

Emotion in motion

Car advertising represents a high-involvement category, by which we mean the consumer invests a large amount of time and energy in search of information before making a purchase decision. A typical search process might involve paying close attention to car commercials on television, visiting a Web site to obtain information about features and pricing, reading *Consumer Reports* for safety ratings or *Road and Track* for performance data, and ultimately visiting a dealership to see and touch the machine, perhaps even taking it for a test-drive. One place that advertising inserts itself into the process is in the colorful, glossy brochures, showcasing the particular model you're interested in, that the dealer will hand you if you leave the dealership without buying the car.

The purpose of these long photo essays on the car of your dreams is obviously not to teach you anything very technical about the car, though they do contain a certain amount of technical information. These brochures only come into your hands toward the end of the search process, after you've been through much of the preliminary information-gathering, and after the car salesman has tried very hard, but unsuccessfully, to close the deal while you're sitting behind the wheel of the model on the showroom floor. These books are expensive to produce, with photographs that rival those in *National Geographic*.

Analyzing the role that car brochures play in the auto sales process

Largely emotional

As you would see from the large array of pictures depicting the car in a variety of poses and settings, the purpose of these brochures is largely emotional. The job of the brochure is to keep a dream alive, to make the car as real as possible in your imagination so that it can hold on to your fickle emotions as you compare and contrast it to the one or two other cars that are competing for your commitment. In

the pages of the brochure you imagine yourself driving the car across landscapes that you've only seen in the movies; you see yourself riding beside smiling friends or having fun chauffeuring happy children; you notice the admiring glances of strangers watching you pull up in front of glamorous urban destinations; and, perhaps, you discover that this vehicle does indeed have 2.5 more cubic feet of cargo space than the other car you're fantasizing about.

When we conduct communications tests of brochures for car com-



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Figure 1

Catalog Performance for Ten Different Car Models

Pre-Post Shift in Top-Two Box Purchase Consideration	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J*
	+3	+5	+8	+15	+19	+21	+22	+32	+36	+58

*New Car

panies, we find a wide range of performance for this form of advertising. For example, if you look at the pre-to-post shift in purchase consideration for 10 brochures tested among a sample of new car purchase intenders (see Figure 1), you can see scores ranging from a low of +3 to a high of +58. In other words, like all other forms of advertising, executional performance goes from no impact to high impact. In terms of sales, some brochures bring the customer back to the showroom while others do not.

Mix of visuals

From our diagnostic research we have learned that much of these differences are driven by the mix of visuals used in the brochure. At the simplest level, the pictures in the brochure can be divided into those containing rational information about the car (e.g., an engineering graphic of the drive train) versus those conveying emotional content (e.g., a picture of the car speeding along a desert highway dramatizing the idea of freedom). But it's also important to keep in mind that the emotional experience of owning a car is multidimensional.

In fact, there are three fundamentally different ways of classifying the emotional, experiential imagery in a car brochure based on the point-of-view represented by each photograph. Images which put you in the driver's seat and evoke the speed and handling of the car in motion generate very different emotions from those that put you in the passenger seat, enjoying the luxury of fine leather, or those which show how you look to an admiring third party walking down the street.

If we add in the informational category of imagery, we have four classes of photographic images that can be found in a typical car brochure:

- **Informational images:** visuals depicting product features, engineering cutaways, options such as color choices, or more generally, images showing the car out of context, as in a dealer showroom-like limbo.
- **Driver experience images:** photos of the car in motion or being driven, or interior shots showing the driver's viewpoint behind the wheel, driving down the highway. The key here is kinetics, or the sense of motion evoked by the photograph.
- **Passenger experience images:** photos showing actual passengers or showing the passenger viewpoint in the car (e.g., the spaciousness of the cabin) or containing props (e.g., sports equipment) implying the presence of passengers. The key here is the comfort and luxury of the interior space.
- **Observer experience images:** photos showing a third-party point of view of the car on the street, or exterior shots of the car emphasizing styling rather than performance (e.g., close-ups of styling details or parts of the car). The key here is the sense of style, status and lifestyle connoted by the imagery.

The mix of these four types of images varies considerably from one brochure to the next, but the average content for 10 different model brochures discussed in Figure 1 gives us a sense of what car manufacturers believe are important for brochure advertising to be effective at bringing the customer back. Two-thirds (65 percent) of the photographic imagery in these 10 brochures is devoted to emotional, experiential content while only one-third (35 percent) of images provide rational information content. Moreover, the experiential imagery can be further subdivided, so that roughly one-fourth (26 percent) are devoted to

