

Master the Metaphor

By George Felton

They may seem more appropriate for English majors and copywriters, but metaphors can be powerful solutions for visual problems, as well. Here's why—and how—to use them effectively in all of your design projects.

As consumers, we like to think we choose products based on what we can see, hear, feel, taste and touch about them. *Is this a good hamburger? Let's taste it. Is this a good car? Let's drive it.* In other words, we make our judgments via tangible distinctions. But the reality of the situation—and we know this as designers—is that there's a lot more to the equation than just our five senses. There are the subconscious elements, the deeper meanings, the other intangible benefits that products offer, which factor into the formula and influence our decisions to buy or not to buy.

For instance, even though that car can be seen and felt and driven, there are other aspects that determine how we relate to the vehicle, such as feelings of power or freedom or security. Even though they aren't part of the actual structure of the car, they're still part of what draws us to the vehicle, so they ought to be part of how the automaker markets and sells it.

And that's where metaphor comes into play. Whether you're designing a brochure for an insurance company or you're creating packaging for a new product, you can use a metaphor to give the product new life and meaning. As marketing professor Theodore Levitt notes, "Metaphors and similes become surrogates for the tangibility that cannot be provided or experienced in advance."

How Metaphors Work

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a comparison is made between dissimilar things. If you compare Ohio State to Penn State or the Cleveland Browns to the Chicago Bears, you aren't making metaphors; you're making literal comparisons between similar things.



LITERAL COMPARISON

But if you say that a football team is like a harnessed set of horses, then you've made a metaphor.



METAPHOR

Think of metaphors as coming in two varieties:

Pure metaphor.

Sometimes you can just show us something that isn't your product at all and tell us it is. You're using a pure metaphor: something that stands in for your *product (or its benefit or the feeling we get from it)* that helps clarify and convince. This is a good idea when your product is intangible, but also when it's boring to look at or complicated or obscure or unknown. Or when everybody else in your category does one *thing (show the car, for example)*, and you want to do something different.

I once saw a poster in the public library: a big photo of a hiker with a backpack pausing on a glorious solo trek through the Grand Canyon, the awesome spectacle looming over his shoulder. This poster could have been advertising Timberland gear or Arizona tourism, but when I read the small headline, "Knowledge is free. Visit your library," I saw how well the visual worked. Going to the library is like an odyssey through immense, spectacular country; just think of what's there. The pure metaphor required me to leap from the Grand Canyon to the library, but I could, and I felt invigorated by doing so.

Another pure metaphor that invites me to leap—this time from color to music—is Stefan Sagmeister's packaging for a Pat Metheny Trio CD. The package is uniformly gray, but

Master the Metaphor

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each side has a round cut-out revealing a portion of the multicolored disc inside. Different colors are randomly shown, which metaphorically evokes the improvisation-within-precision nature of Metheny's jazz. The package, then, looks how he sounds.

Fused metaphor. Pure metaphors, though, are rare. Why? Because it's easier to create a fused metaphor. With a fused metaphor, you take the product (or something associated with it, the way a toothbrush is associated with toothpaste or the highway with cars) and fuse it with something else.

Objects that are modified in some way are more attractive to us. Unmodified images are really just clichés. For example, one of advertiser David Ogilvy's famous ideas was "The Man in the Hathaway Shirt," who wore an eye patch and was thereby more interesting than a man who didn't. He wasn't just the cliché of your typical hunk; he was a wounded, brave, singular fellow with a story to tell. Absolut Vodka has been reinventing its bottle in various amusing ways for years: turning it into a swimming pool for "Absolut L.A.," fogging it in for "Absolut San Francisco," blowing off its letters for "Absolut Chicago" and so on. Many other ads gain some of their visual strength from a "what's wrong here?" approach.

Unlike pure metaphor, fused images help contextualize the selling argument for us; we don't have to leap quite as far when part of what we're looking at is what's for sale. You catch our attention and demonstrate your selling argument by morphing your product into something new that expresses your selling idea.

How to Fuse

Get in the habit of looking for pairs in whatever design problem you're working on; push two things together into one image. For example, if you're selling a home-security system, you could begin with the image of a lock or barbed wire or an armed guard and combine it with a house.

The power of graphic fusion comes from combining two clichés, symbols or aspects of a situation into one new image. Think in terms of either addition (adding something to an image) or substitution (replacing part of an image with something else).

Here are some examples of addition:

- For the book "Mechanism of Mind," the cover image features a big wind-up key on the back of Rodin's "The Thinker."



- A photograph for a magazine article about genetically engineered foods shows a tomato that's been sliced, then stitched back up.
- A poster for a Lincoln, NE, marathon simply shows a black stovepipe hat whose brim is mottled with the white grime of dried sweat. (The fitting headline reads, "The Lincoln Marathon. One score and 6.2 miles. May 7, 2000.")

