

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 BabyConsumer*, 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. *Consumer* 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.

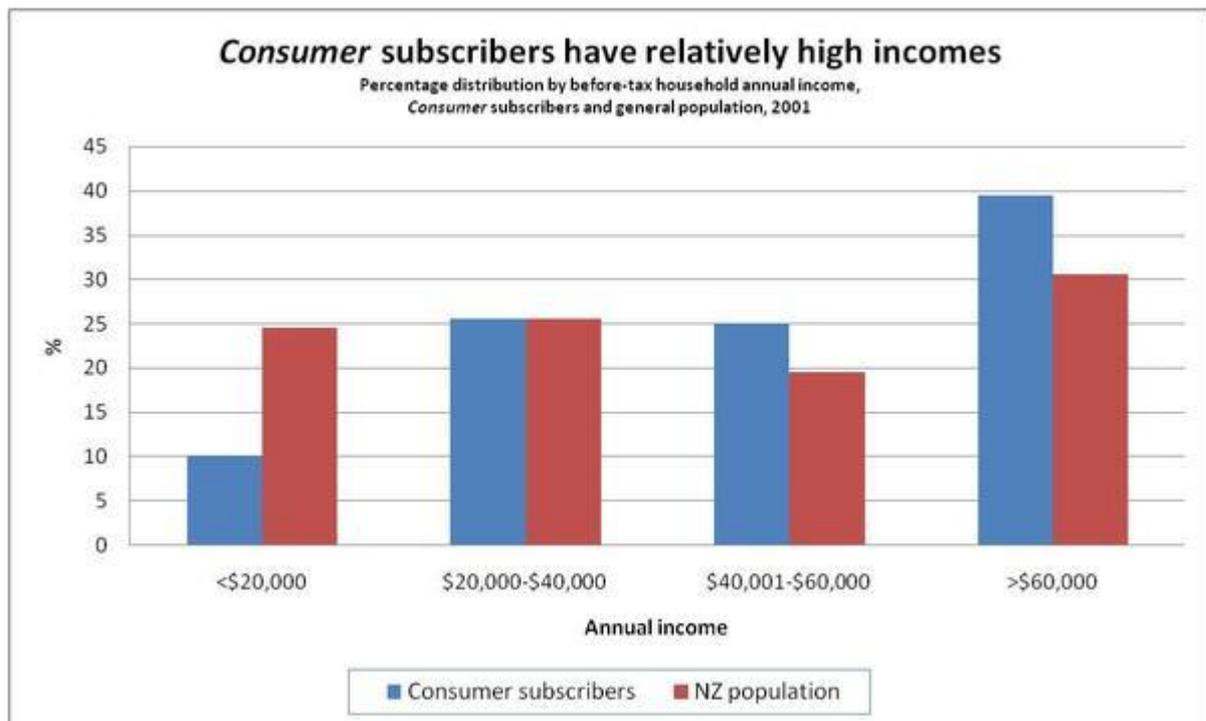


Figure 1: Income distribution of Consumer subscribers compared to the New Zealand population (Hannis, 2004).

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).

