Visual communication in consumer journalism: The case of Consumer magazine in New Zealand

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Abstract

This paper draws on supra-textual design theory and, to a lesser extent, semiotics, to study in detail the visual rhetoric of a highly successful and influential New Zealand consumer-rights magazine, Consumer. The analysis considered the magazine at a time when Consumer was only available by mail order, and it proved instructive to contrast Consumer with North & South, a magazine available to the general public off the shelf in bookshops. To fulﬁl its readers visual expectations of what a magazine should look like, Consumer often adopted the appearance of off-the-shelf magazines such as North & South. For instance, Consumer had a large masthead on the front cover and an extensive table of contents. But Consumer also set itself apart from off-the-shelf magazines by the use of visual devices such as fragmented text, technical tables, and by frequently referencing its own previously published material. Consumer also used its long-time chief executive as the recurring image of a wise fatherly ﬁgure. The overall visual message proposed to readers was dual: Consumer is both a readable and scientiﬁc publication whose information is enjoyable and can be trusted. Note: click images to view full size.

Introduction

There is a range of writing techniques that can be employed to make journalistic and other texts as comprehensible as possible, thereby maximising the writers ability to communicate their message to the reader effectively. These techniques include using plain English, preferring the active voice, and writing concisely (Strunk, White & Kalman, 2005; Williams, 2002), as well as the basics of employing the correct words and using correct punctuation (Bryson, 2001; Truss, 2003). But to focus solely on such elements is to ignore the role played by the visual aspects of the text. These visual elements collectively form the publications visual rhetoric, intended to produce an instinctive response in the reader (Howells, 2003; Kostelnick, 1996; Kostelnick & Hassett, 2003).

This paper considers the visual communication used in consumer journalism. This form of journalism has proven long-lived and popular. For instance, the consumer magazine Consumer Reports in the United States has been in operation since 1936 and in 2008 had 4.4 million subscribers (Consumers Union, 2009a; 2009b). Likewise, Which? Field & Stream and American Baby Consumer, a New Zealand consumer magazine. Consumers long-time chief executive declared once that, to help signal the magazines continued relevance to readers: [t]he look of the magazine is important (Russell, 2006, p. 2). This article will analyse that look.

The article begins by proﬁling the magazine and its readers, discusses the analytical approach, and then presents the analysis. The article concludes that, despite the fact Consumer was only available by mail order during the survey period, Consumer adopted many of the visual design elements of magazines sold off the shelf. The similarity in the visual design of Consumer and off-the-shelf magazines was designed to fulﬁl Consumers readers expectations of what a magazine should look like, thereby helping to convince them to read it. Beyond that, however, Consumer differed from off-the-shelf magazines in ways designed to portray Consumer as having a distinctive authorial personality. That personality is of a reassuring, scientiﬁc, authority whose information could be relied upon, perhaps without question.

Consumer magazine: background

Consumer is published monthly (except January) by Consumer NZ (until recently, Consumers Institute), a not-for-proﬁt organisation owned by the magazines readers. Other than advertising Consumer NZ products, Consumer publishes no advertising, and organisations cannot use Consumers ﬁndings in their advertising (Hannis, 2004). From its ﬁrst issue in December 1959 up to and including its September 2008 issue Consumer was available solely as a mail-order publication. After that date, Consumer began to be sold off the shelf in retail outlets, such as bookstores and supermarkets.

Consumer has enjoyed great success: it has been published since 1959, and in 2008 had an estimated readership of 205,000, making it the twelfth most-read monthly magazine in New Zealand (Consumer NZ, 2009; AGB Nielsen Media Research, 2008). Consumer won best trade professional magazine at the Qantas Media Awards, the countrys leading print-journalism prizes, in 2008 and 2009 (Qantas Media Awards, 2008; 2009). Further, when Consumer NZs long-time chief executive David Russell resigned from the organisation in 2007, the government made him a Companion of the
Queens Service Order for his community service on behalf of consumers and New Zealand’s Massey University awarded him an honorary doctorate in commerce, for his services to consumers (Allen, 2007; Honorary doctorate for, 2008).

