

WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT – COPY OR PIC?

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By Patrick Quinn

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When, some little time ago now, I first descended upon the advertising scene, we were a good deal more concerned than most people seem to be today about the nature of the business we found ourselves in. We were always holding debates - in the saloon bar of the Coach & Horses in New Bond Street, to be tiresomely precise - about the meaning of advertising, the significance of advertising, and the past, present and future of advertising. And an unconscionably serious lot we no doubt were. Not to mention drunk.

Among the hardy perennials of our debates was the relevance of sex in advertising, and also the question of whether the copy element in ads was more important than the visual or vice versa.

Of course, these were the days when it was possible for agency personnel to slope off round the pub during working hours and nobody on the management side of things turned so much as a hair at our absence. Just so long as the work got done on time, nobody gave so much as a tinker's cuss whether you were doing it in the office or down at the dog track. These days, agencies are a little more sanguine in their approach to creative people; and I recently heard of a designer being sacked on the spot for turning up at a client meeting wearing jeans - and I kid you not.

But back to our hardy perennials. The 'sex in advertising' question was a hotly debated topic, mainly because the copywriters and designers in my milieu were always anxious to attend the relevant photo-shoots, and not because sex was liable to help sell anything. Thus, we were constantly coming up with speculative ad campaigns that featured semi-clad females so that we might catch a glimpse of a naked thigh or better. Few of these concepts saw the light of day, but it was always worth a try.

As to the copy versus pic argument, this has still not been resolved to this day. Then, as now, I was on the side of the angels, holding that around 80 per cent of ads could, at a pinch, do without illustrations, whereas only about 2 per cent could do without words. (In regard to the other 18 per cent, you can make your own arrangements.)

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Such an argument, as you'd expect, was met with widespread alarm by the designers, who saw that I was presaging their redundancy. Then as now, they would do everything they could to give their illustrations the prominence they thought they deserved. This usually resulted in a design in which the pic took up four-fifths of the ad, while the copy was relegated to eight-point solid and rendered practically illegible.

My attitude, obviously, was simply a debating stance - true though it undoubtedly is. I am not suggesting for a moment that 8 out of 10 ads should be wholly typographical. But if you take a dispassionate look around you, you might agree with me that a whole lot of ads (and brochures and websites, too, come to that) carry pictures for pictures' sake; and that in quite a few cases the pictures, far from helping the transmission of a message, actually hinder it.

The biggest offenders in this respect are what might be describes as semi-industrial ads. Just leaf through a trade mag (or brochure or website) and you'll see irrelevance in illustration well carried out. You'll see, for instance, pictures of the factory or, as they call it these days, the production operation. You'll see pics of two obvious male models in white coats staring idiotically at a computer screen or a blueprint. And you'll see pics of two obvious male models, plus a female model, in white coats staring idiotically at a computer screen. The female is included in the latter pic because the designer had originally planned for her to be shot with her clothes off.

Here's what I think. With today's wonderful digital photography opportunities, with an instant replay of whatever has been shot, one might hope that illustrations in ads, brochures and websites might be made more relevant. They might actually show the product in action - demonstration is, after all, the soul of advertising. But, no, we still get pics which have nothing whatsoever to do with the product or its benefits.

I don't mind admitting that there can be few people in the whole wide world who know less about photography than I do. What I do know, however, is that promotional material is far better off without an illustration if that illustration does not augment the sales message. So, in this respect, copy is more important than illustration.

Mind you, there is a lot of copy around that doesn't augment the sales message either. But that's another story.

END

Patrick Quinn is an award winning copywriter with 40 years' experience of the advertising business in London, Miami, Dublin and Edinburgh. He publishes a FREE online monthly newsletter, AdBriefing, designed for those who have a very real interest in producing good advertising. Subscriptions are available at: <http://www.adbriefing.com>

WEB PICTURE QUALITY – knowledge over style over content

By Paul Hailey

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FORMATS

bitmap, gif and jpeg. picture formats are commonly used.

