series: "Water gives life. Occasionally it takes some back."



Italy gave us the Mafia. They also gave us these. Let's call it even.

Vespa

Colorado Vespa, Larimer Square 720-432-7271

8.9. A Vespa campaign showed cropped shots of the scooter, emphasizing its Italian styling heritage. Great headline, too: "Italy gave us the Mafia. They also gave us these. Let's call it even."

For more Vespa posters, go to fig. W-8.9.

6. Highlight the benefit of using the product.

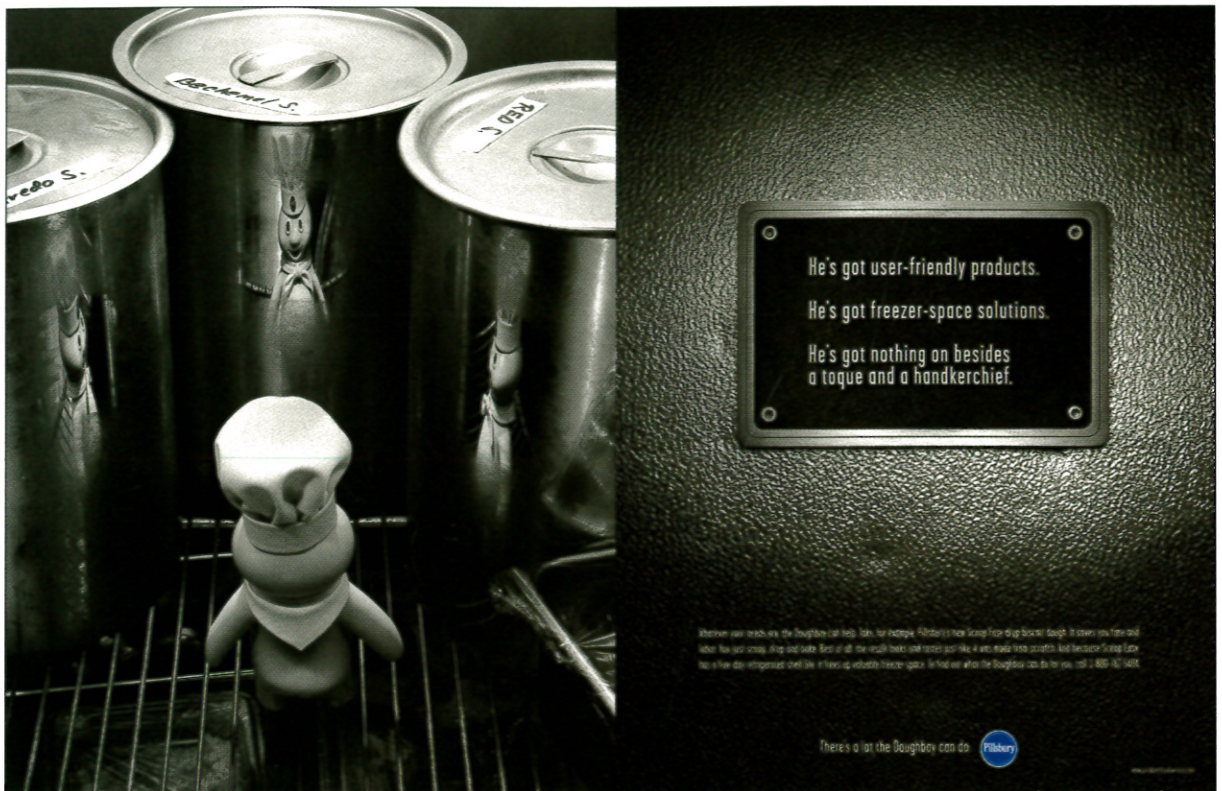
Show the payoff, the result, of using the product. Or show the negative consequences of not using the product (see fig. 8.11), usually less clichéd and therefore more interesting.