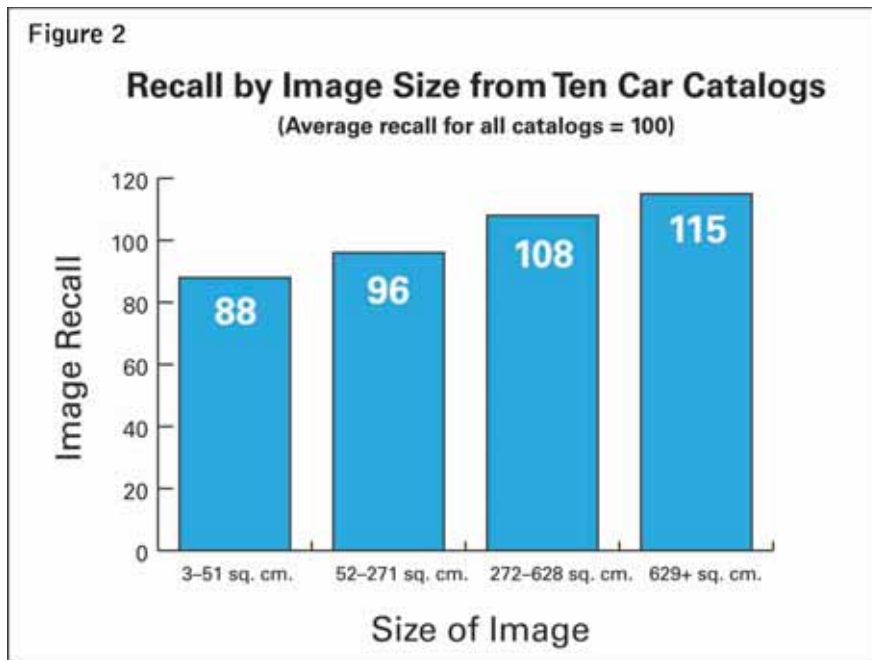
the driving experience, one-fifth to the passenger experience (22 percent) and one-sixth (17 percent) to the observer experience.

Of course, the images in the brochure come in many sizes, with some images spread over two pages in the brochure and others representing a fraction of the page. Moreover, placement in the brochure, from cover to the inside of the last page, may also be important in determining the impact of an image, just as it is in other forms of print advertising. To show how these different factors interact to determine the overall impact of a brochure, we should briefly explain how we do our diagnostic research.

We test brochures and catalogs both offline and online. Online is, of course, quite a bit cheaper, but when interviewing offline we have the opportunity to actually watch consumers looking through the book and record our observations of their reading behavior.

When consumers look through a brochure their search behavior is a lot like that of a shopper browsing through a store - it's fairly non-linear. For example, only six out of 10 consumers will read through the book from front to back. Four out of 10 will backtrack, returning to a previous page a second time after looking at it once. One out of 10 will skip pages without pausing. And only seven out of 10 actually take the time to read the copy that goes with the pictures. As the consumer's mind moves through the book his or her attention focuses on some pictures and ignores others. Understanding the kind of imagery the consumer focuses on - and responds emotionally to - is important for understanding the overall impact of the brochure.

To measure the visual communication of a brochure, we perform a kind of exit interview with respondents after they've finished reading it. The Ameritest Picture Sorts is a diagnostic tool most frequently used to explain the performance of television commercials, but it can also be used to track visual perceptions of consumers after they've left a store to determine how they "read" the store. It also can be used to measure how consumers shop the visual



information in a brochure.

The technique is simple. First, you deconstruct the brochure into its major graphic elements - photographs representing everything from two-page spreads of the car to the small graphic icon of the J.D. Power award it might have won. Typically, from 40 to 50 visual images form a representative sample of the total visual content of a car brochure. After collecting standard verbal diagnostic information about the brochure such as likes/dislikes or brand perceptions, respondents are asked to sort through a randomized set of the visual images from the brochure.

Three picture sorts are typically performed by consumers: first, which images they remember seeing as they browsed through the brochure; second, what their emotional responses to the images were as they looked at them in the brochure; and third, what each image meant to the consumer, measured in terms of the type of emotion that is evoked or the brand value that is communicated.

Attention is driven in part by the size of an image. If you look at Figure 2, you can see how well-remembered an image is as a function of the size of the image, measured in square centimeters. Looking across the data for 10 car brochures, the smaller visuals (fraction of a page) generate only 88 percent of the attention of the average visual in the brochure, while the larger visuals generate 115 percent, or

above average, attention.

Placement within the category also affects consumer attention. Figure 3 shows the first part of a Flow of Attention graph for a brochure, which plots audience attention as a function of which page in the brochure a visual appears on as well as the size of the photographic image. As you can see, consumer attention varies considerably from image to image, and not just as a function of image size. Of the two peaks shown in this part of the Flow graph, one peak is a two-page visual while the other is a one-page visual. In general, we frequently see examples of smaller images getting more attention than

larger images. In part, this is a function of the narrative flow of the brochure and in part this is a function of the actual content of the image.

Emotional response

The content of a photograph affects not only attention, but more importantly, the emotional response of the consumer to the image. Figure 4 shows the levels of consumer attention and emotional response to the four categories of imagery described above. On average, consumers pay less attention and respond less emotionally to the informational images compared to the experiential imagery.

