

# The visual impact of award-winning ads

**D**o award-winning ads indeed do a better job of gaining readers' attention? Are they better at getting the message across?

Whatever consumers do, wherever they go, they are confronted with an ever-growing number of marketing messages. One common estimate puts the number of messages that vie for the consumers' attention at over 3,000 a day. This, and the ever-increasing pressures of everyday life, have taught consumers to shut out most advertising. Studies indicate that a print ad has about 2.1 seconds to gain the reader's attention and get its message across.

Advertisers' No. 1 concern today is that their messages get ignored. How do you make advertising stand out? Common wisdom is that breaking with recipients' expectations is a good way to gain attention.

That is where "creative" ads come into play: The idea behind these ads is to break with ad design's current conventions to garner more attention. Since awards for ads supposedly pick ads that are particularly creative, awards should be a good way to predict the effectiveness of an ad.

## Testing the visual impact of ads

We have used a method to compare award-winning and "regular" print ads to find out if this is true. This software-based method, called AttentionTracking, was created at Cal Tech and developed by MediaAnalyzer for commercial applications. It allows the online testing of advertising to gauge its visual impact. It employs the PC's mouse as a pointing device to

record, in real time, where respondents look when they see an ad. When shown an image on their PC screen, respondents continuously click on whatever they are looking at and the AttentionTracking software records their clicks.

## The test

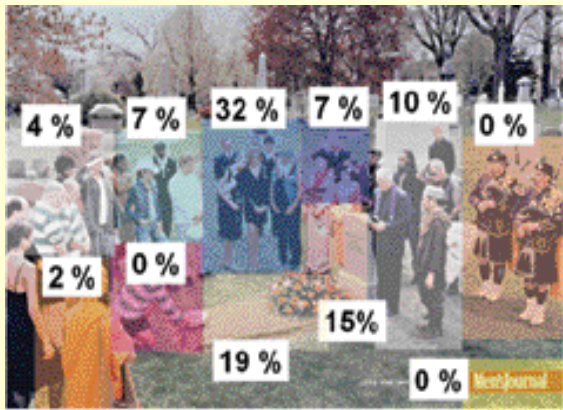
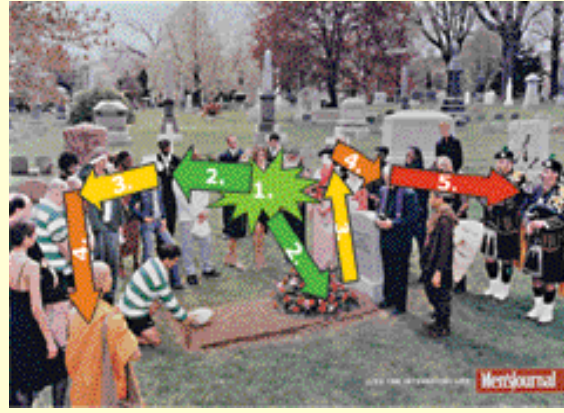
We tested 12 U.S. print ads, six award-winning ads and six regular ads with 200 respondents mirroring the general U.S. population.

Creative ads can work - if they're done right



By Karsten Weide and Christian Scheier

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Figures 1a-c (clockwise from top left) - Men's Journal "Funeral." 1a: No eye-catcher, gaze not guided to brand logo - low stopping power, bad recall. 1b: Shows the scan path. 1c: Shows attention-by-region data.

The award-winning ads were picked from events such as the One Show, the Euro Effies and the ADC Young Guns.

For each ad, we calculated, over the aggregate of all respondents:

- the typical scan paths
- the share of attention certain pre-defined elements received (brand logo, product shot, key visuals, etc.),
- and the average time until respondents saw these elements (time-to-contact).

In addition, each respondent was asked to fill out a questionnaire.

**Good news and bad news**

For the advertising community, there is good news and bad news. First the bad news: On average, the "creative," award-winning ads had no better stopping power than the regular ads, and they had worse brand recall results. Now the good news: Creative ads can, if done right, do an outstanding job. Let's look at some examples.

**Men's Journal "Funeral"**

First let's consider a "creative" ad that did not work well: the Men's Journal ad "Funeral" (Figure 1). The visual test reveals a number of things. To begin with, respondents' scan paths show that this ad misses being an eye-catcher. It forces the readers to get into its story in detail right away if they want to understand what it wants to communicate. However, most readers are not willing to make that kind of time investment anymore without knowing first if the message is relevant for them.

