

# Learn the visual language of successful global brands

Visual communications cut across language and cultural barriers, so they are essential to building a truly global brand, says **Charles Young**, Ameritest

**C**OCA-COLA, DISNEY, DOVE, IBM, Intel, Nestle, Marlboro, McDonald's, Mercedes, Nissan, Samsung and Toyota - all are exemplars of scalability applied to branding.

They have achieved the elite status of becoming global brands; these brand names mean something to disparate consumers in China and India, France and Germany, Brazil and the US. Importantly, they mean pretty much the same thing from one country to another, because standing for something that is important and constant over time is an important part of defining what a brand is.

To scale up a brand to a global level requires a great deal of co-ordination and consistency of execution. More than a decade ago, IBM rocked the advertising world by simultaneously firing more than 40 ad agencies around the world and consolidating its advertising business in one shop, Ogilvy & Mather. At the time, it claimed it did so to 'speak with one voice'. This was the discipline IBM's then chief executive, Lou Gerstner, felt was required to rebuild a global brand in a rapidly changing, hi-tech world.

One of the major barriers to achieving global brand consistency is the concept of 'speaking with one voice'. Language is a slippery subject, and translating selling propositions from one culture to another is not always easy. In particular, translating the nuanced emotional imagery of the brand relationship can be quite a challenge for the poet-in-residence at local advertising agencies.

In an *Admap* article in March this year, 'Global research needs to be overlaid with local cultural tastes', Nigel Hollis, chief global analyst at Millward Brown, reported that "fewer than one in five ads that pretest exceptionally well in their country of origin do so when tested in another country". Among the reasons he cites for the failure of advertising executions to travel globally are "the nuances of language". A bigger problem, I might suggest, is an undue focus on language itself.

As a case in point, I was involved recently in conducting a multinational, quantitative study of teenagers, trying to explore basic values that were important

for defining a well-known global brand. The brief was to find out what it meant to be an 'authentic' person to teenagers in Chile, Germany and the US. We approached the problem on two levels: language and visuals (see panel, 'Testing language and visuals,' right).

Which approach to understanding the concept of authenticity was right: the verbal approach that led us to the conclusion that all teens are alike in some way, or the visual approach that showed us their differences? The answer is both. They were both necessary to guide our understanding of something as complex as the mind of the young consumer.

Words and images work together in complementary ways. Words are important for positioning a brand in the market and helping consumers to think rationally about the functional advantages and disadvantages of one brand compared with another. A brand's image represents the sum total of emotional associations that form the basis of long-term brand loyalty.

## Video power

The most powerful marketing tool for weaving words and images together to create a brand is advertising film, including both TV commercials and the emerging variants of web videos. As a means of rapidly building awareness and communicating headline information, while engaging consumer emotions, advertising film will continue to be the mainstay of marketing communications for the foreseeable future. This is particularly true for global marketing as internet use grows.

Fortunately for global marketers, the language of film is universal. Hollywood has taught the world to watch movies in the same way. No translation or re-editing of what appears on the screen is required, subtitles aside, for the syntax and grammar of visual storytelling in film to work just as well in Beijing and Mumbai as it does in New York, London or Paris. But given differences in culture and language, it is not obvious why communicating with film should work so well.

The rules of film grammar were largely codified in the early 20th century by film pioneers such as DW Griffith, the father of

## Testing language and visuals

First, we provided teens with a group of multiple-choice verbal statements and asked them to indicate which of them came closest to their own definition of what it means to be an authentic person. **Second, we asked them to sort through a number of images of different types of people to find those images that best expressed an image that represented the concept.**

Teenagers in all three countries - Chile, Germany and the US - picked the same answer in the multiple-choice verbal question. So, if verbal constructs were all that we had used in our survey, we might have drawn the conclusion that all teenagers share the same concept of what it means to be authentic. That would have been a mistake because visual imagery generated very different insights from the language-based approach.

Teenagers in each of the three countries

High-profile global brands have the same meaning to consumers, whether they are in the US or China



the feature film. Early film-makers discovered that discontinuous pieces of film could be joined together in ways that appeared to violate the continuous way we normally experience life, to create new visual experiences and tell stories that were comprehensible to audiences. These rules of grammar could be summarised as the four Cs of film editing: continuity, composition, close-ups and the cut.

The reason film grammar works across cultures is that these principles of editing film are tied to the biology of how the brain processes visual information. Motion pictures work because our minds, aided by persistence of vision, transform a series of still pictures into a story of continuous motion. It does this by the principle of closure, with our minds filling in the blanks between one image and another

**Charles Young** is founder and chief executive of Ameritest, an international advertising and brand research company based in New Mexico, USA. He has spent 20 years in the business, working in categories including packaged goods, retail, fast food and automotive.  
 chuck@ameritest.net



**Definition of an authentic person provides a different understanding of the concept than words alone**  
*Visual definitions chosen by teenagers in...*

Chile	Germany	US
		
'Emerging sexual identity'	'Breaking out of the mould'	'Rebellion and defiance'

*Source: Ameritest*

picked three very different photographic representations of the idea of an authentic person. Teenagers in Germany selected the image of an odd-looking fellow wearing a football helmet with Viking horns. Adolescents in Chile picked a photo of a teenage girl in a sexy, vampish pose. And teens in the US chose a retro image of a James Dean-type rebel.

