

What They See Matters

Visual communication takeaways from audience research and tips for testing images



resource media



Hang a picture on the wall and three different people may give you three different opinions — “terrifying” or “inspiring” or “so what?” How then to ever pick effective images for the viewers of your websites, social media posts, print materials, ads or other visual communications? Will the photos you choose say to your audience what you think they say? Will they prove emotional, engaging and memorable — or flat and forgettable? Will they help inspire any participation or opinion or behavior change?

Resource Media’s first visual communication guide, [Seeing is Believing](#), drew on human behavioral science to recommend basic rules of the road for maximizing the effect your photos have on the people you are trying to reach. The first rule: test your visuals with your audience. This is something we’ve now had a chance to do through a range of research projects we’ve conducted. Some of our projects have been quick and simple, designed to answer very narrow campaign-related questions. Other projects, like our recent report, [Beyond the CFL: Winning Images for Energy Efficiency](#), have been broad and complex. Image testing comes in many shapes and sizes.

In this guide we begin with a look at some findings from these image-testing projects that can inform visual communications across a range of issues. We also provide tips for doing effective image research, because specific audiences, contexts and goals call for specific testing to ensure the best results.

Throughout our research, we have often been reminded that initial assumptions we may make about a photo or image-text combination may not be quite accurate for members of our audience. And it’s what they see that matters.

Five Takeaways from Image Testing

In Resource Media's qualitative and quantitative image-testing projects, certain findings turn up repeatedly. In this section, we'll look at five takeaways based on these common findings that can help you with your visual communication projects.

1

Use images your audience can recognize as local

Our testing has repeatedly revealed the strength of imagery that is authentic for an audience, not generic. Authentic images have a much better chance of prompting a viewer to feel or recall or imagine, and that increases the likelihood that a viewer is influenced to act in response.

One proven way to boost authenticity is to use photos that your audience can readily tell are taken in their community, city or state. This means paying careful attention to the composition of photos, ensuring that either the main subject itself is recognizable (like a known local landmark) or that your subject appears in a setting that viewers can identify as being local.



This visual promoted to Facebook users in Utah sparked strong participation in an online action on clean energy. The vista is recognizable to Utahns as local to their state.

When considering image options, ask yourself:

- Could the photo be seen as “any landscape anywhere” or “any urban scene” — or is it clearly a local landscape or a local urban scene?
- Could the person featured in your photo be seen as just “any person, anywhere,” or is there some visible context around them that puts them clearly in a place recognizable to your audience?

2

Include elements that help your viewers relate personally, like homes, activities, or people



Photos of people up-close, with their faces and eyes toward the camera, draw viewer attention.

In focus groups testing photos related to energy efficiency, participants reacted most positively to photos showing real homeowners taking energy-saving actions such as insulating an attic, using a programmable thermostat or caulking windows. These images prompt viewers who are homeowners themselves to think of their own homes and personal experiences with home improvements.

We've seen the same with images about pollution that also show the people, homes or a community affected rather than just the pollution source alone. And an image of rooftop solar that also shows the proud and happy homeowner who made the investment elicits more reaction than a picture of just solar panels alone.

In addition to context that is local to your audience, other elements in your visuals that can help viewers relate include homes, homeowners, families, students, schools, businesses, or recreation. What proves relatable or not will depend on your audience, and their interests and values.

Photos with people's faces up-close consistently draw viewer attention, and eyes and expressions can convey emotions like pride or happiness that in turn produce emotion for the viewer. This is why including people in imagery is often so effective. But we have seen plenty of cases where visuals without people test well too, often because they employ some of the other takeaways discussed in this section.

3

With online action appeals or ads to new audiences, be careful of images that spark interests unrelated to your ask

Sometimes visuals promoted in online ads attract a lot of interest from new audiences we're reaching, but don't lead to high rates of participation in a requested action. One important factor appears to be images that a viewer could be interested in for reasons unrelated to the action ask, or those that require some dots to be connected to "arrive" at the topic of the action ask.

