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Why Visual Marketing is Important for Brands Today

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I recently caught up with my good friend, Laura Ries, who just released her new book “[Visual Hammer](#).” Since 1994, Laura has run Ries & Ries, a consulting firm with her partner, father and legendary Positioning pioneer Al Ries. Together they consult with Fortune 500 companies on brand strategy and are the authors of five books which have been bestsellers around the world. They have traveled to over 60 countries from Chile to China and India to Indonesia teaching the fundamental principles of branding. In this interview, Laura talks about her inspiration for the new book, why visual branding is so important right now, why verbal messaging is still important, and more.



Laura Ries

What inspired you to write Visual Hammer and why did you decide to self-publish this time around?

First of all, I was inspired by a book called “Positioning” written by my dad Al Ries. The essence of positioning is “owning a word in the mind.” And that is what we tried to do in working with many clients over the years.

Today, however, the world is awash in words and we found that a “word only” approach was not enough. In order to get into minds today, you also need a visual. But then the problem occurred, if the objective is owning a word in the mind, what is the role and function of a visual? Perhaps it is to work jointly with the “word” you have chosen. That led to the analogy, the hammer and nail. The objective is a verbal nail, but you need a visual hammer to accomplish your objective.

We approached our current publisher with the idea, but they were appalled by the cost of publishing a printed book with some 300 four-color illustrations. So self-publishing was the alternative. Actually, as we found out, if you are going to write a digital book, you really don’t need a traditional publisher. It’s easy and perhaps better to do it yourself. With this book, I had final say on the title, subtitle and cover, all things we fought and lost bitter battles with the publisher on our last two books.

Can you describe what a Visual Hammer is and what companies have one?

It’s easier to define what a visual hammer is not. It’s not a trademark, although it could be one. A visual hammer is a visual that “says something” and drives that idea into the mind. For example, what does a [Coca-Cola](#) “contour” bottle say? A Coke bottle says that Coca-Cola is the authentic cola, the real thing. The cowboy says that Marlboro is a masculine cigarette. A lime says that Corona Extra is an authentic Mexican beer. A pink ribbon says that you care about finding a cure for breast cancer.

There are thousands of well-known brands, but only a handful have an effective visual hammer.

New forms of visualization are popular now such as infographics. Why do you think they are so effective now and not as much ten years ago?

I don't think they are particularly effective in communicating a message, although they are effective in attracting attention. An infographics illustration is the exact opposite of a visual hammer. Infographics is a method of illustrating a number of related verbal ideas. A visual hammer is a method for hammering a word in the mind. It's the difference between focusing on a singular idea and trying to illustrate a wide array of factual ideas.

When is a visual approach to branding not as powerful as a verbal approach?

There have been many visual approaches to branding. Advertising agencies, in particular, almost never recommend a campaign that doesn't include a wealth of visuals. But a visual hammer is different. It's a combination of a visual hammer and a verbal nail. Without a strong "lock" between the hammer and nail, the approach would not be effective.

Our last book, *War in the Boardroom*, dealt with the concept of "dual brains." And that concept is behind much of my thinking about visual hammers. Everyone has two brains: a left brain and a right brain. The left brain is verbal and logical. The right brain is visual and the site of your emotions.

In practice, the right brain reacts almost instantly to a visual. A stoplight turns red and your foot hits the brake without thinking about it. On the other hand, when you see a verbal message in print, your right brain translates the miniature visuals formed by the letters and sends that information to your left brain when translates the visual information in "aural" sounds. (Your mind thinks in sounds, not in words.) That takes time and that involves logically thinking which is almost devoid of emotion.

The best way to “nail” an idea in the mind is by combining the emotional power of a visual connected to a verbal idea that contains a motivating reason to buy the brand. It’s the combination of the two that makes a Visual Hammer approach so effective.

How can individuals use visuals to develop their own brands?

Dress for success, goes the old slogan. Look what a consistent visual approach has done for a number of celebrities. The white suit of Tom Wolfe. The sunglasses of Jack Nicholson. The black turtleneck of Steve Jobs. The Sunday red shirt of Tiger Woods. All white championship outfit of Roger Federer. Atlanta Major Shirley Franklin always wore a flower.

Change might drive fashion but it doesn’t drive brands, consistency does. For individuals think about finding one thing that can define you: a color, an accessory, a hairstyle, an outfit and go with it.

For me, my color is red. In all my headshots and almost every one of my TV appearances I wear red. Red also is the color of my Ries & Ries logo/website and Visual Hammer on my book cover is red too.

Dan Schawbel is the managing partner of Millennial Branding, a Gen Y research and management consulting firm. He is also the #1 international bestselling author of Me 2.0 and was named to the Inc. Magazine 30 Under 30 list in 2010. Subscribe to his updates at Facebook.com/DanSchawbel.

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