

Contributed by Paul Harris

# CREATING MEMORABLE VISUAL BRANDING



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**T**his past year, the pages of this publication and others in the pharmaceutical advertising niche have explored at length the matter of creativity in pharmaceutical ads. They've addressed such questions as: Why aren't pharma ads more creative? Do the constraints of FDA regulations inhibit creativity to the point that ads are boring? Does the need for scientific accuracy preclude ads that strike pay dirt creatively? While my comments will not put these questions to rest, I hope to remind us that the purpose of advertising is to stimulate people to buy products. To do that, we must create ads that register powerfully in people's imaginations and emotions. This requires, in three words, memorable visual branding. Too many pharma ads just don't convey that. One problem is what I call "The Four Big Stereotypes." In these ads, one company name could be replaced with another and no one would know the difference. They completely lack brand originality.

## THE STEREOTYPES

Stereotype No.1 is what I call "The Testimonial." This includes a big headline quoting a doctor or patient about how great a certain drug is. You see the doctor or patient smiling. The doctor looks confident and professional, the patient healthy and appreciative — a pleasant message, but simply not memorable.

The "Slice of Life" is stereotype No. 2. A woman in a garden is wearing a big hat. She's tending the roses, thanks to the miracle drug. Or maybe it's a smiling couple riding bicycles on the beach; more likely, they are riding a bicycle built for two. These are visual clichés that don't build brand identities.

Stereotype No. 3 shows us "Professionals at Work." A group of docs or nurses are performing some task. They're nicely attired, usually in clean professional garb, and are attractive in a nonglamorous way. They look like people we can trust. But these ads are not unique, and, again, virtually any brand name could be slapped on them. They are, in effect, "bland brands."

This leads to stereotype No. 4, "The Organ." There is a close-up of the heart, lungs, liver, or whatever organ the medication is approved for. We see the body part, but we don't see how the drug treats the condition. It's a visual idea that is half thought out; it doesn't convey the real value of the medication.

If one were to page through most professional publications or mainstream magazines with DTC ads, I'd venture to guess that well over half the ads fall into one of the four stereotypes.

## ON THE FLIPSIDE

There are some ads that do contribute to building strong brands through their creative use of visual images. One campaign I greatly admire is for Lamisil tablets, which treats toenail infections. The ads contain close-ups of nasty critters, dermatophytes by their scientific name, that infect the toenails. These creatures are depicted as mischievous cartoon imps with evil

gleams in their eyes. When we see the ads, we're slightly amused, mildly repelled, but mostly we feel, "we gotta get rid of those things." The ad entertains, yes, but it also makes a powerful case for the product with an attitude — irreverent, humorous, and a bit wicked — that contributes to a strong brand identity.

Another ad I admire is for Arimidex, an adjuvant treatment for postmenopausal women with hormone receptor-positive early breast cancer. The ad shows a woman with fuchsia boxing gloves crossed over her chest with the headline, "In her corner." It's a strong visual and powerful visual branding. Plus the meaning is clear all over the world, which is important in a global economy.

## WHEN EVALUATING VISUAL CREATIVE WORK:

Make sure visuals are original. If using stock photography, be cautious. I've seen the identical image used for more than one product for more than one company. This weakens brand identity, and it's often no more expensive to conduct a photo-shoot for an original image.

Resist "TMI," or too much information. People don't have time to read everything, or to puzzle endlessly over extremely complex images. As marketers, we've got a second or two to grab viewers, at best. And we'd better make those seconds count. A few words that hit the mark will go much further than verbosity; and a visual image that is uncluttered and impactful will be much more memorable than the visually overwrought. If you have additional information you want to convey, save it for trade show booths, videos, or some other appropriate tactic.

It's true that FDA requirements provide creative restraints, and the need to explain science accurately sometimes forces us to go a bit heavy on the technical. But we can still do better. Sometimes product managers or marketing VPs are afraid to try something new, but it is always a greater risk doing the same old, same old. I'm not saying that the four stereotypes are always wrong approaches. They can be very effective when handled imaginatively. But for ads to really hit home, we must look at these stereotypes with fresh eyes and move from "bland building" to "brand building."

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