**A profile of Consumers readers**

The most recent publicly available data on *Consumer* subscribers income and age distribution come from 2001, well within the survey period of the current study. *Consumers* subscribers tend to be on higher incomes than the population generally (Figure 1). In 2001, nearly 40 per cent of *Consumer* subscribers had annual household incomes (before tax) of more than $60,000, whereas only about 30 per cent of the general population did. By contrast, only 10 per cent of *Consumer* subscribers had household incomes less than $20,000, against about 25 per cent of the general population.

![Figure 1: Income distribution of Consumer subscribers compared to the New Zealand population (Hannis, 2004).](image)

*Consumer* subscribers also tend to be older than the general population (Figure 2). In 2001, 27 per cent of *Consumer* subscribers were aged 65 or more, whereas only 17 per cent of the general New Zealand population was in that age group. At the other end of the scale, 11 per cent of *Consumer* subscribers were aged 20-34, compared to 29 per cent of the general population. Indeed, in 2004 the then editor of *Consumer*, Simon Wilson, acknowledged that *Consumers* readership had long been relatively old and that Consumer NZ actively marketed the magazine to younger people (Hannis, 2004).
Supra-textual design theory focuses on the over-arching appearance of a document. It has been defined as the global design of the document, which can extend over several documents, creating a series or set that might continue over long stretches of time (Kostelnick, 1996, pp. 10-11). Supra-textual design elements order the material in a document, enabling readers to comprehend its logic and hierarchy and to retrieve essential information (Kostelnick, 1988, p. 36). Supra-textual design includes the nitty-gritty of the documents elements, including page colour and binding, that can easily be dismissed as unimportant or peripheral ... [but in fact] supply clues about its visual rhetoric (Kostelnick, 1996, p. 9). To understand this analytical approach better, let us first consider the notion of metadiscourse. This is the name given to the various textual and interpersonal elements writers use to impart ideas to their readers (Baratta, 2009; Hyland, 2005; Vande Kopple, 2002). It is a rhetorical practice used by writers to explain what they are saying, identify their intentions, and assist their readers grasp the meaning of their texts. In text, one feature of metadiscourse is connectives, such as the use of explicit sequences (for example: first, second, third) and references to other parts of the text (for example: as previously mentioned). Another feature is code glosses, including explanations and clarifications (including: in other words, defined as). Such features aim to improve the clarity and coherence of a text. Analysing the metadiscourse of a text can also reveal aspects of a writers personality, such as when a writer reveals a certain reticence about themselves by favouring the passive voice in their prose (Baratta, 2009).

But the relationship between the author of a document and the reader begins before the reader reads a word (Bernanke, 2005). The visual features of the document can determine whether the reader will make the effort to read the text. These visual features can be regarded as a visual metadiscourse, giving the textual information shape and structure. To ignore this visual component is to ignore much of how a document seeks to influence its reader.

To understand the viewpoint of those who design documents we must turn to the world of graphic-design literature. There is a wealth of insight contained in this literature on how detailed visual techniques are used to influence readers. These insights can be brought together under the term supra-textual design theory, which, for ease of exposition, is disaggregated into three main elements.

Making a good first impression
Graphic-design scholars advise designers to design documents that make a good first impression on the reader and fulfill the readers visual expectations (Kumpf, 2000; Shriver, 1997; Weiss, 1982). Readers often regard reading as a chore and will only read as far as they feel they need to. So, if the reader forms an initially poor impression of a document, they are less likely to read it. In deciding whether to read a document, a prospective reader will consider its heft (Kumpf, 2000, p. 407). A document that is inappropriately hefty may not be read. For instance, a reader would expect the instructions for the construction of a kitset wheelbarrow to be only a few pages long, as the reader would expect that not much guidance would be needed for such a relatively simple construction task. If the manual is long, the user may simply not read it. The reader may decide the manual must go into too much detail, and so would use trial and error to build the wheelbarrow.