7. Go a step further and show the lifestyle the product helps create. Beyond the white teeth and smiles there is a desired lifestyle. Show this state of mind, this attitude or way of being that the product engenders. (Or, again, show the unhappy state of mind of the nonuser.) This is a good visual technique

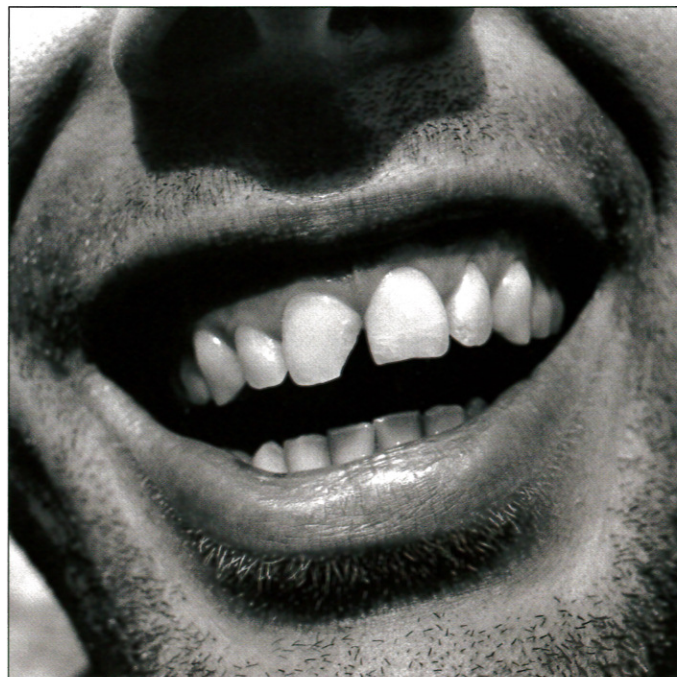
for brand-image/lifestyle advertising.

8. Use split-screen imagery. Try this-versus-that: before and after; a comparison with the competition, or among versions of the product itself, or with something unexpected (see chapter 20, Two-Fers).

9. Show not the product but some modification of it, a transformation or metamorphosis that is visually arresting and communicates the selling idea (see fig. 8.12). Or go further and show a metaphor for the product or service, something dissimilar that stands for its benefit. (For further discussion of



8.10. Pillsbury wanted to expand its presence in the food service industry, so it literally walked the Doughboy into a big freezer as a way of saying the company belonged there. The slogan advances the argument: "There's a lot the Doughboy can do."



8.11. Demonstrate the benefit of using a product by illustrating the liability of not using it.



8.12. Metamorphosing the landscape is a visually dramatic way of showing the need for protection.

these techniques, see chapter 22, Visual Metaphor.)

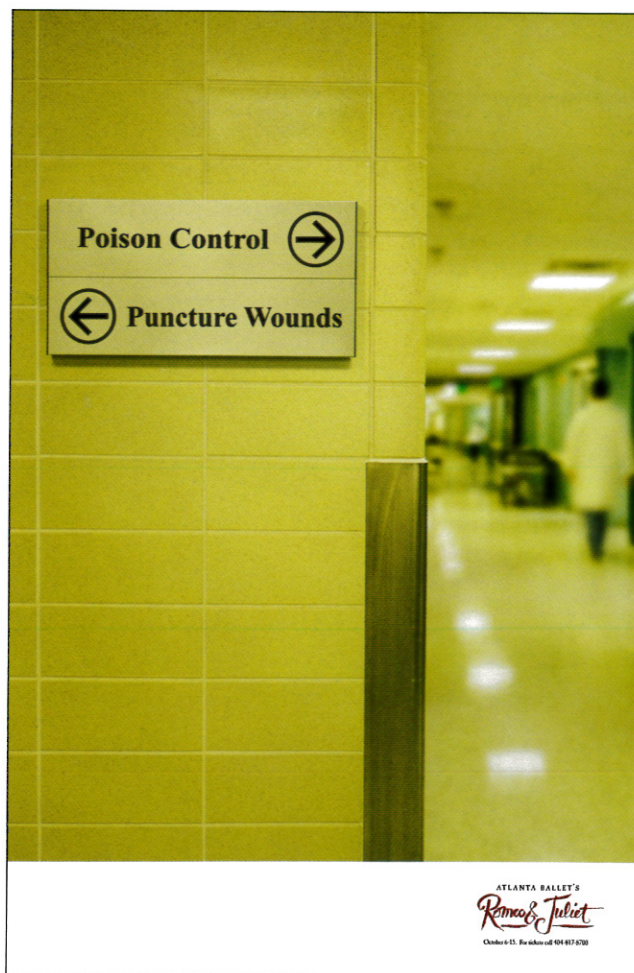
10. Remove rather than add. Crop the image, show only part of the product, boil a complicated narrative down to its simplest aspect, suggest rather than state—reduce, reduce, reduce. That Vespa ad (fig. 8.9) crops a motor scooter. The poster in figure 8.13 crops a play.