Secondly, respondents' attention was scattered across all the visuals that tell the story - but virtually none was spent on the brand logo. This is what we call the vampire effect: One or more elements of an ad suck up so much attention that little is left for what was supposed to get attention.

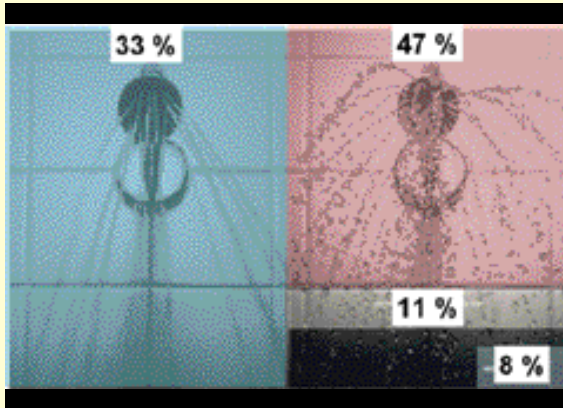
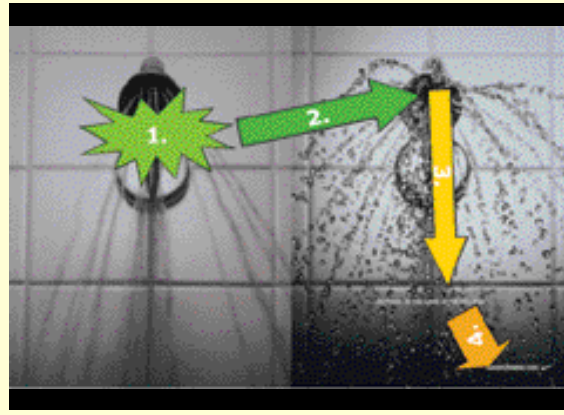
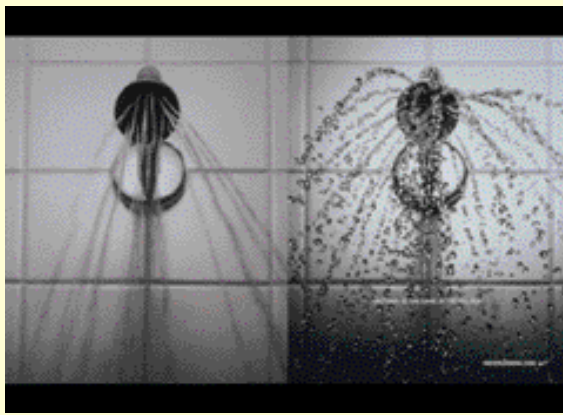
And finally, at each given point

in time, different respondents looked at different things. This is what we call messy attention. It happens when an ad does not tightly control the reader's scan path. This is something you see quite often in creative ads. The scan path is unstructured, and this is another factor that contributes to less attention on the brand logo.

The result is not surprising. Even though 90 percent of respondents called the Men's Journal ad a creative one (the best value in the test), it had the worst stopping power in the test (only 10 percent of respondents said they would stop to look at it more closely). It also had one of the worst results for aided and unaided brand recall (31 percent and 14 percent, respectively, with averages of 45 percent and 20 percent, respectively).

**Nike "Shower"**

Now consider the Nike ad "Shower" as an example of an



Figures 2a-c (clockwise from top left) - Nike "Shower." 2a: Good eye catcher, view directed to brand logo - good stopping power, good recall. 2b: Shows the scan path. 2c: Shows attention-by-region data.

award-winning ad that works well (Figure 2).

The ad catches readers' attention with simple key visuals: the showerheads. Once readers' attention has been gained, the ad keeps tight control over what readers see, and in which sequence. Respondents' scan paths uniformly start at the left showerhead (because the cultural convention for picture stories is that they begin at the left), move on to the second showerhead, then to the claim, finally to the brand logo. This is one of the cleanest scan paths we have seen in practice yet. Both claim and logo received a decent amount of attention (11 percent and 8 percent, respectively).

