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#### METHODOLOGY

Abstract: This article discusses the strategic use of color in marketing as a way of having messages stand out. The article presents an overview of color science, discusses the idea of a color strategy for marketing communications materials that includes considering your product or service, audience, message, medium, and budget. The author does not mean to suggest that color alone will make or break a marketing campaign, but a campaign with an effective strategy and focus can be enhanced by color. The author emphasizes that the difference is not in the use of color, but in the strategy and execution of the marketing plan.

#### ARTICLE

In these days of intense scrutiny of marketing dollars and marketing effectiveness, you should be using all the ammunition at your disposal to make your messages stand out, and color is one of the truly great tools.

Of course, the use of color in and of itself isn't a guarantee for success, and there is some science to it. But used to its highest strategic degree, color as an element in your marketing/communications messages is a way to make your messages perform--and leave other marketers' monotonous, uninspired attempts in the colorless dust.

For most of us, the world is a four-color kind of place. Our days are spent enveloped by colorful surroundings that we often take for granted: blue skies, green grass, red roses. Many of us even spend our nights dreaming in color.

Color affects the human mind and body in many different ways. These effects mean that certain colors attract us while others repel. Colors can stimulate or soothe. Studies have suggested that environmental color schemes have wide-ranging effects--in a workplace it can affect morale and productivity; in a penitentiary it can pacify prisoners; in a health care facility it can affect patients' recovery rates.

On the color spectrum, different colors are the products of different light wavelengths. Colors at the warm end of the spectrum have longer wavelengths, while those at the spectrum's cool end have shorter wavelengths. Research has suggested that colors on the spectrum's warm end are very appealing to children, while maturity brings a preference for cool colors.

Color also has been shown to be culture-bound, with certain combinations associated with particular cultural ideologies and traditions. Climate, too, has been related to color preference, with those living in sunny and hot regions favoring brighter colors than their colder-weather-suffering neighbors of the North.

In general, colors at the warm end of the spectrum, like red, are more stimulating and exciting. The quieter, more soothing colors, blue, for example, fall at the spectrum's cool end. In terms of visibility, warmer colors outperform cooler ones, with yellow being most visible. "Pure" colors have higher visibility than shades (color with black added) or tints (with white added). The higher the contrast between two colors, bright orange or yellow and black, for instance, the greater the visibility.

### **The Color Strategy**

History and science aside, what are the issues you should consider when constructing your marketing/communications message? Because color is associated with emotion, when thinking about how to use it effectively, it's a good idea to step back out of the subjective to assess the strategic issues first, then determine how color supports and improves the strategy.

When you approach color use strategically, its function has a specific and constructive purpose. Color alone can't conceal an incomplete or ill-conceived strategy, nor can it make up for a bad design. However, when color is used as part of a well-thought-out strategy that is on target, its presence can make for a more effective marketing effort.

### **Consider Your Product or Service**

Maybe you're promoting the hospital's new pelvic floor clinic or your oncology department's seed-implant program. Perhaps you're initiating the branding/positioning strategy for your new integrated delivery system. In many instances, the health care industry's new technologies and organizational structures leave most consumers feeling confused and powerless. The added problem of unfamiliar health care jargon simply multiplies the quandary.

As communication professionals, we know the surest way to actually impart information--and make it stick--is to focus on the benefit deemed most relevant to your audience. And as marketing professionals, we know that building business is one of our most important directives. Concentrating on the more meaningful benefit and supporting it with reasons to believe is the most effective method for communicating.

It requires discipline to remain focused on the benefit, especially when you're promoting a complicated product or service that in fact may have multiple benefits--but, by focusing, you increase your ability to cut through the clutter created by all those other messages.

Benefit-focus provides you with the tip of the differentiation spear, which leads us into thinking about the marketplace strategically. What is the competition doing in terms of color usage? You'll want to proceed cautiously when you've determined what their color strategy is. By not taking a strategic look at colors in your market, you risk creating confusion rather than imparting information about your organization.

Once you've determined the primary benefit, think about the ways in which color can help you accentuate that benefit. Color helps communicate complex information by invoking ancillary emotional responses. The combination head/heart (rational/emotional) message is very effective in conveying information. Your headlines and copy provide the rational information and emotional appeal, while color plays an important supporting role in communicating that message on a deeper level.

Color can be used to create a sense of personality for a brand, a positioning niche, or atmosphere for a service. In many tangible-product industries, choice of color often begins with the product or service itself. Many health care organizations have developed definitive graphic identity programs that may include strict parameters for color, and in these instances, color can link all the organization's divisions, departments, programs, and services.

In these cases, color is a valuable tool in establishing continuity and consistency across communication messages, venues, and media. Carefully planned and uniformly executed, color-based graphic continuity can provide a significant strategic foundation for the organization.

### **Consider Your Audience**

Certainly, in determining a primary benefit, you take your audience into account, but in many cases, there may be more than one important audience. An aggressive, interventionist heart health renewal program, for example, can have a number of critical audiences: the physician, the patient, the patient cohort. The branding/positioning of a system often brings with it a minimum of a dozen target audiences. Each audience is likely to be motivated by a different appeal, each requiring a unique approach.