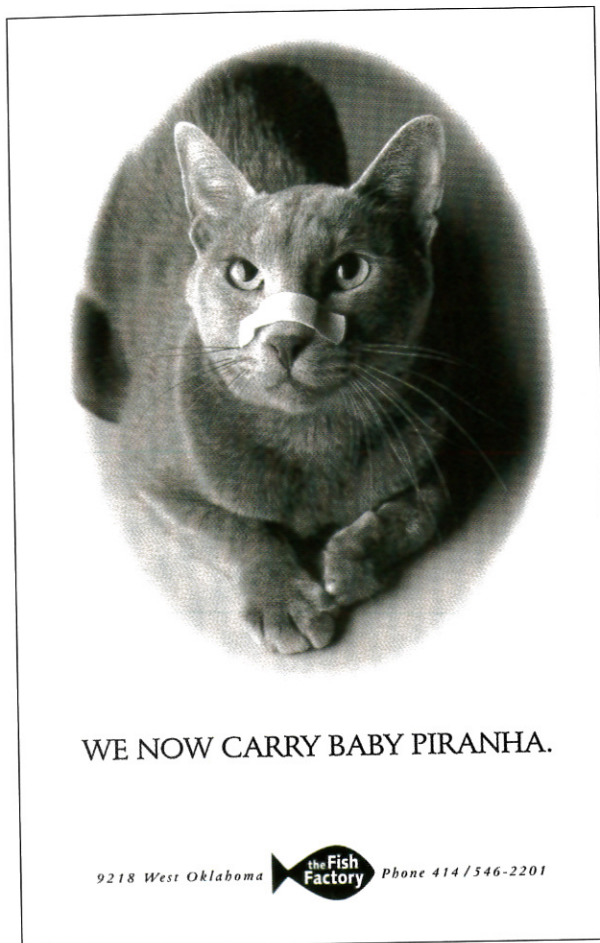
11. Show nothing. Use all type instead. If you say it well enough, you're done. Besides, letting the viewer supply the visual leaves room for the mouse. The travel service Expedia.com put up this outdoor board: "Imagine not seeing this ad for two whole weeks."

12. Walk away from the product. While it makes sense to start visual thinking with either the product or its happy user, you can land in Clichéville that way and never get out. Try to walk away from the product—go toward things associated with it, or consequences of it, or conditions that lead to it. Yet another way to leave room for the mouse (see figs. 8.14–8.16).

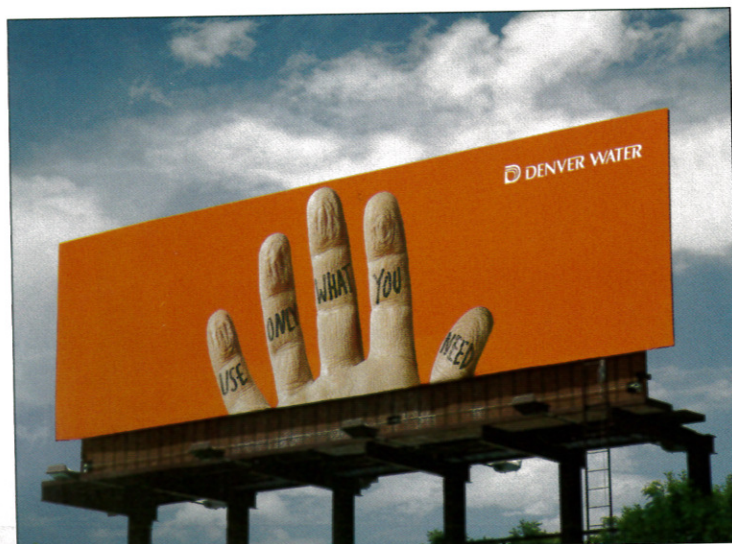
Right

8.13. This ad looks like anything but what it's for. An apparent photo of a hospital hallway, it both crops the play and updates it, moving it out of time and place. Hip humor brings Shakespeare closer to the audience.





