

How marketers can capitalize on the power of perception to influence beliefs about brand performance

January 4 2023



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Researchers from Oklahoma State University and University of Florida published a new article explaining how marketers can capitalize on the

power of perception through the structure of visual communications to influence beliefs about brand performance, which ultimately influences product interest and choice.

The study, forthcoming in the *Journal of Marketing*, is titled "Marketing by Design: The Influence of Perceptual Structure on Brand Performance" and is authored by Felipe M. Affonso and Chris Janiszewski.

Brands are constantly updating their visual identities. Intel recently went through its third visual brand identity refresh in half a century and its new logo has iconic symmetry, balance, and proportion. The underlying geometry is apparent in the design. Could visual design characteristics influence consumers' perceptions about the brand?

This new study finds that a sense of order and structure can reinforce claims about a brand's utilitarian benefits. Intel's visual marketing not only communicates the company's vision and positioning, but also reinforces them through specific design properties. The researchers identify a variety of design properties that can influence perceptions of structure in visual elements, including symmetry, balance, geometry, regularity, proximity, and similarity.

It is well known that customers are subliminally influenced by visual marketing tools such as logos, packages, and retail displays; they use them as a basis to make judgments about brands delivering on their promise. We find that for brands that promise utilitarian benefits (functional, instrumental, and useful), consumers are encouraged by visual designs perceived as more orderly and structured. This suggests marketers can capitalize on the power of perception to influence beliefs about brand performance, which ultimately influences product interest and choice.

Utilitarian vs. hedonic brands

At the other end of the spectrum are brands, such as Pepsi, which promise benefits related to enjoyment, pleasure, and experiences—collectively referred to as hedonic benefits. In this case, marketers can benefit from using visual design properties that convey lack of structure. The [visual elements](#) of Pepsi's marketing communications are relatively more asymmetric, free-flowing, unbalanced, and irregular. The research suggests that these characteristics reinforce consumers' beliefs about the performance of hedonic-positioned brands.

As Affonso explains, "We find that visual design characteristics that encourage structured perceptions of visual communications, such as high proximity, high similarity, and symmetry, can reinforce beliefs about utilitarian-positioned brand performance. On the other hand, visual design characteristics that encourage unstructured perceptions of visual communications, such as low proximity, low similarity, and asymmetry, can reinforce beliefs about hedonic-positioned brand performance. These reinforcements occur because structure and lack of structure have specific associations that consumers use to make inferences."

These suggestions are supported by a series of carefully designed experiments, both in the lab and in the field, and an analysis of industry data. First, in a large-scale field experiment when a perfume was positioned as utilitarian ("Long-lasting. Great for work and everyday occasions"), consumers were more likely to click on the advertisement depicting the perfume with a visual design perceived as more structured than its unstructured counterpart. When the perfume was positioned as hedonic ("Delightful. Great for special and fun occasions"), consumers were more likely to click on the advertisement depicting the perfume with a visual design perceived as more unstructured than its structured counterpart.

Second, when consumers made choices considering functional goals (such as choosing a restaurant that provides a fast and reliable experience), they were more likely to pick a restaurant perceived as structured. However, when the choice involved hedonic goals (such as choosing a restaurant providing an entertaining and exciting experience) they were likely to pick the option perceived as unstructured. Importantly, the research finds that these effects, across a variety of visual marketing communications, induce a structured versus unstructured perception in different ways.

Finally, for brands perceived as more utilitarian, structured perceptions are associated with greater financial brand valuation and customer-based brand equity than unstructured perceptions. The opposite is true for brands perceived as more hedonic.

"Our research offers actionable insights for marketers and visual design specialists working with design, advertising, social media communications, visual merchandising, and the appearance of retail environments. Specifically, the findings suggest that perceptual structure can be used as an efficient marketing communication tool. And it can encourage consumers at the point of purchase, being a relatively costless way to reinforce brand positioning," says Janiszewski.

Lessons for chief sales officers

- Brands may want to consider using design elements that encourage structured/unstructured perceptions of logos, products, product packaging, and retail store design if their brand is primarily associated with utilitarian/hedonic benefits.
- The implications extend to many other visual marketing communications, including print advertisements, website layouts, and app user interfaces. Marketers can take advantage of our findings and anticipate the consequences of key visual [design](#)

decisions.

- Brands could benefit in the long term from shifting the structure of their visual [marketing communications](#) to align with their [brand](#) positioning.

More information: Felipe M. Affonso et al, EXPRESS: Marketing by Design: The Influence of Perceptual Structure on Brand Performance, *Journal of Marketing* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/00222429221142281](https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429221142281)

Provided by American Marketing Association

Citation: How marketers can capitalize on the power of perception to influence beliefs about brand performance (2023, January 4) retrieved 27 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-01-capitalize-power-perception-beliefs-brand.html>

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