*Using a clear and coherent visual style*

Graphic-design literature also suggests that designers must present the documents ideas in a clear and coherent visual style (Green, 2004; Millman, 2008; Moore and Fitz, 1993). An important aspect of this is the documents external skeleton (including the table of contents, page numbering, headings, and headers and footers). Many readers skim documents, looking for indicators as to how much time and attention they need to devote to reading. The external skeleton quickly shows the reader how the document is assembled, helping the reader find the material they want to read, and thereby encouraging them to read (Kumpf, 2000; Souther, 1962). Chunking, a term used in graphic design to denote the grouping of related information together, is used to prevent text looking too dense and to make it easier to distinguish different ideas in a document. Information can be presented as body text, lists, tables, break-out quotes, and case studies (Kostelnick & Roberts, 1998).

*Conveying authorial personality*

Another factor page designers must take into account is to ensure the documents visual appearance indicates an appropriate authorial personality to the reader (Kostelnick, 1998). For instance, educated readers expect designers of quality publications to produce professional graphical images and not to fall into certain obvious traps, such as producing misleading graphs or using poor graphical design. If there is too much extraneous material included in a graph, for example, this can result in a graph that is simply chartjunk (Tufte, 1983, p. 107).

The context of the documents visual appearance is also important, and understanding this contextualisation can involve analysing the supra-textual design of similar documents (Chandler, 2002). For instance, when it first appeared, the supra-textual design of American newspaper USA Today The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times, to indicate that USA Today was more light-hearted in its approach than were those newspapers, but sufficiently similar to indicate that USA Today was still a newspaper (Kostelnick & Hassett, 2003). That is to say, we can compare and contrast the document under scrutiny with related documents in order to derive further insights into the visual communication techniques being employed. The designer must therefore anticipate visual associations readers have with certain symbols (Kostelnick & Hassett, 2003, p. 115).

An awareness of contextualisation of images takes us to the world of semiotics, an analytical approach long used by scholars to analyse representations, including visual signs. Semiotics is the theory of signification, that is, of the generation or production of meaning (Martin & Ringham, 2006, p. 175). It considers how the meaning of a sign is produced, including how it signifies and what precedes it on a deeper level to result in the manifestation of meaning (Martin & Ringham, 2006, p. 175). In undertaking a semiotic analysis of a media structure, the semiotician is guided by three basic questions (Danesi, 2004): What does the structure mean? How is this meaning represented? Why does it mean this?

The foundational works in this field include Saussure (1916), Barthes (1957), Baudrillard (1981), and Eco (1984). Publication in the field continues apace today (for instance, Bignell, 2002; Danesi, 2004; Hall, 2007; Howells, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The semiotician considers the representation itself, otherwise known as the signifier, and its meaning, the signified. Together, the signifier and the signified are the sign. The deeper meaning of a sign is known as its connotation. The connotation of signs is often highly dependent on the cultural context in which they are viewed (Konstantinidou, 2008; Blair, 2004, Roberts, 2007). By helping us identify deep meanings in visual representations, semiotic analysis is a useful tool in analysing visual communication, as other contributions to this special issue testify (see McAuley, 2006).

This paper will therefore use semiotic concepts together with supra-textual design theory and apply these to New Zealanders Consumer magazine. This combined approach will allow a consideration of the minute details of Consumers visual communication and will provide fresh insight into the importance of visual communication in journalism.

*Research method employed*
Data collection

This research solely considers the hard-copy version of Consumer magazine; space constraints preclude an examination of its internet equivalent, Consumer Online. The supra-textual design techniques used in the 110 issues of Consumer magazine published in the 10-year period June 1998 to May 2008 inclusive was considered. Ten years is a sufficiently long period to detect the variety of techniques used in the magazine and assess how these techniques have evolved over time. The data from the magazine was collected by the author, drawn from the complete set of magazines held in his personal possession for the survey period.

Although an analysis of the supra-textual design of all the issues of Consumer in the survey period was undertaken, the focus of the study was on an illustrative selection of issues of Consumer.