Remember, you only have two seconds to gain attention and communicate your message. And the Nike ad heeds this. You want a key visual that is strong enough to gain attention, yet weak enough to yield attention to the ad's other

elements that do the communication. And to facilitate control over what readers see, you want your ad to guide readers' scan path as much as possible. In this case, this is accomplished by a mixture of design simplicity and the use of a picture-story.

The payoff: This was the only award-winning ad with both an above-average stopping power (52 percent of respondents said they would stop to look at it more closely) and aided and unaided brand recall (49 percent and 23 percent).

#### Lexus "gi ro d'Italia"

Now, as a contrast, let us look at regular ads. First, one that does not work too well: the Lexus "gi ro d'Italia" ad (Figure 3).

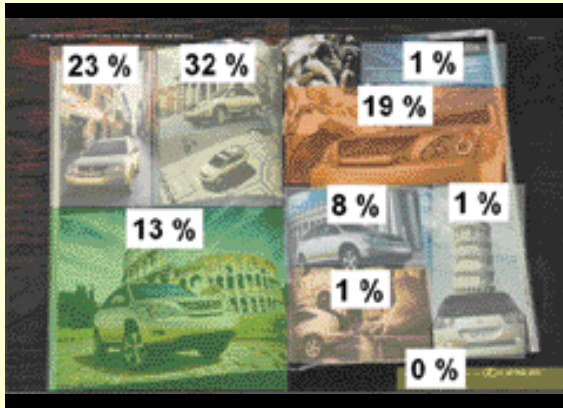
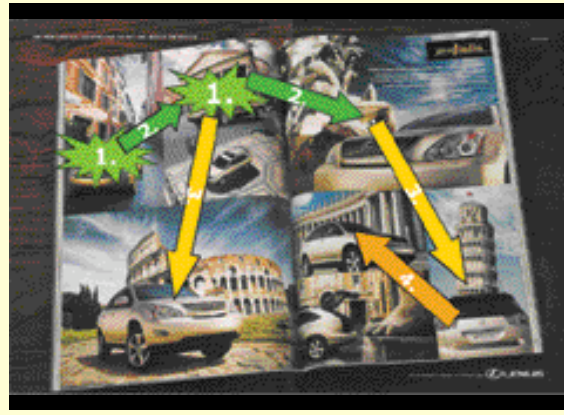
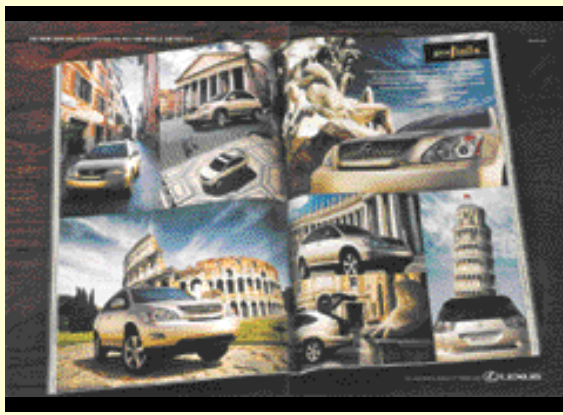
Once again, as in the Men's Journal ad, there is no commanding key visual that unifies attention to an entry point to this ad's message. There are no fewer than seven

key visuals competing for attention, and there is no structure to them in terms of encouraging a particular viewing sequence. As a result, respondents' scan paths start in no fewer than three locations and then wander aimlessly across them. Consequently, all attention is spent on the key visuals, and none on the brand logo. As in the Men's Journal ad, though the story is a potentially compelling one ("European flair, travel, adventure"), it is never connected with the brand.

Owing to the vampire effect and messy attention, this ad was the only regular ad with both below-average stopping power (39 percent) and aided and unaided recall data (38 percent and 14 percent, respectively).

#### Lancôme "Résolution"

Finally, a look at a "regular" ad that worked well: the Lancôme "Résolution" ad (Figure 4).



Figures 3a-c (clockwise from top left) - Lexus "giro d'Italia." 3a: Eye-catcher missing, gaze not guided to brand logo - low stopping power, bad recall. 3b: Shows the scan path. 3c: Shows attention-by-region data.

It is an example of an ad with an excellent eye-catcher: the model's face. Our experience shows that faces work better than anything else in this regard. In general, kids' faces work best, then adult faces (male and female work equally well) and finally cars' "faces."