Clearly, the concept of authenticity was being viewed through three very different

sets of cultural lenses. In Germany, teens appeared to arrive at their concept of an authentic person by rejecting the rigid, formal German stereotype. In Chile, the concept of authenticity was couched in the context of an adolescent dealing with her emergent sexual identity - possibly a reaction to the strong influence of the Catholic church in that culture. In the US, teens were expressing a rebellious, individualistic world-view.

name. And cuts, replicating the blinking of an eye, enable the mind to jump discontinuously from one idea to another, leaving it to the audience to draw its overarching conclusion about the meaning of a laundry softener, for example.

### Universal language

These visual storytelling techniques form the universal 'language' of film. To measure how 'grammatical' a piece of film is, and how well it communicates emotional imagery, I use simple online techniques based on sorting still frames from a film. One study I regularly conduct for clients is to learn how the same piece of advertising film works across different countries.

For more than ten years, this system has been used to test TV commercials in different regions of the world for Fortune 100 clients. Three of the key diagnostics in the test focus on the visual experience of the advertising. The first, the 'flow of attention', measures how consumers 'pre-consciously' filter which images are allowed to enter the conscious mind and, importantly, which visuals are processed into the long-term memories of the brand's image.

A second diagnostic is the 'flow of emotion', which measures how consumers' emotions are engaged, both positively and negatively, by the dramatic choices creatives have made.

The third, the 'flow of meaning', like the exercise conducted with the international teenagers, measures what particular emotions, ideas or meanings different images in an ad convey in the context of the strategic values a global brand is trying to stand for.

The flow of attention stage gets respondents to sort photos based on what they remember seeing a few minutes after exposure to the ad. The wave-like patterns produced by the flow of attention are pretty much the same from one country to another for the same advertising film.

Researchers fluent in multinational studies are well aware of the scaling bias that occurs when you move from one culture to another. Respondents in different cultures tend to use rating scales differently. Some may give more positive



er, so that the cinematic illusion of a seamless, unified reality is created. Closure is the psychological phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole. Because of closure, the mind doesn't see what it doesn't see, just as we lack awareness of the blind spot in the rear-view mirror of a car. Closure is the process by which the audience co-creates a commercial experience by mentally completing the imagery that is presented in an ad, based on past experience with the brand or category. A commercial may choose to focus on one attribute of the brand and let the consumer assume the existence of the rest of the attributes that make it a whole product.

The four Cs of film editing represent a full range of creative choices in terms of how to rearrange fragments of reality to

create a more vivid sense of reality. Continuity, for example, might be thought of simply, as in choosing to represent a story in time by a succession of scenes arranged in a linear, chronological sequence; or continuity can be achieved in more complex ways by matching actions to actions, moods to moods, or ideas to ideas. These approaches require more audience involvement to render the transitions between images meaningful.

Similarly, composition represents a creative choice of what information to frame within a scene and what to leave out. Close-ups on the face of a character eating a McDonald's burger may focus audience attention on the emotions of enjoyment, but close-ups on the packaging may also trigger a thinking response, causing the audience to read the brand