Contrasting Consumer with an off-the-shelf magazine

The literature of supra-textual design theory and semiotics highlighted the importance of considering context when analysing images. This analysis therefore compares and contrasts Consumers supra-textual design with that of a competing magazine, North & South. In many ways the magazines are similar. Both tend to publish articles of interest to middle-class New Zealanders, both are published monthly, and their price is similar. There are, however, two marked differences between the publications. The first is that during the survey period Consumer was only available by mail order, whereas North & South was also sold in shops. Another difference is that Consumer does not carry other organisations advertising, whereas North & South does. Analysing the visual similarities and differences between the two magazines helped bring the supra-textual design of Consumer into sharper focus. For comparative purposes, one issue of North & South is considered, published in the middle of this paper's survey period.

A third difference between Consumer and North & South is that Consumers audience is the consuming public whereas North & South is the general public. That difference was corrected for in the analysis, in that the cover story of the issue of North & South analysed was a consumer story also covered by Consumer (a cover story being the major story in the magazine, advertised on the front cover in large print with an accompanying full-page illustration). As such, the analysis below compares Consumer with an issue of North & South that focussed on a consumer topic, ensuring like was compared with like.

Analysis of visual communication in Consumer

In the remainder of this paper I will analyse the three supra-textual design dimensions of Consumer magazine. I will first focus on the way the magazine manages first impressions, then consider how it attempts to create a clear and coherent style and finally explore what kind of authorial personality it projects. Contrast with the off-the-shelf magazine will be made when relevant.

Managing first impressions: importance of the cover

The initial role of supra-textual design is to help convince the reader that the document is worth reading. In this process, the design of the magazine cover is an important aspect that helps catch readers attention. During the survey period Consumer was posted to subscribers letterboxes in clear plastic wrappers, so the first image the prospective reader saw was its front cover. As the basis for discussion, Figure 3 depicts four front covers from across the period (unless otherwise stated, all page references below refer to Consumer). As part of the analysis, the appearance of Consumers front covers will be compared with the front cover of the issue of off-the-shelf magazine North & South considered in this paper.

As Figure 3 (below) testifies, the major features of the Consumer Consumers front covers in contrast with competing magazines.
Figure 3: Front covers of four Consumer magazines. Clockwise from top left: A (July, 1999, p. 1); B (June, 2001, p. 1); C (October, 2006, p. 1); D (April, 2008, p. 1).

Fulfilling readers visual expectations

Textual mode: Off-the-shelf magazines frequently use a large masthead, as their titles need to be clearly visible to potential purchasers amid the visual noise of the other magazine covers on the bookstore shelves. As an example, Figure 4 depicts the front cover of an issue of North & South. As Consumer was not sold off the shelf, it did not need a masthead to cut through the front covers of competing magazines on a bookshop rack. It would
appear therefore that Consumer has a large masthead because readers expect magazines to have large mastheads. Consumer belongs to a category of artefacts (magazines), rather than for a masthead's usual function: to increase a publications visibility on the retail stores shelf.

To reinforce the readers' perception that Consumer is a "proper magazine", the cover of each Consumer lists a range of stories contained within its pages. Each has a cover story plus a list of other stories in the magazine. For instance, in Figure 3A the cover story is about local government, and the list of other articles includes those on vacuum cleaners, pyramid-selling schemes, and fixed-interest investments. Off-the-shelf magazines use the same technique: the cover story stands out on the bookshop rack, and, having attracted the readers' attention, the list of other articles helps convince the reader the magazine contains other interesting material and is therefore worth buying and reading. With the North & South cover, for example, there is a cover story about car safety called Driving Blind, with three other stories listed. On the last Consumer cover depicted (Figure 3D) Consumer outdoes even North & South in this regard, by placing a list of articles (including photographs) at the top of the page, where the list would have been more visible had it been sitting on a shelf.

Here, Consumer behaved more off-the-shelf than an off-the-shelf competitor. It used and placed these various signs (masthead, list of stories) as signifiers of its status as a magazine — that is, it is as much a magazine as its off-the-shelf counterparts.

As a mail-order publication, Consumer did not need to do any of this, as the subscriber had already paid for the magazine. Consumer NZ could simply have posted Consumer to subscribers in plain brown or white envelopes, the way most mail-order merchandise arrives in the letterbox. Instead, Consumers' front cover has many of the characteristics of off-the-shelf magazines because this is what readers expect magazines to look like. Using these obvious signs, Consumer naturalised its function as a "normal modern magazine."