However, notice that after the respondents' scan paths start out at the model's face, one group switches to product shot/brand and the copy, while the other first explores the face more and only then proceeds to the copy and the product shot. This is a case where the key visual is on the verge of being too interesting in itself, yet it does not cross the line to becoming an attention vampire.

The overall design of the ad keeps fairly tight control over the scan path: Once the key visual passes attention on to other elements, it is first the product shot/brand that receives it (since it is the next-most salient element),

and then the copy. The product/brand and the copy receive 11 percent and 14 percent of attention, respectively.

All in all, the ad's design leads to the desired effects: Lancôme's "Résolution" has an above-average stopping power (55 percent), as well as excellent recall data (aided: 72 percent; unaided: 32 percent).

Another effect that helps: This ad sticks to an overall design template that Lancôme ads use. Respondents who have previously been exposed to them learned to associate the brand with this design and will more easily recall the correct brand. This works as a general rule: Go with an overall design template to support recall. Other examples for this are State Farm's red frame or the blue bars at the bottom and the top of IBM's TV ads.

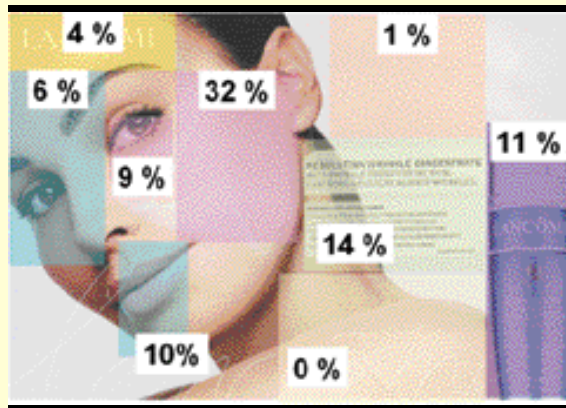
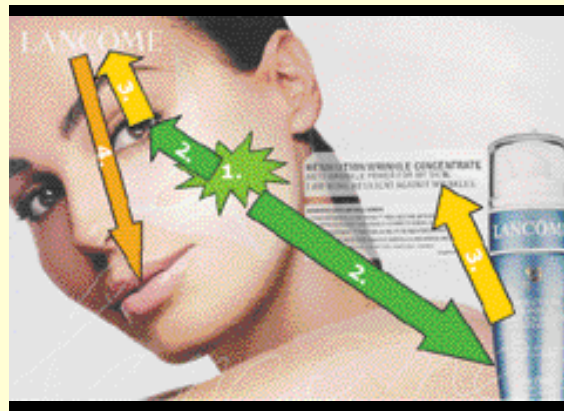
#### Creativity and stopping power

Respondents in our test believe new creative ads would make them

stop and look more closely; 86 percent said so as compared to 54 percent for new regular ads. If a friend told them about a creative ad, 78 percent said they would, if they happened to find it in a magazine, stop to study it more closely. And a surprising 16 percent said they would even actively go and look for that ad in magazines.

However, when confronted with award-winning ads, their behavior did not line up with these beliefs. On average, we did not find that award-winning ads have a higher stopping power than regular ads (45 percent vs. 47 percent).

We also asked respondents to tell us for each ad if they felt that it was a creative ad. This yielded two interesting results. First, respondents' opinions of what constitutes "creative" were not the same as those of the professional judges in the award competitions. Second, the perceived creativity of an ad and its stopping power correlated



Figures 4a-c (clockwise from top left) - Lancôme "Résolution." 4a: Excellent eye-catcher, scan path guided to product and brand - good stopping power, good outstanding recall. 4b: Shows the scan path. 4c: Shows attention-by-region data.

negatively. In other words, the more creative an ad was perceived to be, the less willing respondents were to actually stop and study it, in direct contradiction to what they believed they would do. Why is this? Perhaps because in our cul-

ture, it is understood that creative ads are cool or perhaps even art, but in everyday life, time is of essence, and nobody really has time to decipher a complex visual message.

So the magic formula in terms

of stopping power for the professional creative person seems to be: a professionally creative ad is one that is not actually perceived to be creative by consumers, but one that uses visual design creatively to make the ad effective.

However, be aware that an ad with good stopping power can still lose the battle for consumers' attention: In our test, stopping power and recall did not correlate. In other words, an ad that gains attention does not necessarily also get the message across.