I use jpeg format for converting most big pictures, and reduce the dots per inch (dpi) to 70 or below, for a web page.

To keep jpeg file sizes under 50k, I use 30 to 60 on the 'compression' scale for jpegs (a scale runs from 2 as high quality, to 255 for low quality.)

Because many users employ a 256 colour palette, gif's are still much in use, but they only handle up to 256 colours. I use gifs for icons and small pics.

I use 24 bit colour bmp's for archiving (I use 300 dpi in case I might print them later), they can be used as a source for both gif and jpeg.

THE FORMATS

1.bmp (bitmap)

This is a pixel-mapped format. I scan pics at 300 dpi –this is about the maximum for a printer, but too good for the web.

300 dpi 10 by 8 inch pictures, take around 20 megabytes file size. 300 dpi bitmap scans are ideal for archiving, as the place to start processing.

NOTE – Netscape Browser does not appear to handle bmp's!

2.gif.

Gif's are useful for small pics like icons, and also come in 'animated' form useful for websites.

Any scanned colour pic should be processed to 256 colour FIRST, then the dpi reduced to a maximum of 72dpi for screen use, then saved as the gif.

The basic colour palette options are (in PhotoPaint) :

'uniform palette'

– keeps to colours that a 256 colour screen uses. This is good where multiple pics are on one webpage, because the browser might have only those colours to use, (someone correct me if that's wrong?)

'adaptive palette' and 'optimised palette'

These both select the 'best' 256 colours from the picture itself –. Pics done with these options may not

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look well on pages with many pictures, as the browser page may be limited to 256 colours in total. A picture on its own on a page will look ok.

3. jpegs (jpg)

The jpeg compression works directly from a 24 bit colour palette if necessary, whereas gifs are 256 colours maximum.

The standard compression method is type 4:4:4 on Photopaint. There is a scale 'compression' from 2 to 255. 2 is highest quality, biggest file, 255 is lowest quality, smallest file.

Here are the pic filesizes I got from different compression of a 70 dpi, 10 by 8 inch scan of a full colour (24bit) photograph:

Original bmp file .. appx 20mb
jpg compression 2: 217kb
jpg compression 15: 79kb
jpg compression 30: 51kb ..recommended
jpg compression 50: 36kb ..recommended
jpg compression 150: 20kb.

Even the 20kb version was adequate for pictures say up to 5 by 3 inches on an 800 by 600 pixel screen resolution. 30 to 60kb seems a good trade off between file size and quality, but the file size you get relates to the picture composition. This would seem a good range for 'average' sized jpg web pictures without noticeably losing quality.

4. jpg versus gif

gifs are good for icons and small pics – these can be in 16 colours which makes very small files.

jpeg is a compression facility and does not do so well with 16 colour or small pics, unless the compression number is increased. jpeg is really for compressing big pictures, lots of data, 24 bit colour.

With gif you do not get the options for palette selection and compression levels that jpeg gives.

I use gifs for icons and small pics, jpeg for the rest.

5. Black and white.

For texts, scan textual material in B&W even if there are colour pics on the page. Separately scan the colour pics, in colour. Black and white is 1 bit not 8 bit – file sizes are much smaller than the equivalent in colour.

I have received text scans in colour – usually the black is grey rather than black. If 'ocr' software won't scan them because the resolution is too low (and it usually is!), I do the next best thing and convert the

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pic to B&W. The process usually involves darkening the colour image as much as possible, to increase the blackness of the characters.

Then convert to black and white using the 'threshold' control. This threshold is just the point at which the analyser decides it is a 'black' pixel square, not 'white'.

The threshold range is 0 to 255, in the range from 127 to 220 does the trick, dependent on the colour original, and the allowable extra black 'dots' you get if the value is set too high.

File sizes can reduce a text page from 100kb jpg to 20kb gif, just by going to b&w. Somehow I prefer gifs for black and white – I feel gifs are better suited to simpler jobs than jpeg.

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