Whereas Consumer used and placed various signs, such as its masthead and list of stories, with a view to signify its status as a magazine, it also used the front cover to differentiate itself and emphasise one essential point of difference between itself and its competitors: the fact that Consumer is alone in publishing scientific tests of products. The four Consumer front covers in Figure 3 all list product tests, including vacuum cleaners and printers (Figure 3A), webcams and
electric fry pans (Figure 3B), digital cameras and three-wheel strollers (Figure 3C) and clothes dryers and digital camcorders (Figure 3D). In fact, the lists of articles on the covers of all 110 Consumer Consumer. (Although other specialist magazines in New Zealand, such as computer, cycling and automotive magazines, contain product tests, these are simply user trials, where a journalist uses a product and reports on performance. It is prohibitively expensive for such magazines to do otherwise. Consumer is alone in the New Zealand magazine industry in publishing the results of comprehensive, scientific testing of products, often sharing the cost of such testing with its Australian counterpart, Australian Consumers Association, or the international body of consumer organisations, Consumers International, which has an international testing laboratory in England [Hannis, 2004].)

**Graphical mode:** Of all 110 Consumer cover stories for the ten-year period under scrutiny, 66 (60 per cent) featured people (see, for example, the Consumer photographs on Figures 3A and 3D). Of all the covers featuring people, 48 (73 per cent) featured white, middle-class looking people, and 55 (83 per cent) featured younger people (under 40). This is in line with what we know about Consumers readership and marketing strategy. Consumer readers are relatively affluent, so the magazine reflects their world by placing white, middle-class people on the cover. Further, as Consumers target market during the survey period was young people, it is largely they who stare out from the covers to engage the reader.

Although the North & South cover also features a young, white person, this is where the similarity to Consumer ends. The North & South cover is highly emotive, emphasising the potential immediate danger of cars by having a woman shown in close-up at the wheel, in distress, presumably because her car is about to be involved in an accident. The covers of Consumer do not display such emotionally charged, dramatic images, indicating that the magazine prefers not to play on readers emotions in this way.

**Spatial mode:** Consumer is printed on glossy paper and in full colour, which signifies a clear attempt at presenting itself as a quality magazine similar to North & South. Towards the end of the survey period Consumer underscored this point with recasting its masthead in lower case and in a smaller font. This change in the masthead, making it look more sleek and attractive, signified modernity and an up-to-date quality to Consumers readers. In other words, Consumer was using these visual signals to persuade its readers that, despite the magazines longevity, it remains a magazine relevant for todays audience.

The heft, another aspect of the spatial mode of the two publications, was markedly different however. The Consumers in the survey period were only 40–44 pages long, whereas the North & South issue was 124 pages. In part, at least, North & South was physically larger than Consumer simply because it carried a considerable amount of advertising. Indeed, 13 pages of the North & South issue considered here are full-page advertisements. Inevitably, given its relative lack of pages, Consumer is flimsier than North & South. This may signify to the reader that Consumer is a less substantial document than North & South: that is to say Consumer is not value for money (in a world where many people are more concerned with quantity than quality). Consumer Consumer, several pages in each issue were printed on heavier weighted paper than were the other pages.

So far, we have discussed the first of the three factors to consider when analysing supra-textual design, making a good first impression that fulfills the readers visual expectations. Let us now consider the second factor, presenting a clear and coherent visual style.

**Clarity and coherence**

The first element to consider here is the external skeleton. The major feature of Consumers external skeleton is the table of contents, which always begins on page two of the magazine. Four examples are reproduced here (Figures 5 A, B, C & D), the same four magazines as above have been used. Figure 5 reveals that the table of contents was dramatically altered over time.