FIGURE 1

## Flow of attention across five countries

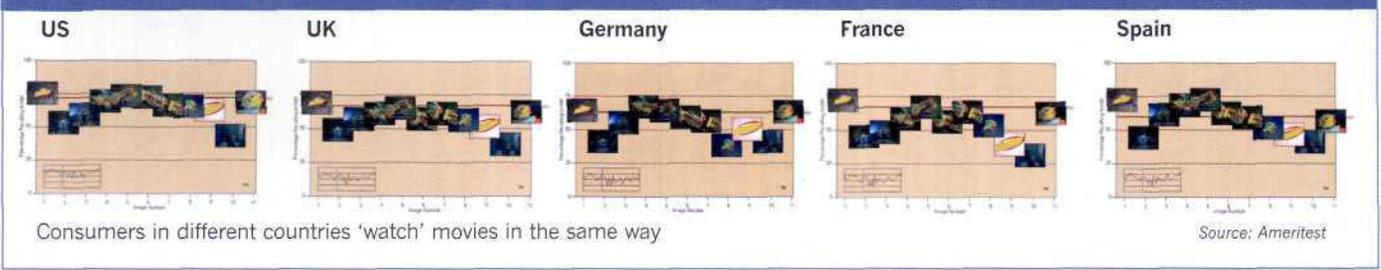
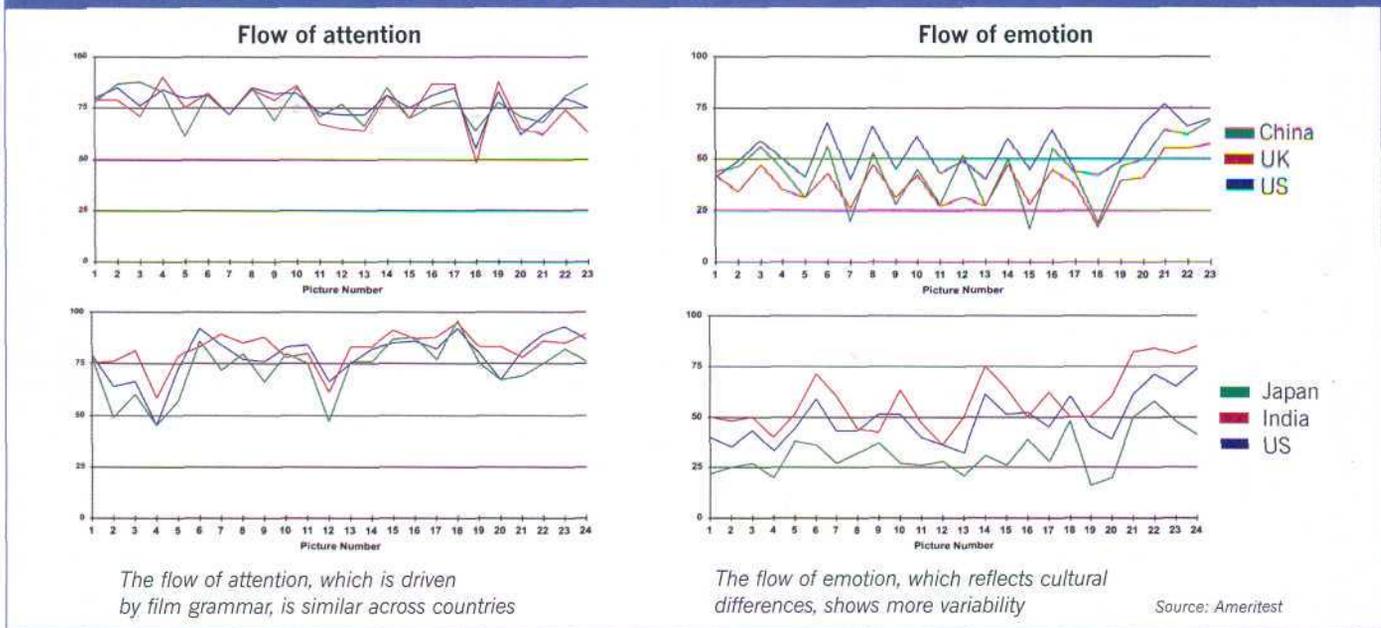


FIGURE 2

## Cross-cultural comparisons of flow of attention and flow of emotion



answers at the higher end of a scale in an effort to please the interviewer, while those from other cultures may be more guarded in their response.

For these reasons, analysis of quantitative data across different countries usually involves indexing the data first to make relevant comparisons. The flow of attention graphs for the commercial shown in Figure 1 have not been indexed, and the attention curves are almost identical for all five countries - a fairly typical result.

The reason is that flow of attention measures the syntax and grammar of the film - not the content. We regularly see this when we analyse commercials to understand a problem with a commercial's attention-getting power or branding scores. Well-structured film that follows universal principles of visual storytelling produces the same peaks and valleys of attention for audiences in Asia as in Europe or the Americas.

In contrast, the second diagnostic, the flow of emotion, picks up on response differences that can be seen from one culture to the next. Figure 2 shows the flow of attention and emotion graphs from tests

of the same ads in different regions of the world. Again, we see that the attention curves are very similar, but the emotion graphs can vary widely.

This makes sense. The flow of emotion measures emotions we can self-report, and so can be highly conditioned by culture. An image of the Eiffel Tower will evoke a different emotional response in Paris than it will in Berlin. An image of the US flag will evoke a different emotional response in New York than it will in Moscow. Part of the challenge of developing global advertising campaigns is to find imagery that works across cultures.

To determine the meaning of specific imagery in an ad requires a third level of analysis, the flow of meaning. As with the example of what the idea of 'authenticity' meant across different cultures, probing the meaning of advertising imagery can be a straightforward research task of asking local consumers to sort images from the ad into different, pre-determined categories of brand meanings. The purpose of the flow of meaning is to find out how well the pictures in an ad match those words from one country to the next.

Global brands are built by visually

effective advertising campaigns. Reflecting the three criteria (flow of attention, flow of emotion and flow of meaning) used to deconstruct audience responses to advertising film, 'visual effectiveness' for a television commercial can be defined in terms of three levels of performance:

**Clear visual grammar**, so audiences everywhere can follow the visual storytelling.

**Emotional engagement**, so audiences everywhere can become involved with the brand stories that are being told.

**Common meaning of the visuals**, so the images audiences focus on are culturally relevant and communicate a universal value for the brand.

An old adage has it that a picture is worth a thousand words. But research across many countries has taught us that the opposite is also true. One word can be worth a thousand pictures. The trick in advertising global brands is in finding the few pictures from those thousand that consumers everywhere can agree mean the same thing.

More on global brand marketing at [www.warc.com](http://www.warc.com)