The photo shown on this page drew good rates of clicks when promoted via Facebook in Alabama. But it was less effective in motivating the requested action — completing a short survey in support of clean energy — than the photo of the farmer with solar panels shown on the front cover of this guide. In focus groups, we've learned that for some people an image of soldiers with solar panels is not mainly about energy but rather about military work and service ("how hard the military works, and so many different jobs"). So viewers who weren't clicking out of interest in energy probably moved on when landing on an action page with an energy-related survey ask.



Is this an image about solar energy, or about military service and work?

4

Accompanying text can create impact, but the image comes first



The Little Blue Run coal ash storage pond in West Virginia. The blue color results from chemicals. Coal ash contains mercury and arsenic.

The pretty turquoise water in this aerial photo catches the eye. Then the brief factual caption delivers a surprising fact that makes the visual memorable.

Again, though, it is the image that does the heavy lifting. In our testing, different images with the same text overlay can result in dramatically different response rates. The right text can help the right image work better, but the right text won't compensate for the wrong image.

In focus groups where viewers are taking some time with a visual, as people may do in real life with a photo essay or article, we clearly see the effect of accompanying text. Brief, factual captions noting the names of people shown and identifying locations and dates help the image become more authentic and resonant. Text can also reveal something surprising or startling about the image, making the visual more memorable for viewers. But the image has to capture attention for the caption to be read.

For more fleeting online visual communications, like an online ad that will receive only a quick glance, a couple words of text overlay on a photo will help the post drive more engagement.

Clean air matters



5

Juxtaposition can be effective

Visuals that create contrast can be very effective. In one example, before-and-after images of a pristine landscape and the same landscape post-mining proved more memorable and compelling than the image of mining degradation alone. The combination gives viewers a simple and striking visual contrast that sticks.

We have seen similar effectiveness from side-by-side comparisons in projects to motivate online action via Facebook. In several different cities with air pollution problems, presenting an image of the local skyline on a clean air day vs. a polluted air day has proven effective in generating both clicks and participation in actions related to air pollution. Text can also play a role in generating unexpected contrast for viewers from a single image, such as brief text overlay that prompts your audience to imagine a scene shown in a much different condition than what's depicted.

An example of creating contrast with a single photo and a few words that prompt the viewer to imagine in their mind's eye the contrasting image – the river filled with coal barges.



Conducting an image-testing project

With growing guidance on visual communication to draw from, why keep testing images? Why consider research on imagery as part of your next campaign or outreach project?

Even with good basic guidelines, there are often many different imagery alternatives and photo-text choices for any project — and goals and contexts vary widely. In image-testing projects over the past couple years, we've often run into examples of visuals that appear clear to us in their inspiration and appeal, but don't lead to the results we might expect with our audience. Our testing confirms that selecting one photo over another could mean the difference between 1,500 online actions vs. 500, or paying for a display ad that will stick with your audience vs. being quickly forgotten.

What testing approach to use?

An online experiment via Facebook comparing the effectiveness of two or three different visuals in motivating participation is useful in ensuring an outreach campaign is as efficient as possible. The shortcoming is that you don't get to understand as much about why one image does better than another to inform broader learning. That's where a focus group approach is helpful, as we saw in the example discussed in takeaway #3 above with insight from focus groups shedding light on Facebook ad campaign results.

Chances are that over time you will be served well by a combination of both focus-group style research and online campaign experiments. If you have little prior research to go on about how visuals work with your audience on your issue, it can be helpful to start with focus groups. That way you can explore a variety of visual appeals in a short time frame and narrow in on a visual strategy. Watching people react to your visuals can also expand your thinking and creativity about image acquisition and visuals. Once you have a sense of potentially effective approaches, experiments in real-life campaigns are a good way to compare the behavioral impact of different visual options.