**Textual mode:** The tables of contents on Figures 5A and 5B arrange the articles by department (that is, topic area), with the department in large type (cover story, products & appliances, utilities, appliances, etc.). In Figure 5C the table of contents lists the articles in the sequence in which they appear in the magazine, with the departments in small lettering underneath, expressed as textually striking neologisms (consumerviews [sic], consumertest [sic]). Figure 5D reverts to the arranging the articles under departments in large typeface, but retains the use of neologisms (consumerreport [sic], consumertest [sic]). As with the masthead, such use of neologism signifies modernity and creativity. Just as that exemplar of modernity, the computer industry, coins new words by bringing together existing ones (YouTube, Facebook), so Consumer did likewise.

**Graphical mode:** The table of contents in Figure 5A comprises most of the page and is accompanied with small photographs. The rest of the page is various notices. The table of contents in Figure 5B is
similar, but the rest of the page is largely taken up with an editorial and accompanying small photograph. Figure 5Cs table of contents is minimal, comprising about a quarter of the page and featuring no photographs, with the bulk of the page taken up with an editorial and accompanying large photograph. Figure 5Ds table of contents is spread over two pages, complete with large photographs, with the editorial closely resembling that in Figure 5B.

Figure 5A: Consumer table of contents, July 1999, p. 2.
Figure 5B: Consumer table of contents, June 2001, p. 2.

Figure 5C: Consumer table of contents, October 2006, p. 2.
This constant change and refinement of the tables of contents suggests that across the period *Consumer* was unsure how best to depict this element of the external skeleton. This is merely speculation, but certainly the table of contents in Figure 5D is reminiscent of the table of contents in the issue of *North & South* under consideration (Figure 6). *North & South* Consumer ultimately decided to mimic the approach of such off-the-shelf magazines in order to fulfil its readers expectations of what a table of contents in a magazine should look like.
Body of the magazine: Signifying readability and authority

Moving from the table of contents into the body of the magazine, the main articles in Consumer rely heavily on chunking, that is to say, compartmentalising the text. This makes the text look far less intimidating to the reader than would pages of long, solid text, thereby encouraging the reader to read the material. Figure 7 gives an example of the final page of a long Consumer article on eating disorders, showing many of the supra-textual techniques used.

Textual mode: The paragraphs in Consumer are kept short, with an average length of three and a half lines (the longest paragraph was seven lines, the shortest one line). The text is broken up further by subheadings and into panels (including a panel on bulimia, a break-out quote, and list of sources of further information headed MORE HELP).

Graphical mode: The external skeleton of the text chunks is made very explicit, assisting the reader in finding the material on the page. Colours and frames are used to signify importance or to focus/lead the reader to specific parts of the page. The panels and break-out quote are in different colours, for instance, and the MORE HELP section is highlighted by the partial use of red text. Most striking, the information that the reader would likely find most helpful, Consumers advice, is marked off conspicuously in a red-bordered box. With this box, ConsumerNorth & South article below, many of these techniques set Consumer apart from off-the-shelf magazines.
This brings us to the third and final factor when considering a documents supra-textual design, presenting an appropriate authorial personality.

Consumers authorial personality: independent and scientific

Textual mode: Consumer regularly reminded readers of its impartiality by running short statements in the magazine, noting that it is independent of all commercial interests and that its research findings cannot be used for advertising. These short statements appear in every issue of the magazine in the survey period, usually somewhere at the back of the magazine (Figure 8A). Such repetition ensures the reader will receive and remember the message. More strikingly, from August 2007 the magazine has run a subheading under the masthead on the front cover, consisting of three important, simple, fore-grounded linguistic signs: ACCURATE • UNBIASED • NOT FOR PROFIT (Figure 8B). This highly conspicuous information conveys a strong sense to the reader that Consumer has undertaken rigorous (ACCURATE) analysis, without favour (UNBIASED), solely for the readers benefit (NOT FOR PROFIT). A possible reason for the relatively recent addition of these elements is discussed below.
Graphical mode: *Consumer* articles frequently included tables, be they summaries of test results or financial products, or the results of user trials or reader surveys. These tables featured highly technical details such as product model numbers, products places of manufacture, ratings of product performance, prices, and extra features. Much of the information was presented in the form of symbols, giving it an even greater technical appearance and thereby signifying an important aspect of *Consumer*.

