

# Communicating The Brain's Ear For Info

Jack Trout 10.24.05, 9:00 AM ET



Have you ever been asked which is more powerful, the eye or the ear? Probably not, because the answer is obvious. I'll bet that deep down inside, you believe the eye is more powerful. Call it "visual chauvinism," if you like, but it's a preconception held by many marketing people.

I'll bet, too, that you share a related preconception, first expressed some 500 years before the birth of Jesus Christ. Confucius says: "A picture is worth a thousand words."

Those seven words--not *pictures*, mind you, but *words*--have lived for 2,500 years. And the way things have been going lately, it seems like those seven words will never die. What agency president, creative director or art director hasn't quoted Confucius at least once in his or her career?

After analyzing hundreds of effective positioning programs, we ran into a surprising conclusion: The programs were all verbal. There wasn't a single positioning concept that was exclusively visual. Could Confucius have been wrong? We have come to the conclusion that the mind works by ear, not by eye. **A picture is not worth a thousand words.**

If you looked just at the pictures in almost any magazine or newspaper, you would learn very little. If you read just the words, however, you would have a pretty good idea.

In spite of the evidence all around us, communications people suffer from **wordophobia**, a morbid fear of words. To set the record straight, we had the Chinese characters translated to find out exactly what it was Confucius said. The translation: "A picture is worth a thousand pieces of gold." Not *words*, but *gold*!

We knew instantly that here was a true prophet. What Confucius foresaw was television and the movies, where a picture does indeed sell for thousands of pieces of gold. Son of a gun! And here, after all these years, I thought he was knocking *words*!

But what is a picture worth on television? That is, just the picture, without the sound?

Not much. As a matter of fact, without the words on the package or the graphics on the screen, pictures in a TV commercial have almost no communication value. But add sound and the "picture" changes.

If pictures alone make no sense, how about sound alone? Strange as it may seem, the sound alone in a television commercial usually carries an easy-to-understand message. Most classic print advertisements illustrate the same principle. The visual alone makes almost no sense. A print ad with both pictures and words is more effective than either alone. But which is more powerful individually, the verbal or the visual?

Take the classic "Pepsi-Cola hits the spot" radio commercial, which first ran 56 years ago. Nothing, absolutely nothing, went into the mind via the eye. Yet the commercial hit a hot spot. Even today some people can recall the opening bits of Pepsi (nyse: [PEP](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)) music, and are then able to recite every word of the jingle. Fifty-six years later!

That's interesting. An idea deeply embedded in the mind that didn't come in through the eyes. Something seems wrong with the conventional wisdom as to the superiority of the eye.

To obtain a more objective viewpoint on the subject, we spoke with Dr. Elizabeth Loftus of the University of Washington, a psychologist, teacher, researcher and author of more than eight books and 100 articles on the human mind and how it works. When we asked her which is superior, the eye or the ear, this was her reply:

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"In many ways, the ear is superior to the eye. What I mean by that is that there is evidence from controlled laboratory studies that shows that when you present a list of words to people, and you present it either auditorily, say on a tape recorder, or you present it visually, say on slides, people remember more words if they hear the words than if they see them."

In the book I wrote with Al Ries, *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*, we said: "The name is the hook that hangs the brand on the product ladder in the prospect's mind." Now we know *why*. Apparently, thinking itself involves the manipulation of sounds deep inside the brain--even when the stimulus is purely visual, as with printed words.

William Shakespeare was wrong: A rose by any other name would *not* smell as sweet! Not only do you see what you want to see, you also smell what you want to smell. That is why the single most important decision in the marketing of a perfume is the name.

Would "Alfred" perfume have sold as well as "Charlie"? We doubt it. And Hog Island in the Caribbean was going nowhere until its name was changed to Paradise Island.

"Language and writing," said Ferdinand de Saussure, a famous Belgian linguist, "are two distinct systems of signs. The second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first." Translation: Print is a secondary medium that exists as a representation of the primary medium of sound.

The implications of these findings for the advertising industry are staggering. In many ways, they call for a complete reorientation from the visual to the verbal point of view. This isn't to say that the visual doesn't play an important role. Of course, it does. But the verbal should be the driver, while the pictures reinforce the words. All too often the opposite is the case.

First off, then, the printed words should carry the bulk of the sales message. Cutesy or confusing words bring nothing but trouble.

Second, headlines should sound good, as well as look good. The rhyme or rhythm of the words can be powerful memory devices.

Finally, pictures need a very quick explanation, otherwise they will distract readers. "Stopping" people won't accomplish much, if they look but don't read.

In a television commercial, spoken words should carry the sales message. Most important, you should never let the pictures and movements overwhelm the sound. When this happens, viewers stop listening and little communication takes place.

This "distraction factor" explains why so many commercials tend to be misidentified by the public. It also explains why **Procter & Gamble's** (nyse: [PG](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)) much-maligned slice-of-life approach works so well. The format is verbally driven and rarely contains any visual distraction. People don't rave about their commercials, they just remember them.