8.14. More interesting, and more suggestive, than looking at a fish, don't you think?



8.15. One consequence of taking too long a shower.

HEADLINE ADVICE

The best headline ideas will arise out of your own approach, both strategic and visual. Nevertheless, try these suggestions:

1. Consider command headlines. You generate commands by using the imperative form of the verb, with "you" understood: "Join the army"; "Visit the zoo." Commands make readers pay attention because someone is verbally pointing a finger, demanding a response (fig. 8.17). So don't say, "People should discover the Bahamas" or "Discovering the Bahamas." Say, "Discover the Bahamas." Nike didn't say, "Just doing it," did they?

2. Ask questions. "Are your feet happy?" "Have you looked at your wife lately?" Questions have rhetorical power. They come up from the page, out of the radio, or off the screen in a way a statement doesn't, getting in the viewer's face, making the viewer deal with them. When you want a response from someone in conversation, you ask a question. Hey, have you fallen asleep? (See? It works here, too.)

3. Add "how" or "why" to a headline to increase its pull and bond it to the visual.

BLAH:

We put six airbags in the Audi A4.
(visual of open airbag)

BETTER:

Why we put six airbags in the Audi A4.
(visual of a loving, happy moment between husband and wife)

"How" and "why" also draw consumers into the ad by promising inside knowledge:

How to tell if your house has termites.

Why you should spend \$200,000 on a DePauw education.

4. Let the consumer know, one way or another, "This ad's for you." David Ogilvy once wrote, in his elegance, that a print ad's "headline is 'the ticket on the meat.' Use it to flag down the readers who are prospects for the kind of product you are advertising. If you are selling a remedy for bladder weakness, display the words **BLADDER WEAKNESS** in your headline. . . . If you want mothers to read your advertisement, display **MOTHERS** in your headline. And so on."⁶

Writing in 1963, Ogilvy now sounds dogmatic and dated, but he's still correct. The message does not have to be in the headline, however, nor must it be as literal-minded and obvious as Ogilvy implies. In the decades since then, people have become sophisticated consumers of public messages. Lots of elements besides the ad's language can be the ticket on the meat. In print it might be the images themselves, the typography, or the design of the page; on TV and online video it might be the editing rhythms or the soundtrack; in radio the sense of humor or just the tone of voice. But it's got to be there. I only look up when someone flags me down, when someone calls my name, and so do you.

5. Decide whether you need to shout. Other traditional advice has been to name the brand in the headline (or use great big product shots or large logotypes to identify the ad's commercial point) or repeat the brand name endlessly in radio and TV spots. This is another "rule" that's not always wise, necessary, or graceful. How prominently—visually or verbally—to emphasize the product's name in the ad should be approached situation by situation. You want to sell the product, but shouting is not often the best way.

6. Consider how long the headline needs to be. As long as it needs to be to say itself, not one word longer. The tendency is to keep headlines short, although it's always possible to find a great long one.