A focus group approach gives you a chance to learn more about how and why different visuals affect your audience the way they do. An experiment via Facebook or website ads can let you observe the behavioral impact of your visual communications in a real-world context.

Testing Options

Here are five options for image-testing and a few key aspects about each. Resources, time, capacity, project scope and other factors will be important in determining the right route for your needs.

Hire a public opinion research firm with experience on your topic and issue advocacy communications to design and conduct image-testing focus groups, either online or in-person

- Recruitment from your target audience; professional research design, questionnaire development, facilitation, session recording, and results analysis and interpretation that also benefits from the pollster's experience with your issue area.
- Can alleviate demand on client's time and provide confidence in methodology and takeaways.

Contract with a consumer market research company for online 'panels'

- An option for those more confident in designing and steering research. Participants for your study can be recruited according to geography, demographics and other characteristics.
- Market research firms may not have experience with issue advocacy campaigns or your issue area, so a more 'hands-on' role by your organization (or an additional advisor) may be needed in development of visual appeals, image-selection, panel moderation and other aspects.

Conduct an informal focus group or series of one-on-one interviews on your own

- No cost, so this is an option for those with limited resources or for smaller projects that may not warrant more significant financial investment.
- Potentially very difficult to recruit willing participants from your target audience, or sufficient numbers of participants to ensure trustworthy results. Requires skill and knowledge by someone in your organization to design and implement.

Hire an ad agency to implement an online campaign that includes image-testing experiments

- If you have a campaign that warrants significant online outreach through ads served on websites and other online channels, you can work with your ad buyer to test a range of options first before deciding on the one or two to put the most resources behind — and learn about your visuals in the process.
- With ads on websites, you can reach beyond Facebook users and reach a wide audience of people who are 'politically active,' for example. Some firms can also target ads very narrowly based on consumer data.

Run your own online experiments via Facebook

- With Facebook's Ads Manager, you can run controlled experiments to compare audience reaction to visual communications. Targeting is confined to Facebook users only, but your audience can be narrowed by geography, demographics, and interests.
- Can be implemented quickly and inexpensively. Experiments need to be narrow and carefully constructed and analyzed to ensure meaningful and trustworthy results. Requires skill and knowledge by someone inside or outside your organization to design and implement.

Start with a good visual project planning process and concrete research questions

Good image research starts with thoughtful planning to identify goals and desired outcomes for the communications outreach, key audiences and the channels needed to reach them, and the interests and values of target audiences. A good planning process gets as specific as possible, as these considerations will in turn inform image options and testing design.

For example, are you setting out to motivate an action, influence attitudes or shame an opponent? Do you need to reach and connect with a broad audience, or just ‘young people’ or ‘parents’ or ‘residents of a particular neighborhood or town affected by a specific problem or decision?’ Such clarity on goals and audience will steer choices on testing approach as well as focus group recruitment or targeting for an online experiment.

When analyzing audiences in terms of ways to interest or appeal to them visually, be creative and broad at first if you’re not already confident what will work well. For each appeal angle you come up with — such as ‘health’ or ‘jobs’ or ‘recreation’ — make a list of ideas of what you could show in a visual. Who could you show? Are there images you could pair in combination? What facts or stories might accompany particular shots? Think about showing problems, solutions, impacts, testimonials, something funny, or something maddening.

Looking at your range of ideas for visuals and appeals, what predictions can you make about what will be best at drawing attention, triggering emotion and engagement, and motivating action? What are you pretty confident about based on past research and experience? What are you unsure about or perhaps assuming without prior research to go on? These will become research questions to explore in your image-testing.

