

# BtoB

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## Time for b-to-b brands to wield 'visual hammer'



By Laura Ries

IN A WORLD AWASH in words, emails, tweets and texts, it might be surprising to read that the best way to connect with a human is with a visual. ¶ Corona's lime, Tropicana's straw-in-the-orange, Susan G. Komen's pink ribbon. Each of these is what I call a "visual hammer." Some of these visual hammer success stories are astonishing: Thanks to the duck, Aflac's name recognition went from 12% to 94%. Thanks to the lime, Corona has become the No. 1 imported beer in America. Thanks to the pink ribbon, Susan G. Komen for the Cure, according to a 2010 Harris Poll, was the charity people were "most likely to donate to."

There are some 250 examples in my newly published book, "Visual Hammer," but guess what? There is only one pure b-to-b example—Tiger Woods.

In the seven years that Tiger was its visual symbol, Accenture's name recognition went through the roof and its revenue increased 72%. (The revenue of industry leader IBM Corp. rose only 12% during that same period.)

B-to-b brands should be big users of visual hammers. They would help visualize services that are essentially "invisible." And they would help humanize brands often perceived to be cold and unfriendly.

So why don't more b-to-b brands use them?

One reason is that they think they already have one—their trademark. But most trademarks are not visual hammers. Take Coca-Cola, a brand that has been making steady progress against archrival Pepsi. Coke's trademark, its Spencerian script, is not the hammer. The hammer is the "contour" bottle that says Coke is "the original, the authentic cola."

A second reason is that they think visual hammers are undignified. Imagine walking into the boardroom of a company like General Electric Co. or Oracle and saying, "The answer to your marketing problem is a duck." (Be prepared to duck on your way

out. They'll be throwing things at you.)

A third reason is that they don't know how to nurture and maintain a visual hammer. Take Accenture, for example. After severing its ties with Tiger, the company tried a variety of animals in its advertising, from elephants to frogs to lizards. It recently dropped the animals in favor of focusing on clients such as Marriott International and Unilever.

Verbally this might make sense, but visually it does not. At least the animals had some consistency and memorability. But where is the visual consistency between Unilever shampoo and Marriott hotels?

Accenture is apparently counting on a prominent ">" symbol to unify its new campaign. That might make sense for an automobile, but it doesn't make visual sense for a consulting firm. The symbol doesn't drive any idea into the mind the way Tiger in the rough or an elephant surfing did.

In a world awash in words, the future belongs to b-to-b brands that develop powerful visual hammers and use them consistently.

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