How to use graphic devices to boost your direct mail response rates

By Hugh Chewning

This is Part 2 of the findings of an extensive series of eye-camera tests conducted by Professor Siegfried Vogele of the Institute for Direct Marketing in Munich, West Germany. The tests traced eye movements as thousands of men and women opened and read all types of direct mailings and, at the same time, study emotional reactions by observing body and hand movements.

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Once your reader opens the envelope, they take no longer that 11 seconds to decide whether to read your letter or trash it.

During this 11-second preview, Professor Vogele found that the reader's eyes fix only on pictures and headlines – never on the body copy.

The Professor's findings demonstrated that illustrations play a greater role in determining how the recipient reads your direct mail than any other graphic device.

Before any word of text is even noted, the reader's eyes will be pulled to photographs and/or drawings. And by understanding the affects of graphics on eye flow, we can boost response rates by directing our reader's attention to our most powerful sales copy.
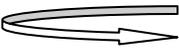
Focusing the reader's attention

- A reader will typically follow the direction in which eyes in the illustration are focused.

- When an object within an illustration "points," the eyes will generally flow in that direction. For example, in an illustration of a model wearing a man-style tie, the eyes of readers follow the tie right down to its pointed end.

- Place captions as close to pictures as possible. Captions should always be below or to the right of an illustration, not above or to the left.

Expand what the reader sees

On two-page spreads – the inside of a folded brochure, for example –put your strongest picture as far to the left as possible.

Why? In most cases, eye flow begins at the upper right of a two-page spread and continues in a sideways "U" like this – ⟸ Typically, however, the eyes stop just to the left of the gutter between the two pages and then exits at the lower right.

To expand the reader's scan of the entire page:

- Put a "commanding" illustration at the far left. It will draw the   reader's eye and expands the   allowing the reader to see more of the left-hand page.

- You can get similar results by placing color pictures to the left with black-and-white pictures to the right. Warmer colors draw the reader's eye to the left and they will see more of your message.

- If you have pictures with and without people, put the people pictures to the left and they will encourage eyes to go in that direction.

But be careful not to place an eye-grabbing illustration at the lower right. It will draw eyes immediately

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How to use illustrations

- Large pictures will get attention before smaller pictures.

- Color pictures will be noted before black-and-white pictures.

- Warm colors attract attention before middle tones or cooler colors.

- A sequence of pictures will be noted before individual pictures.

- Action illustrations will be seen before still pictures.

- Pictures with people will be looked at before pictures of products.

- Children will attract attention before adults.

- Portraits will gain attention before full pictures of people.

- Eyes will be the first thing focused upon.

- Most often, a larger group of people will gain attention before a smaller group.

- Outline illustrations will generally be noted before square halftones.

- A reader has will follow the direction in which eyes in an illustration are focused.

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to the exit position of the page and reduce the amount of attention given to your entire presentation.

Shapes

Vogele's eye-camera studies also show how shapes affect readership.

- 80% of readers will go to a vertical shape before a horizontal shape.
- Even more eye-compelling is a diagonal shape.
- Readers generally note circled areas before square-cornered areas.
- Closed shapes are observed before partially open shapes. People typically read copy within a border before "open" text."
- Bursts" get immediate attention, but they can often be distracting by re-attracting the eyes and drawing the reader's attention from copy you want them to read.

Without graphic elements to draw the eye, reading generally follows the classic pattern of left-to-right, top-to-bottom. But when we add eye-compelling graphic elements to the page – and understand how to use them to draw the reader's attention to our most powerful sales copy – the result is often a welcomed boost to our response rates.