Within the body of *Consumer* articles, the text of the MORE HELP sections also emphasised *Consumers* authorial personality. For example, an article on mortgages had a MORE HELP section that listed contact details for all the major lenders (April, 2000, p. 20) and an article on maternity care listed contacts details for all the major organisations involved with births (July, 2001, p. 8). The specificity of this information (website addresses and telephone numbers of other organisations) not only signifies that *Consumer* is a source of authoritative, factual information, but is also unbiased and helpful. Moreover, many of the sources of further information listed by *Consumer* were previously published *Consumer* articles, books published by Consumer NZ, and information on the organisations website (for instance October, 2001, p. 9; July, 2001, p. 14). Much like a q.v. entry in an encyclopaedia, the referencing of other *Consumer* articles and books signifies to the reader that *Consumer* is a reference resource, rather than just a magazine. To underscore this, each February *Consumer* publishes a page-long index of articles published in the magazine over the previous year.

Spatial mode: A spatial element of another product sold by Consumer NZ is also relevant here. To help readers keep their magazines safe and in order, Consumer NZ sold its readers binders in which to store their *Consumers* (Figure 9). These textual and spatial mechanisms help convince the reader that *Consumer North & South*...
Comparison with an off-the-shelf magazines article: Emotional versus rational

The overall effect of many of the techniques discussed above is that the general look of Consumer articles differs markedly from long articles found in North & South magazine. For instance a similar story to the North & South cover story on car safety appeared in Consumer in October 2004 (p. 38-39). Comparing the supra-textual design of the two magazines reveals how each presents quite a different authorial personality.

The North & South table is only a small part of the articles total page area, two per cent, indicating that it is only a minor part of the article.
By contrast, the Consumer article on car crash data was only two pages long (Figure 11). Its photographs are small, simple, and represent cars and a government report, not people. The photographs are accompanied with three circular, coloured panels identifying which cars are THE GOOD, THE BAD and THE UGLY. In this way, the photographs signify Consumers rational and frank approach to the topic, lightened with a reference to a spaghetti Western film. In contrast to the North & South article, the Consumer articles text is broken up considerably using short paragraphs, subheadings, panels, and colours. Consumers advice is presented separately, conspicuously, concisely and assertively as a set of bullet points at the top far right under OUR ADVICE. Sources of more information (including Consumer Online) are listed at the bottom far right, under MORE HELP. There is a large, highly technical table, complete with a guide, which together comprise 21 per cent of the articles total page area, indicating the table is an integral and major part of the article.
Whereas the authorial personality of *North & South* is of an emotive, loquacious generalist, taking the reader through a wordy, relatively non-technical story, by contrast, the authorial personality of *Consumer* is of a no-nonsense technical expert who makes the information as accessible as possible. At a fundamental level, then, *Consumers* visual rhetoric is that scientific methods are the appropriate way to assess consumer products.

*David Russell: Signifying experience and wisdom*

Of crucial importance in *Consumers* supra-textual design in the graphical mode was the use as a recurrent, stable sign, Consumer NZs long-time chief executive, David Russell. This was usually in the form of his photograph accompanying an editorial penned by him. He was depicted smiling pleasantly in the photographs, and his editorials were published on the highly conspicuous second or third pages of many issues (Figure 12 is an example).

![Figure 12: Image of David Russell in Consumer (September, 2001, p. 2)]

