

# JOHNÉR



**VISUAL  
COMMUNICATION**  
How do you do it?

## **DO NOT JUST THINK OF IMAGES, IMAGINE THE MESSAGE!**

© Bo Bergström

All communicators want to reach out with their messages whether it be information, news or advertising. And it is undoubtedly the image, i.e. the photograph, film, or illustration that does the most important work to capture interest, affect and influence.

### **Choose the right image for the right message**

Image work begins when a communications person, editor or advertising professional formulates a message that is intended for a specific target group. And that message must be seasoned with attractive text, design and color, but above all, an image.

Often, and especially in advertising, there are two types of messages to use. The first one promises to solve a problem, the second aims to create well-being.

If you, for example, want to provide information about a burglar alarm that solves the problem of recurrent home break-ins in one area, you should probably seek out a dark, dramatic nighttime photo of a house. With such an image, a viewer can identify with, perhaps feel intimidated, and thus take the message to heart, and the result is hopefully a purchase. The picture conveys, in other words, the promise of a product that solves a problem.

In another context, you may want to convey a message that promises well-being, enjoyment and connection with other people. A healthy, fresh sparkling water creates pleasant company for a group of people around a garden table. If you portray it in a light, soft, shimmering photograph it awakens a desire and soon we stand in front of the display case in the store. The image conveys, in other words, a promise of a product that creates well-being.

### **Enlist the help of image categorization**

The two examples above were perhaps simple and self-evident, but this is not always the case. Often, long discussions are required about which image or images best support the message. A categorization like the above mentioned two groups can then come to the rescue.

The first category is known as window images, and include photographs, films and drawings, that in a straightforward and truthful manner attempts to reproduce reality, such as a person on the lawn or a colorful kite in the sky. The photographer opened his camera to the world in the same way that one opens a window. The environment out there cannot be influenced to a high degree, and when the photographer takes the picture, it contains an objective depiction of the subject.

The second category is known as mirror images, and these reflect the person behind the camera. It is a directing and organizing approach to the subject, and is thereby depicted in a subjective manner. Imagine a suggestive face in motion and slightly unfocused, which conveys a sense of determination and commitment. "I photograph not what I see, but what I feel", is usually how photographers describe how they work with mirror images.

### **Composing with good form**

So far we have covered the message and categorization. Now to the question of how we as picture viewers perceive images in the busy flow around us. It's all about image composition.

Our brain has been endowed with a kind of sense of order, which helps us to bring order to the often chaotic world we live in. We try to put all signals from the outside world into manageable and understandable so-called configurations or entities outside our ability to see shapes and patterns.

There are both bad and good configurations in the outside world, as well as in photographs. The bad ones we reject because they are difficult to grasp when the eye wanders aimlessly about among completely diffuse picture elements.

The good configurations, on the other hand, are characterized by simplicity, clarity, contrast and dominance and catch us right away. They can be described as a figure, a kind of focal point, which more or less clearly takes a step forward towards us, and stands out against the image background. This figure – the girl, the bicycle, the house – forms an entrance into the photograph and tells the viewer that this is where one should start to look, in the same way as a door to a house tells one that here is where you enter. Obviously, this visual entrance promotes the possibility of reaching the viewer.

### **Put images together effectively**

When images with exciting dominant elements are selected, there is obviously good reason to put them together in a pleasing way. How is this done? Well, there are two ways.

One way is to make them different or surprising and aims to strengthen the interest from the viewer's side by letting the images contrast with each other, almost colliding. This can happen when images are reproduced on a spread in a catalog but also page after page on a website or in a magazine.

The aim is to counteract the predictable by enticingly placing bright images next to dark ones, using color versus black and white, closeness versus distance, diagonal versus horizontal symmetry versus

asymmetry, dramatic versus non-dramatic. This approach creates curiosity in the viewer, which stimulates and encourages them to delve deeper into the material.

Another way is to use continuity, and here there are no strong contrasts or clashes, just images of similar character locked together in a smooth, consistent and suggestive manner. Here also the viewer is encouraged to go deeper into the material as a kind of cinematic effect is created.

### **Let the text and image interact**

A picture is worth a thousand words. Yes, you have heard that phrase a thousand times. But honestly, isn't it just an old saying? Let us now kill that notion with the following reasoning:

Just as a picture is worth a thousand words, a thousand words say more than one picture. A thousand apples do not taste more than one pear, and a thousand pears taste not more than one apple. Apples taste nothing like a pear no matter how many there are. A thousand words says something other than a picture.

Words and pictures obviously say different things but despite (or because of) it seems they are constantly drawn to each other and then something always happens. They work together, they support each other, and they interact so that the message comes across.

And this interaction can occur in two ways.

In harmony, which means that text and images pretty much say the same thing. This harmony is great for informative and educational contexts, such as in a cookbook. For us to be able to cook up a delicious fish soup, the text and images need to interact closely. "Fillet the fish with a sharp knife, first do this ..." says the text and the photo shows the same thing, the fish, the knife...