In addition, the demographic/psychographic makeup of your target audiences will influence the colors you will consider for your message. The audience of children provides an obvious example to illustrate the impact of audience makeup. In promoting your product/service line, say, pediatric oncology, your color choice might be based in a primary color scheme. The crayon-like primary colors instantly communicate a child-oriented message. Another conspicuous example is the choice of pinks and blues for OB materials.

The danger in relying on stereotypical color schemes is just that--it's stereotypical and generic. Instead, try to widen the scope by thinking about creative ways to build on or enhance those colors that are immediately recognizable in conjunction with particular topics. Could your message be made more exciting if you dial up the brightness, or increase the contrast between two colors? Or would more toned-down hues elicit a new and innovative appeal? Again, the

idea is to use color to support and extend your strategic vision for the product/service, not fight against it.

### **Consider Your Message**

Target audience in sight, primary benefit in mind--now, how do we say it? What's the tonality of the message going to be? Do you want to be humorous? Or is it an appeal that's fear-based? In the case of branding/positioning, appropriateness of tone and message are all the more critical.

The personality of the message will necessarily affect your use and selection of color. For example, an aggressive message, one that deals with empowering life-or-death decisions, might be a good candidate for direct, aggressive colors. In contrast, a message designed to encourage more introspective thinking might use colors that are soothing and contemplative by nature, such as light blues and greens. And a sophisticated product or service, selective cosmetic surgery for example, could benefit from the use of urbane, refined colors, say, a sophisticated combination of lavender and burgundy.

### **Consider Your Medium**

So you've got your product benefit outlined from the target audience's point of view, and you've developed a message that states the product's relevance in a language that your target easily understands. Now you've got to deliver the message. The medium you select will have an effect your use and selection of color.

The sweeping improvements in electronic technology have meant that we can reproduce critical colors more accurately than ever before. These improved technologies also enable the print media to provide color less expensively; many of the nation's largest publishers are offering to print color at reduced, or even complimentary, rates. Color ads are good for publications, too, in that they create a more lively, interesting and engaging environment for readers.

Findings from split-run studies of newspaper ads have found that the addition of color can dramatically improve readership, by as much as 40%-85%. Recall, too, has been shown to be positively influenced by color. However, it remains that many publications still have limitations on where color can run, which might force the marketer to sacrifice positioning for color. You'll need to weigh the placement restrictions against the efficacy of your color message, remembering that consumers will be more attracted to a color message.

Outdoor billboards are an example of a medium with special color considerations. Color contrast is important to ensure long-distance viewing. Value, (the color's relative lightness or darkness) is critical when two or more colors are used. To ensure highest visibility, be sure your colors are of differing values. Seasonality also will affect your outdoor board's visibility. A primarily green board, for example, in the spring or summer months will likely not have as much impact it would against a snowy (or gray) background of winter.

Another issue to consider in terms of medium is the related effects of natural vs. sodium vapor light, which often is used to illuminate outdoor boards at night. Colors are subject to change as the surrounding environments change. When possible, these changes should be anticipated and planned for.

Marketers as auspicious as the NFL have spent millions of dollars experimenting with colors and color combinations to ensure the most effective means possible for on-field visibility as well as mass merchandising. Health care marketers should take note of the ways in which light can impact their message.

Color also can be a liability. When everyone else is doing color in a magazine, for example, you will want to design your message to be most noticeable. In this case, color can be portrayed as a duotone or combination of duotones, perhaps, or in black and white. Of late, we've seen a resurgence in black and white concepts in both magazine and television advertising. Spot color is often added to increase the impact of a stark and sophisticated background as well as to provide an eye-catching accent in the black-and-white ad.

### **Consider Your Budget**

Ah, the budget. Why are we talking about it last, when for many of us, it's one of the first challenges? There's no doubt that budget can place restrictions on the ability to use color in a communication effort. The trick is to use those restrictions to your advantage.

When you consider budget last rather than first, you allow yourself the freedom to think creatively about what it is that you're trying to communicate (your product or service) and how best to present that product or service in a way that truly compels your target audience. That's the essence of communication: giving people the knowledge that allows them to act.

In health care, because so much interaction between the patient and the health care provider is episodic ("I need cardiac care right now because I'm having a heart attack") and often intermittent, that action may occur now but more likely will happen at some yet-to-be-determined time in the future. Obviously, accuracy in message placement, timing, and frequency are the critical factors here.

While there's plenty of proof to suggest that color is important, using color as part of a communication piece that lacks strategy and focus may not be to your advantage. A four-color ad is not guaranteed to outperform a black-and-white one. However, all things being equal--meaning strategically sound and well-executed--that four-color ad may in fact do better. The performance difference is in the strategy and execution.

You need to look carefully at the product or service you're promoting. Are its benefits better, and more instantly, illustrated in color? Think about the mindset of your audience. When your audience sees a black-and-white image, will it conjure feelings of nostalgia or stark modernity? How are the message's visual images presented? Are you sure you're saying what you think you're saying as far as the audience is concerned?

By organizing your marketing / communications approach strategically, you construct an objective framework for color that is strategically driven, and strategically supportable. When color has a specific, predetermined function that acts to support the overall strategy, your marketing/communications effort can do all you've designed it to do. With well-planned color, you will create the remarkable, effective marketing/communications message that you set out to produce in the first place.

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