Russell was not the only member of *Consumers* staff to write editorials, but his image appears most often. Of the 110 issues in the survey period, Russells editorials, complete with his photograph, appears in 62 issues (56 per cent of the issues). The second most common contributor was David Naulls, editor of the magazine for the latter part of the survey period. His editorials, along with his photograph, appear 17 times (15 per cent). Russells image would no doubt have appeared even more frequently had he not left the organisation during the latter part of the survey period (his farewell editorial can be found in the April, 2007 issue, p. 2). During his time at *Consumer*, Consumer NZ no doubt hoped readers would associate the magazine with this highly regarded and recognisable champion of consumer causes. As a middle-aged white man, with grey hair, and wearing a smile Russell contained many signifiers that fostered connection with *Consumers* audience identified above. His appearance itself signified kindness, wisdom, experience, confidence, and trustworthiness. He was the middle-class father figure drawn from the same culture as *Consumers* primary readership. These were powerful visual rhetorical devices, and were presumably the reason his face frequently appeared on *Consumers* marketing material in similar poses (for instance, Figure 13).
The cult of the personality can be a highly potent visual marketing tool. Many commercially successful organisations have marketed themselves in personified form, including multinational companies such as Virgin, personified in the shape of its founder and chairman Sir Richard Branson, and New Zealand companies such as Hubbard Foods (Dick Hubbard), fruit company Charlies (Marc Ellis), and appliance store LV Martin and Son (Alan, and later Neil, Martin) (Virgin, 2009; Hubbards, 2009; Charlies, 2009; LV Martin and Son, 2009). But there are two significant dangers with this strategy. If the person has a fall from grace, this can by implication taint the organisations image. For instance, following a drug conviction in 2005, Marc Ellis chose to stand down from Charlies for a year (Cleave, 2005; Hargreaves, 2006). The world-famous golfer Tiger Woods is currently undergoing a similar experience as sponsors begin to abandon or reduce their involvement with him following his recent sex scandal (First sponsor dumps Tiger Woods, 2009). Also, if a celebrity endorser no longer wishes to advertise an organisation, the goodwill of their previous association with the organisation can be lost. For example, Neil Martin no longer advertises the company that carries his surname, as the Martin family sold the company in 2004 (LV Martin and Son, 2009).

Russells departure exposed Consumer. She certainly had no existing profile in consumer issues: she was a newspaper editor and magazine business manager before coming to Consumer NZ (Dekker, 2007). In welcoming her to the organisation, even the chairperson of Consumer NZs board said Russell would be a hard act to follow (Consumers Institute, 2007, p.1). It was possibly Russells departure that necessitated Consumers recent stronger assertions of its authorial personality in its own right, such as the subheading under the masthead discussed above.

Conclusions and further research

Despite the high readership and longevity of consumer journalism, the visual rhetorical devices used by consumer journalists have not received scholarly attention. This paper addressed that gap in the literature by examining the visual communication techniques used by Consumer magazine in New Zealand. Often, semiotics is used to analyse visual signs, but this paper largely adopted the less commonly encountered supra-textual design theory, in order to illuminate the visual details employed by Consumer. This has provided fresh insights into visual communication in a neglected area of journalism.

The paper considered a recent 10-year period when Consumer was only available by mail order. The analysis revealed how the front pages of Consumer largely mimic off-the-shelf magazine in order to convince readers that ConsumerConsumerConsumerConsumer was comprehensive and authoritative. Some of the supra-textual design elements, such as the preponderance of young,
middle-class people on the front covers, were designed to appeal to the magazine's target and existing markets.

The analysis also revealed two elements found in Consumers' overall visual appearance. First, the typical Consumer article reveals a veneration of the scientific method. Second, the frequent photographs of David Russell in the magazine signified a wise, trustworthy, father figure. These two elements are the heart of the magazine's visual rhetoric which its readers may therefore be induced to accept without question.

It was beyond the scope of this paper to assess how Consumers' readers' expectations were initially created and maintained. Analysis of older consumer-rights texts and the culture from which the consumer movement sprang might help shed light on those issues. A glance at the front cover of the first Consumer magazine indicates the supra-textual design of the magazine was then prosaic (Figure 14). This design may just reflect a simpler age, but it may indicate Consumer was initially expected by its readers to be a government publication free of any concessions to off-the-shelf populism.

This, in turn, suggests another avenue for future research. Recently, Consumer NZ decided to make Consumer available as an off-the-shelf magazine, sold by bookshops, supermarkets, and other retailers. The first magazine sold this way was the October 2008 issue. Consumer NZ made clear that the appearance of the magazine was an important element in this change, with the cover proclaiming this edition to be a NEW LOOK LAUNCH ISSUE! (Figure 15). It would be instructive to consider the extent to which Consumer changes its supra-textual design in light of such a fundamental change in the way the magazine is distributed.
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