And examples of substitution:

- A holiday mailer promoting "PEACE" substitutes a wishbone for the letter A.

Master the Metaphor

By George Felton

- Milton Glaser’s famous poster of Bob Dylan replaces his hair with curly rainbows of color.



- For the American Institute of Architects’ proposed headquarters in New York City, the campaign’s symbol is a key, where the jagged negative space of the key’s teeth has been replaced by the similarly jagged shape of the city’s skyline.



How to Find Metaphors

Put your client’s product (or the benefit we derive from it) into these formats to help you make connections and create images:

“It’s like a ____.”

“It’s like a ____ for your ____.”

“Think of it as ____.”

“If it were a ____, it would be a ____.”

If you called the product something else, what would it be? If you compared it to something else, what would it be? The annual report for a network-infrastructure company explains broadband by comparing it to various kinds of “big pipes”—a boy about to yell (“big pipes are my birthright”) a girl looking through a kaleidoscope (“it keeps changing”), and children running through a large tunnel (“where does this go?”). Pipes of various sorts serve as metaphors for the otherwise invisible product and its value to our lives.

Ask yourself these questions:

What is this product? What does it do? The logotype for Exhale, a pulmonary disease therapy company, demonstrates visually what they do best: help us breathe better. Each subsequent letter in the logo is less heavy and lighter in color than the previous. As we read the name, we realize and understand its meaning through this visual metaphor.

How does it differ from the competition? One of Herman Miller’s annual reports used transparent paper stock to suggest the serendipity of innovation: You look at one problem and sometimes see through it, the answer to another.

What’s the largest claim you can make for the product? That it’s a dog shampoo that dogs actually love? Then put the shampoo in packaging designed like something else they love: a fire hydrant.

What is this product or company doing here? What is its real purpose? One annual report for the Calgary YWCA emphasized the organization’s work with battered women, so the report itself was torn and distressed. The headline on the beat-up cover: “Last year over 11,000 Calgary women were treated worse than this book.”

Master the Metaphor

By George Felton

This metaphor may even be stronger than if they had used actual photographs of battered women, since this approach is less expected.

And don't be too literal. Try to find metaphors that capture psychological essence more than simply external reality. Let's say that you're creating a poster announcing a seminar in business fundamentals for graphic designers, one called "The Business Primordial." You may start thinking of cave men with clubs—clubs as felt-tip markers, business cards made out of stone, cave men dressed in business suits and so on. In other words, you could try to fuse some image of business or graphic arts with some "primordial" image. But you don't have to. A visual of two dogs in a tug of war (a pure metaphor) can also express the psychological essence of basic business difficulties in a less obvious way. It's a metaphor off to the side; the dogs symbolize not the thing, but the emotional center of the thing. They're unexpected but appropriate.

Since everybody's first ideas are often the most cliched, hold out for the second, third or 30th comparison. Metaphors will jump-start your originality, but the best ideas, as always, are hard to land on.

How to Use Words

Look up key words of your problem in a thesaurus and scan the synonyms and antonyms for metaphors. All language is metaphorical, and the metaphors hidden inside words can spark visual ideas. If, for example, you wanted to create another image for that library poster, you could look up "knowledge," where you'll find synonyms like:

- "conceive," an obvious birth metaphor
- "have at one's fingertips" and "know by heart," both offering visual possibilities
- "impression," suggesting thumbprints pressed into books or the literal impressions books and ideas leave on a person or the world
- "lettered," which suggests placing letters all over someone or building something from letters
- "insight" and "glimmer," which use the metaphor of light, implying images of looking inside something or lighting something from within.

Recommended reading —*Designing the Editorial Experience: A Primer for Print, Web, and Mobile*

In all these cases, a thesaurus can quickly put a lot of metaphors in front of you. It gives you access to more ideas than you'd locate unaided.

And remember that metaphors are lurking in every design problem, ready to go to work. Just look around: They abound in your client's story (often in the brand name alone, such as Yellow Tail, Food Chain Films, Dirty Girl) and certainly in previous brochures and annual reports, current marketing and website copy, not to mention the words being generated for whatever project you're working on right now. Any metaphor in this language system might create the organizing principle or visual idea you need.

Of course, graphic design is a metaphor of its own: line, shape, texture and color are used to represent the values of the client. Using these tools communicates the client's essence and the benefits of its products. Since you're this far into metaphor already, I invite you simply to keep going. As Jill Howry has noted, "Our work as designers is not just about design but also about the concept. Taking the leap. Finding something that compels. It's not about making people think; it's about making people want to think."