#### Time-to-contact and branding

On average, award-winning ads had worse aided recall results than regular ads (35 percent vs. 56 percent) and also worse unaided recall results (16 percent vs. 25 percent).

There are a number of factors that contribute to brand recall: The amount of attention the brand logo garners is one, the amount of attention on the product shot is

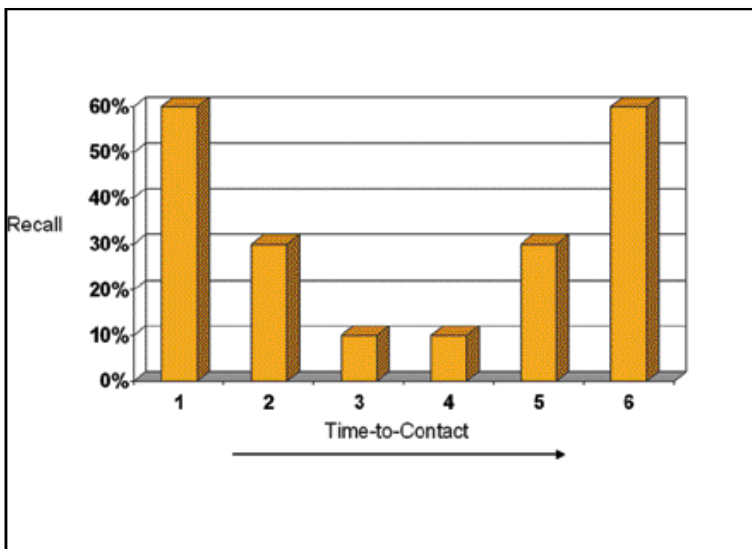
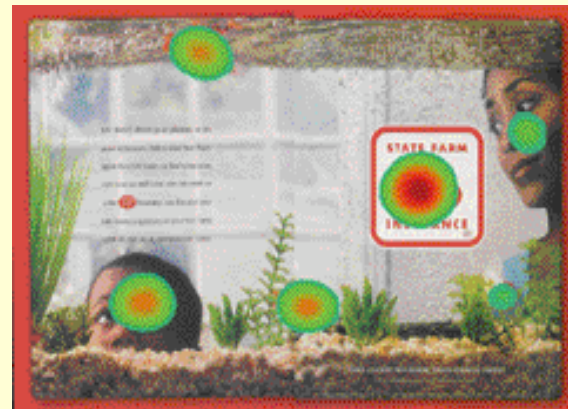
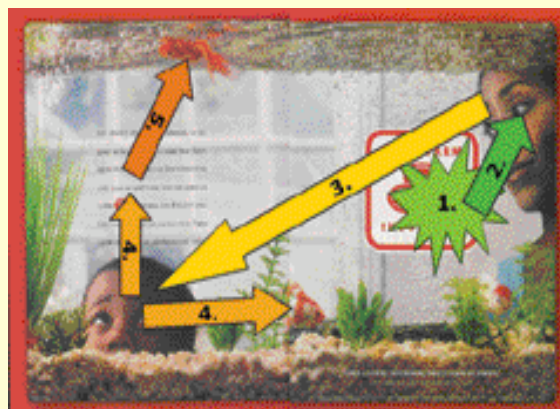
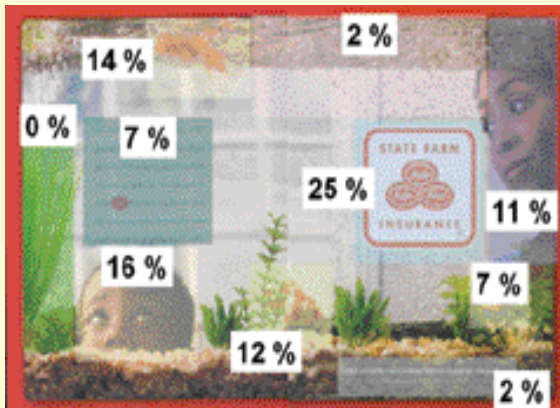


Figure 5: This chart illustrates the U-curve effect (schematized). People remember best what they see first or what they see last.