Visual Project Planning Worksheet

What will your visual communications accomplish? (Set in the broader campaign or project context)	For example: As part of our overall campaign to win better renewable and energy efficiency standards, tell the personal stories over three months of 10 people whose lives, livelihoods and families are supported by clean energy and efficiency in order to position these issues as being about people and lives rather than just government policy.
Who are the audiences you will want to reach?	For example: college students; businesses; people with conservation interests beyond our networks; activists; residents in a certain neighborhood; journalists and politicians
What specific actions will you want your audience to take?	For example: sign a petition or letter; provide an email address; make a donation; request more information; show up for an event; join an online community; visit a web site; share with friends; vote
What visual channels will reach your audiences, and how many images will you need?	For example: Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, email, a web site, online slide show or photo essay, a brochure, an event, paid ads. Images needed: 8 for Facebook outreach; 5 for photo essay; etc.
What are interests, values, concerns, aspirations for your audiences that your visuals might appeal to?	For example: health, safety, saving money, climate impacts, kids, having fun, a treasured place, a hated or beloved person, clean water, homeownership, freedom, self-reliance
Brainstorm and list ideas for specific images that stem from your analysis above	For each audience and appeal angle above, what can you show? Who can you show? Think broadly: photos you wish you had; with people, without people; showing problems, showing solutions; events; exteriors vs. interiors; before and after shots; surprises, contrasts, juxtapositions; action shots; environmental portraits; etc. Note particular stories or facts that might accompany/caption particular image ideas.
Narrow your image list and identify testing needs and opportunities	Based on what you know from research and best practices, what predictions can you make about what images and image-text combinations above will be best at pulling eyes, triggering emotion and engagement, delivering impact, and motivating action? Use this analysis to narrow your image idea list above. What questions are you left with about which images will work best? Which would be good to put to the test if you could, either through online experiments or via informal focus grouping?
Plan your image collection	Categorize images above that you: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- already have- could photograph yourself- could locate online- can ask another others to lend to you, or obtain for you

A worksheet you can use for visual project planning is available for download at visualstorylab.org.

Image-testing focus groups

Here are some key elements and options to consider with image-testing focus groups:

Recruitment

Professional opinion research firms use screening questions and other methods to ensure focus group participants come from your desired target audience. If you're recruiting participants for informal testing you're conducting yourself, venues such as schools, a book club, sports team or neighborhood gathering may provide opportunities for recruitment.

Sequencing

The very start of an image-testing focus group is a chance to see viewers' reactions to photos before they are influenced to some degree by discussion and material shown over the course of the group. For these first visuals, consider showing photos alone without accompanying text so you can learn where the imagery itself naturally "takes" viewers – whether it triggers the interests and associations you presume or not. Later, you can get feedback on versions with text, or other more "message-laden" approaches such as side-by-sides or ad drafts.

A quick-glance test

In the real world, photos get only a brief moment to catch viewers' interest as people scroll online or flip through print material. This can be simulated in a focus group by showing a set of photos to participants briefly, one at a time, and then putting them away and asking which caught your eye, and why? Later, participants can take more time to dwell on the images and provide feedback on each.

Testing your visuals can help you:

- *Learn what an image "says" to your audience and the associations it triggers*
- *Understand if an image is engaging and compelling*
- *Unearth unanticipated or unhelpful associations*
- *Spot ways to improve a particular visual communication*
- *Motivate more action-taking, and be cost-effective with outreach*
- *Reveal trends to help you refine your next visual projects*

Assessing reaction

In addition to paying close attention to the associations that come up for participants as they view images, it's also helpful to watch for signs of more engaged reaction. Are people mentioning personal memories or experiences? Are they imagining more beyond what's shown in the image? Are they using words and phrases that convey feelings, either their own or those felt by the subjects depicted in the image? Do they talk about values or ideas that are particularly important to them?

Image sets

Images can be grouped in a variety of ways to explore different research questions. For example, with a set of photos including one of recreation, one of wildlife and one of industrial activity you could solicit feedback comparing these different visual appeals in terms of motivating support for a wilderness area. On the other hand, with a set of three slightly different recreation photos, as an example, you could zero in on the effect of variations in image composition or other more subtle aspects.