But the harmony is less effective in news reporting and advertising because it is almost disturbingly too obvious when the text and image repeat each other. For a picture of a summer dress the heading says "summer dress". Not very enticing, right? Another type of interaction is needed, disharmony.

In disharmony, the text and image say different things and a communicative distance or gap arises. This gap makes us curious and encourages us to join the text and image so that we can understand the message. This results in participation and commitment from our side, which is necessary in all forms of communication. A picture of an ear with the heading "Read a book". But that does not register quite right with the viewer. What has an ear and reading a book have to do with each other? Very soon the viewer realizes that the message is about an audiobook. For the picture of the summer dress above, the headline now reads "25°C".

### **The location has influence**

No, in reality, a photograph, a film clip or an illustration, is experienced and perceived quite differently in Los Angeles, Singapore, Nairobi, Kabul and Berlin. The differences can be heavens apart. What makes the difference naturally depends on the culture, religion, laws and regulations that strongly affect the experience. It is clear that each individual image is interpreted in its own way depending on the geographical circumstances.

Avoiding a communicative disaster requires careful research, surveys, and not least instinct regarding image selection.

### **Time also has influence**

There is much that affects experiences and interpretations of images. This also includes time in the sense of what is happening in the public domain. The public domain is filled with many voices in conversation and discussion between people over café tables or on discussion programs on TV. The consequence is that this changes the interpretation of visual expressions. They are influenced by time, and this is particularly true when it has been a long time between the production of an image and the consumption of it. One could say that the time “consumes meanings and churns out new ones”. A photograph from the fifties today can transmit very inappropriate, and based on a message perspective, dangerous signals, for example regarding gender roles.

### **Interpretation on two levels**

To interpret an image means to discern and understand its meaning. The viewer is often helped by a caption, but despite this, sometimes there is a misinterpretation, and the message does not get through.

It is obvious that the viewer creates and nourishes their own image. The eye and brain are influenced by experiences, memories, knowledge, expectations, prejudices, aspirations and, of course, also by the situation and context that the viewer is in at that moment. Therefore, the possibilities for interpretation are many and rich.

The image of a bike provokes adrenaline and fighting spirit in a racing cyclist, while a social anthropologist is fascinated by that conveyance because it is based on one of mankind’s most important and earliest inventions.

But there must be some kind of order in the world of pictures, right? Yes, and it manifests itself in two levels of interpretation.

The first is comprised of a core meaning, or the basic meaning, and refers to the actual meaning when most people in a group viewing a photo are in a kind of agreement to interpret it in much the same way. The picture is clear and the image communication has great potential for success. A chair in a photograph is interpreted simply as a chair.

Now, however, it immediately becomes more difficult. If the viewing group delves deeper in the interpretation work, they soon find that the discussion becomes both intense and prolonged. We are approaching the image’s additional connotation, which is strongly influenced by the viewer’s associations and experiences. The photograph becomes ambiguous and the communication possibilities can be lost.

Connotation can also be determined culturally and therefore shared by different groups with similar backgrounds and values. A distinct group has thus, so to speak, agreed on a certain interpretation.

For the discussion and analysis of possible images, one needs to get to grips with these two levels and decide if the photograph or film sequence is interpreted in a manner consistent with the intent.

## **Spice it up and reap the benefits**

How do you become a skilled image communicator? In all probability you already are. But generally speaking, follow the advice and consider the approaches above and you will be a long way on the path to the difficult art of communication. It doesn't hurt to add something more, something extra.

Search for that extra "spice" in the image. View photographs and film footage that adds personality or a measure of honesty, a teaspoon of ingenuity, plenty of human warmth, a lot of concern and ultimately, perhaps laced with humor that immediately creates sympathy.

Soon you can reap the effects of a good image selection. And you'll get the best results, if you think less about the image and more about the message.

Bo Bergström

Creative director, lecturer, educator, author

(Image: © Elliot Elliot/Johnér)

*Bo Bergström is an author, educator, lecturer and creative director. He has worked at some of the top advertising agencies in Stockholm, Sweden, with numerous awards, including the prestigious communication award, "Guldägget" (The Golden Egg Award).*

*Bo Bergström has written dozens of specialist books on visual communication and image communications. The books are course literature in a variety of contexts. The standard work, "Essentials of Visual Communication", is also published in English and six other languages around the world (most recently Chinese). He lectures, educates and leads workshops at colleges and universities in Sweden and abroad, at advertising and design schools as well as in industry.*

*Bo Bergström also educates image communicators and photographers in a number of Swedish photography schools with a focus on news, advertising and information. He is also has a BA in art, literature and pedagogy and is First Vice Chairman of the Bild & Ord Akademin (Image & Word Academy).*