

How Do Images Make Us Buy?

Increasingly, we live in a world saturated by images. The ubiquity of visual media has been driven by the proliferation of screens since the advent of powerful mobile technology. Placing a smartphone into the hands of the average consumer has bridged the gap between marketable goods and people's wallets like never before. Indeed, every technological step forward in the realm of consumer electronics has the effect of making it easier, faster and less painful to pay for things; bigger screens equate to more real estate for advertising, and better connectivity means the consumer is always within reach, while fingerprint scanning and contactless payment elevates convenience to hitherto unexplored heights.

Crying With Laughter

It was reported recently that emoji is the UK's fastest growing language. It is not hard to see why. The colourful little picture symbols are the most direct means available – using the technology we have – of transmitting small packets of information. Often this boils down to describing how we are feeling, which can usually be achieved to a degree of accuracy by selecting one of the round faces (interestingly, the “crying with laughter” face is the most-shared emoticon to date, although it is not one that I can recall using myself. I put that down to my quietly dignified British policy of emotional reserve).

Some have already decried the rise of emoji, but they need to move with the times. Firstly, the evolution of language is fluid and ungovernable. And secondly, the picture symbol-as-communicator is a naturally occurring artifact of the digital age. Internationally agreed-upon illustrations of commonly encountered things provide an instant and entirely intuitive universal language, which is deepening in complexity all the time. The benefits of such a system – in a world where conversations can happen just as easily across continents as they can across rooms – should be obvious to anyone.

The Power of Images

Emoji and online advertising are different, in the sense that emoji is not developed purely for commercial purposes. However, in one sense, they do share the same future. To fully take advantage of their native digital environment, they will become ever more predictive as they seek to match themselves to our fluctuating moods and desires. In advertising we see the beginnings of this already, when Google throws up “suggestions” based upon search history. When the emoji library expands from a few hundred symbols to a few thousand, it will become increasingly important to find ways of swiftly and efficiently extracting the desired symbol. At some point in the future, these quirky little pictures may give rise to a fully functioning international language, capable of communicating complex and nuanced messages only a little slower than the speed of thought.

Such is the power of images.

Commercial Applications

Images have always been at the heart of advertising. That is because – when they are simplified and presented correctly – they are instantly recognisable, and digestible. Fast food advertising, for example, is designed to be first eaten through the eyes, before it is swallowed via the throat. Glossy pictures of burgers are famously misleading when compared to the withered and flabby specimens they purport to represent, yet they have immense pulling power when you are hungry.

It is not surprising that the fast food industry should find itself so at home in the digital realm, where convenience is prized so highly. Currently, Domino’s Pizza is at the vanguard of this brave new culinary world. They have launched a new service that allows customers to order a pre-determined “favourite”

pizza merely by texting a pizza slice emoji. That is it. Perhaps half-a-dozen movements of a thumb can now result in pizza crashing through the letterbox (not that this is the preferred method of delivery).

Never before has so much junk food been so easily available for so many, for such little effort.

Everything is following the example of fast food. Retailers and service providers strive to position their products in the moment at which they are most palatable to consumers. Online advertising is most likely to succeed when the target audience is reached, and when that target audience is feeling *hungry for the product*.

That is where images are so important. Increasingly, they are becoming instant-access portals to the products they represent. This level of interactivity means there is less thinking time available to the consumer because the mechanics of the transaction have been streamlined to the point at which they are invisible. A beautifully rendered image of a product that is attractive or in some way useful to people at *the moment they see it*, triggers a grab reflex, because in that instant, the human brain does not have the faculty to distinguish between the representation of the product and the product itself. If the barriers to acquisition are suitably low, the reflexive action may bypass some of the brain's more rarefied hierarchies of reasoning, allowing for spontaneous purchases to be made. Because of this, companies that intelligently combine the selling tools available on the Internet with good timing and artistry can expect to maximise their sales potential during their products' natural lifecycles.

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