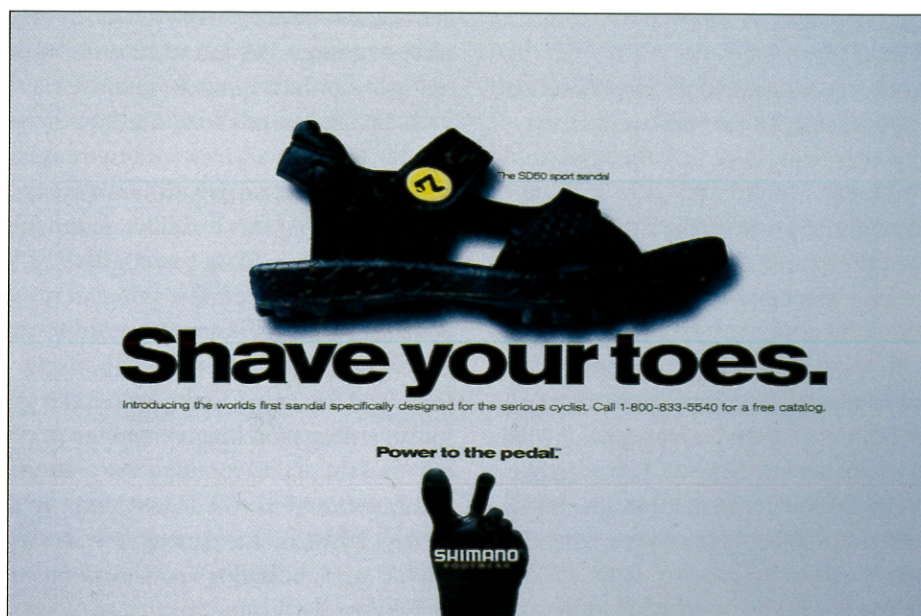


8.16. Showing white clothes to demonstrate a detergent's cleaning power is clichéd and boring. Why not show a more surprising consequence: an eye whose pupil is constricted from looking at *very* white clothes?

The classic is, of course, Ogilvy's seventeen-worder for Rolls-Royce:

At 60 miles an hour the loudest noise in this new Rolls-Royce comes from the electric clock.

Since that headline was written in 1958, you may argue that people won't read that many words anymore. But here's a headline written in 1997 for Adidas swimwear. It accompanies a photo of a woman, swimming laps:



8.17. A command form of the verb, not to mention a terrific way to dramatize the product's benefit.

8.18. An all-type ad with a tightly written headline.

Assault someone, you get five years. In hockey, five minutes. Is this a great game or what?

Deep down, they're really good kids. They're just dealing with a lot of stress right now. So why not bring \$5 and a valid college I.D. to the Fairgrounds Coliseum this Friday or Saturday at 7:30 and watch some talented young men try to walk the straight and narrow. And, if they slip up and commit an act considered a felony in most states, well, a little time in the corner should straighten them out. You naughty boys.

For more information, call 438-8000.

CHILL
COLUMBUS

One selfish lover, three late trains, two disastrous meetings, one irate boss, two large bills. The weight I lose in the pool.

Here are two headlines written in 2011 for Raise the Roof, an organization helping homeless children and teenagers. They encourage people to get their priorities straight:

A lost cat wanders the street and the neighbourhood is alerted. A homeless 16-year-old wanders the street and people really hope they find that cat.

You see an abandoned chair on the street and you think "It has the potential to be something beautiful." You see a homeless youth on the street and you think "Don't make eye contact."

The real trick is to say what you want to, then tighten it. Don't limit your ideas by presupposing that you must have teensy ones or be terse. For example, a tongue-in-cheek headline for a minor league hockey team, the Columbus Chill, could have been written this way:

If you assault someone in America, you'll get five years in prison. But if you assault someone in

hockey, you'll only get five minutes. So is this a great game or what?

The actual headline, however, didn't waste a word (fig. 8.18). Feel how much stronger it is?

7. Use both internal and end punctuation on headlines. Most ad writers use periods to close headlines (and often slogans), even when they aren't complete sentences. Periods add a sense of certainty and authority to the fragment or phrase.

8. Use subheads frequently. Whenever they need it, finish headlines with more straightforward subheads. For example, Columbus State Community College put this headline on outdoor boards: "Take Columbus State home with you," an interesting but unclear offer. The subhead resolves matters: "Over 300 online courses." Communicate completely with your audience. "Oh, they'll get it when they read the copy" is almost never a good excuse for an ambiguous, teaser headline in print advertising, and there's no excuse for any headline/subhead combination that still doesn't make enough sense (unless ambiguity is part of your strategy). An ad should work both fast and slow; that is, a scanner should get something from it—at least the selling idea—and a true reader should get more—the complete story.