A set designed to compare a range of possible visual appeals in connection to a conservation topic



A set designed to explore more subtle variations in image composition

“Stickiness”

A memorable image has greater influence than one which is quickly forgotten. At the very end of a focus group, when all the images have been put away, consider asking participants to identify which of everything they viewed during the group stuck with them most, and why.

Question prompts to get feedback on images:

- What do you see in this image?*
- What does it make you think about?*
- What are the first words that come to mind?*
- What questions would you ask about it?*
- Is it important to you in any way? How?*
- Which of these images is most compelling to you? Why?*
- Which stands out the most to you? Why?*

Image-testing via Facebook's Ads Manager

Following are some tips for learning about audience reaction to different visuals through paid Facebook post promotion:

For each experiment, isolate just one key variable of interest.

There are many potential variables in play when promoting posts via Facebook's Ads Manager, from the theme of your posts to the images, text, audience targeting and more. If more than one of these varies among the visuals you compare, it will be difficult to single out an explanation for performance differences. It's important to keep everything the same except one variable of interest. Develop a very narrow research question, such as "Will including a family in the landscape photo be more engaging than the same landscape without the family?"



NO: too much variation

If the top visual in this pair performs better, we won't know if it's due to the theme, images, side-by-side approach, or the text and its layout.



YES: just one element varies

Now if the top visual performs better we can be more confident that it's the side-by-side contrast that's making the difference.

Track and compare both post interactions and action-taking.

Facebook's Ads Manager provides a lot of data on sponsored posts. Clicks, likes, shares, conversions, impressions and reach are all important. A click-through rate (such as clicks per users reached) will shed light on how well an ad sparked interest. A conversion rate (completed actions per users reached) will let you compare participation in an online action if your posts are linking to one.

It's not unusual to see different visuals in an experiment drive similar click-rates but different rates of participation in a promoted action such as a sign-on petition, survey or send-an-email ask. So it can really be worth the extra steps to track conversions. It's done by installing a "conversion tracking pixel," a bit of code Facebook generates for you, in the appropriate place on your website's take-action page. It's this pixel that enables Facebook to count and report on actions uniquely driven by each post in your test.

Beware of hidden factors before making conclusions.

Before pronouncing one post better than another, be sure to unearth possible hidden factors that could potentially be getting in the way. For example, did one of your posts get served a lot more via mobile devices while another was served more via desktop? Another factor to consider is random chance. If needed, consult online tools, Resource Media, or colleagues or friends with statistics expertise for advice on how to determine whether you can be confident that a difference in click-through rate or conversion rate between two posts isn't due to random chance.



Conclusion

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, as the saying goes. But what the “beholders” of your visual communications consider compelling need not remain a mystery. As we’ve seen in this guide, there are effective ways to ask your audience for feedback and set up experiments that shed light on how your visuals affect your viewers.

About Resource Media

Resource Media is a one-of-a-kind communications firm: a mission-driven nonprofit working to improve the health of people and the planet, and to build a more just and equitable world. We provide expert communications services to nonprofits, foundations, research institutions, government agencies and responsible businesses working to make the world a better place. On visual communications, Resource Media can assist organizations with design, production and evaluations of visual materials, image selection, trainings on visual storytelling and testing, and design and implementation of visual research through focus groups and online experiments. We look forward to continuing to share our ongoing visual learning with you and to hearing about findings from testing that you are doing. Please keep in touch with us!

Acknowledgements

Several foundations have provided support for us to be able to produce this guide and conduct the image research projects that have informed the advice we present. First and foremost, we are so thankful to the Brainerd and Compton Foundations for their initial grants that launched our visual communication research and our *Seeing is Believing* guide, as well as their continued support that has made this second guide possible. Other foundations we are indebted to for supporting image-testing projects over the past two years include the Energy Foundation and Mize Family Foundation. Thank you.



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