The types of image that most strongly engage consumer emotions are those that promise the driver experience, with scores +119 percent of average. This is a highly intuitive result. To keep the dream alive so that the consumer goes back to the dealership a second time to actually buy the car, you need to keep the consumer imagining what it actually feels like to drive the car! Not surprisingly, car manufacturers long ago learned this advertising lesson - though we do have examples of brochures that under-deliver on this type of imagery. Moreover, it's important for marketers to understand which particular driver experience imagery most strongly engages consumer emotions. Note that it is the execution that makes the difference as

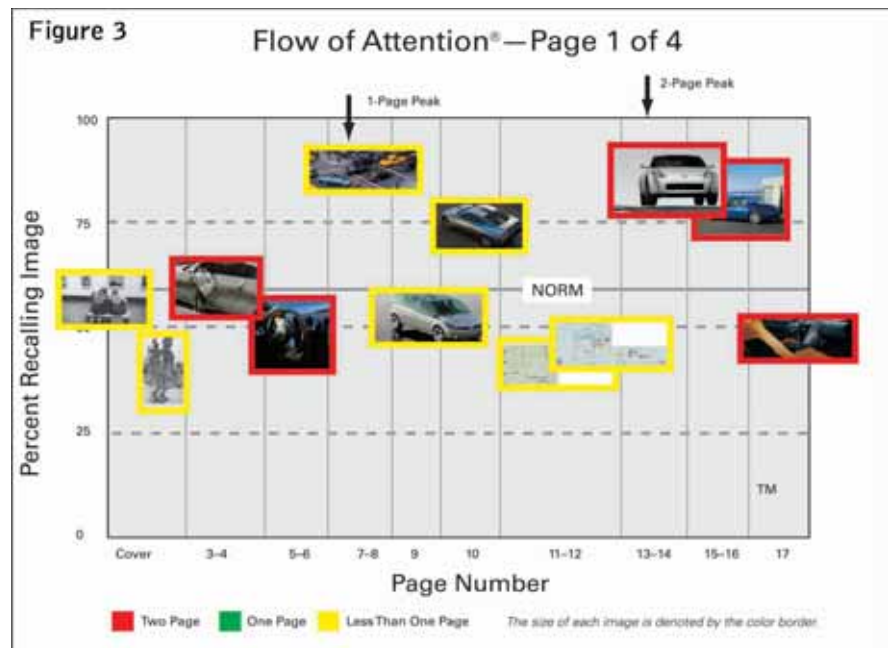
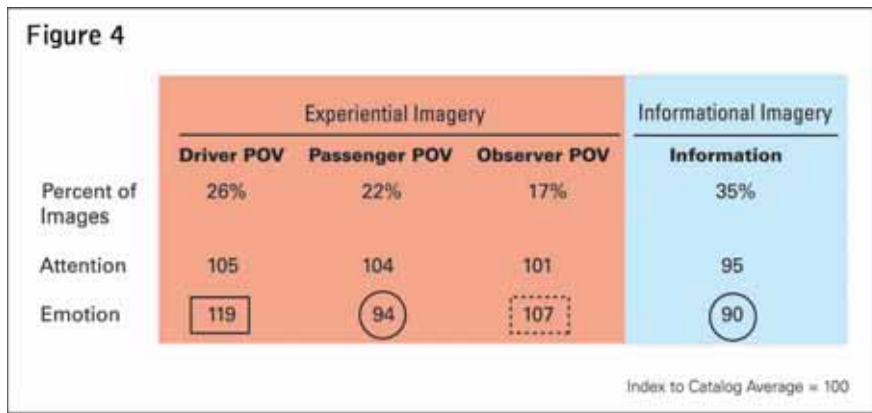


Figure 4



much as the content.

The second most powerful type of imagery is the kind that depicts the third-party, observer experience. Remember, these are images that focus on the aesthetics and styling of the car, the status that it symbolizes and the reactions of people who admire you in the car. For some, the car you drive is an important badge of identity, and therefore, imagery that speaks to your “car-as-identity” has a strong pull on your emotions.

The least-powerful experiential imagery is the kind that depicts the passenger experience. These may be images of spacious interiors or lifestyle shots of the product in use. On average, these generate no more emotional response than the informational shots, though they do generate slightly more attention. The

average, however, can be misleading, because we do have many examples of passenger experience visuals that are attention-getting and generate strong emotions. Luxurious leather may say more about the quality of the car while showing room in the cargo space for all the kids’ sports equipment makes more of a statement about quality of life. Moreover, passenger experience visuals may be relatively more or less important depending on the particular make or model of car being advertised.

Last ad

The car brochure is the last ad the consumer sees before she buys the car. Therefore, unlike traditional media advertising, which can be more single-minded in its focus, the brochure has to communicate all the relevant

information and promise all the relevant brand experiences that may be important for closing the sale. One at a time, each of the ideas and images in the brochure must systematically remove all the counter-arguments of resistance and barriers to action before a final commitment can be made.

For the decision maker this may be how much fun the car is to drive; for the decision influencer this may be how comfortable the car is to ride in or how practical it is for the needs of the family; for both, it’s important how the car will look parked in front of the family home. To say that the car purchase decision involves high-involvement consumer processing with lots of information to be gathered in the search process is not to say that emotions are not involved - quite the opposite. Buying a car is even more emotional than most consumer decisions. Most of the important information in a car brochure, therefore, is contained in the photographs and not in the engineering specs. Measuring the meaning and emotional content of those visuals is a key to sales success. | Q

References

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