How AttentionTracking works (clockwise from top right): (1) State Farm "Aquarium" is one of the ads we tested. Respondents were told to continuously click on whatever they looked at. (2) Each green spot represents one mouse click and corresponds to one fixation of the eye. (3) All respondents' fixation points are merged into Hotspot images, showing where respondents looked. (4) Scan path graphics show the sequence in which respondents looked at the ad's elements. (5) Attention-by-region graphics display how much attention specific pre-defined regions received.



another, learning effects are yet another one.

In this field, the best predictor for recall was the amount of time respondents needed on average until they saw the brand logo. Interestingly, for regular ads, this correlated negatively, yet for award-winning ads, it correlated positively. This means the earlier respondents saw the brand logo in a regular ad, the better the recall would be, while for award-winning

ads, the recall would be better the later respondents saw the brand logo.

This reflects two key principles in memory psychology: the primacy effect, where we remember things better that we see first, and the recency effect, where we remember things better that we see last, i.e., recall will be U-shaped along time-to-contact on the x-axis of a diagram (see Figure 5).

Creative ads often need more

time to communicate because readers need more time to understand them. Yet they can still be effective, if readers' scan paths are directed so that they will see the brand logo, and that they will see it last.

#### Guiding attention

How, then, does one guide attention? We have already mentioned the importance of a key visual as gateway, the salience of elements

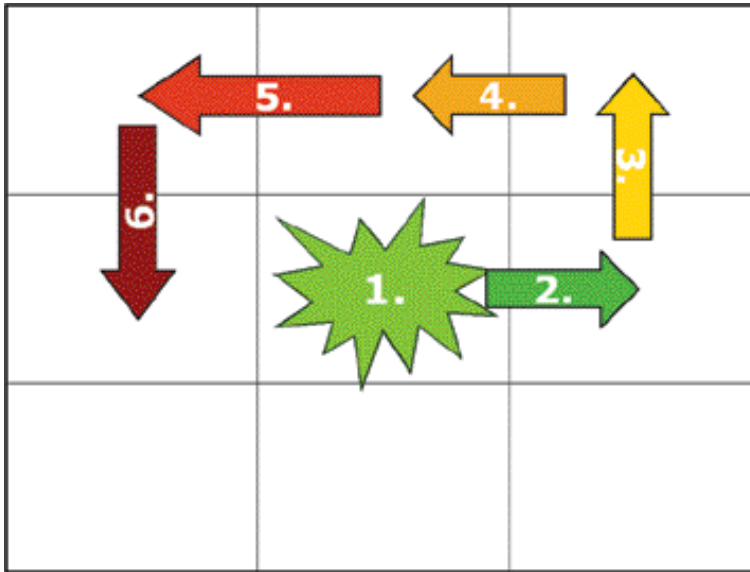


Figure 6: The merged scan paths for all 12 ads in the test. There is no Z pattern in ad perception.

and design simplicity.

There are some other interesting means: Faces not only attract attention, they also direct it. A good example is the State Farm “Aquarium” ad from the test (see sidebar on how AttentionTracking works). The prominent brand logo works as an eye-catcher and also supports branding by forcing a short time-to-contact. After that, the mother’s face attracts attention – and notice how she is looking at

the boy. Where do you think the scan path will go next? Right, to the boy. And see how the boy looks at the fish? Again, that is where respondents will look next. We humans tend to direct our attention at what other people direct their attention at, the direction of their heads and eyes being our cues.

#### No Z pattern

To wrap things up, let’s lay one myth about ad perception to rest.

Often, people believe that our reading pattern, from left to right and from top to bottom, will predispose us to look at ads the same way, i.e., that readers will look at the ad in a Z pattern.

We merged the scan paths for all 12 ads into one (Figure 6). Now, of course, this does not suggest a general scan scheme for ads. But it does dispel the notion that there is a Z pattern. That also means that the brand logo should not necessarily go into the bottom right corner (where it is in the majority of ads), not for the sake of the Z pattern, and not for the sake of design tradition. It should go where it is seen.

If there is anything you should take home from this article, it is this: People don’t read ads, people look at ads as they would at pictures, guided by visual cues within the ad. Gain their attention with a key visual and guide their gaze towards what is ultimately important. | Q

#### References

Young, Charles and Cohen, Larry. “Creative Awards vs. Copytesting,” *Quirk’s Marketing Research Review*, April 2004: 32-39.