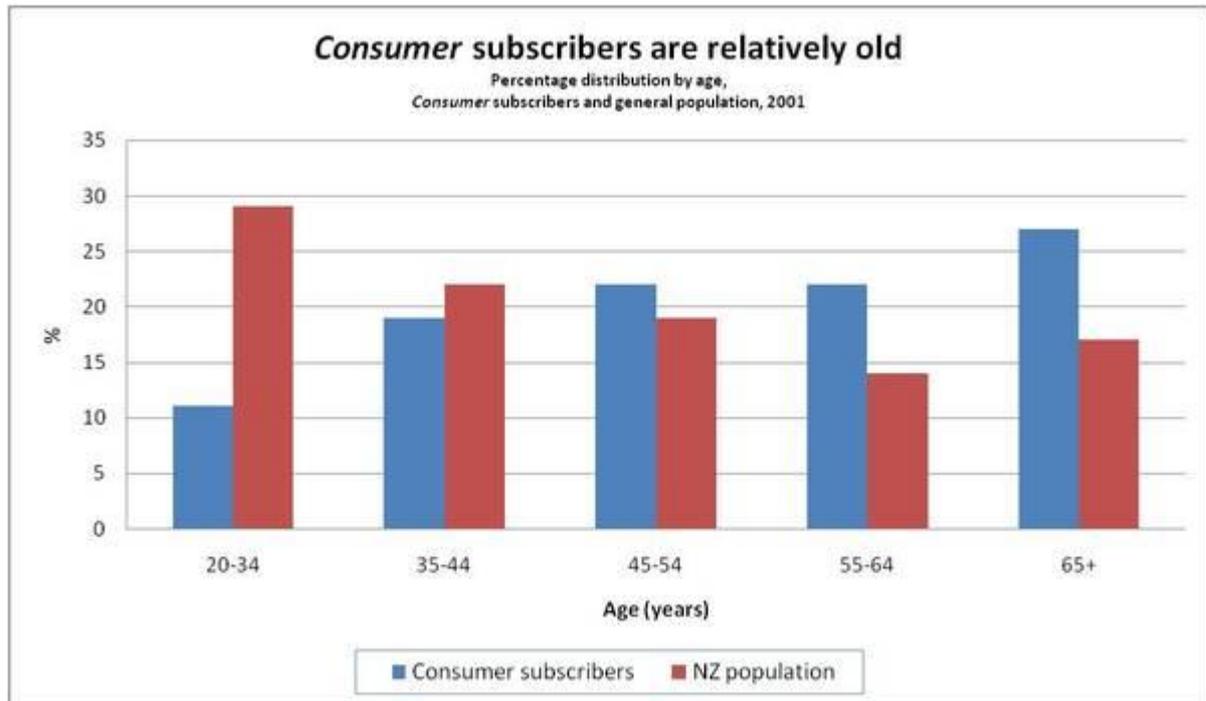


Figure 2: Age distribution of Consumer subscribers compared to the New Zealand population (Hannis, 2004).

Methodological approach: supra-textual design and semiotics

This paper primarily uses supra-textual design theory and, to a lesser extent, semiotics to analyse *Consumer*. To that end, this section will begin by defining both theoretical approaches and then will discuss each in more detail.

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 fulfil 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 Zealand's *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 papers survey period.

A third difference between *Consumer* and *North & South* is that *Consumers* audience is the consuming public whereas *North & Souths* 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 *ConsumerConsumers* front covers in contrast with competing magazines.

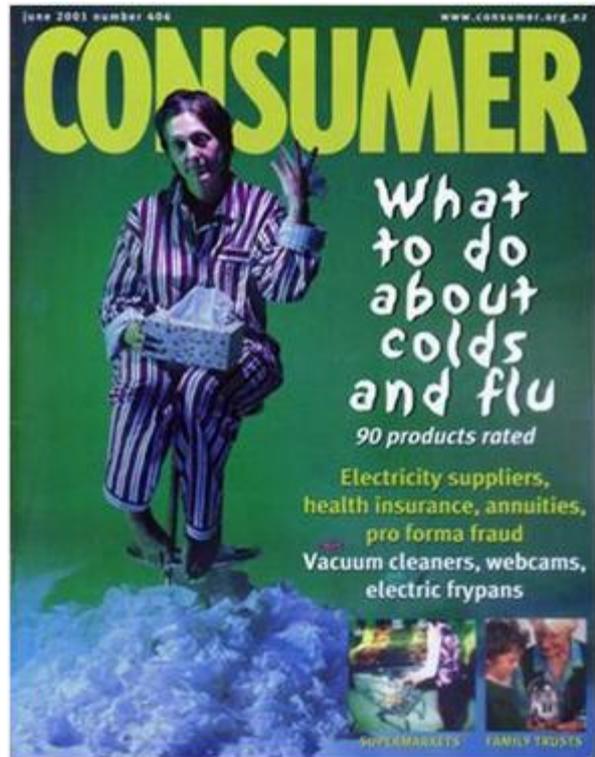
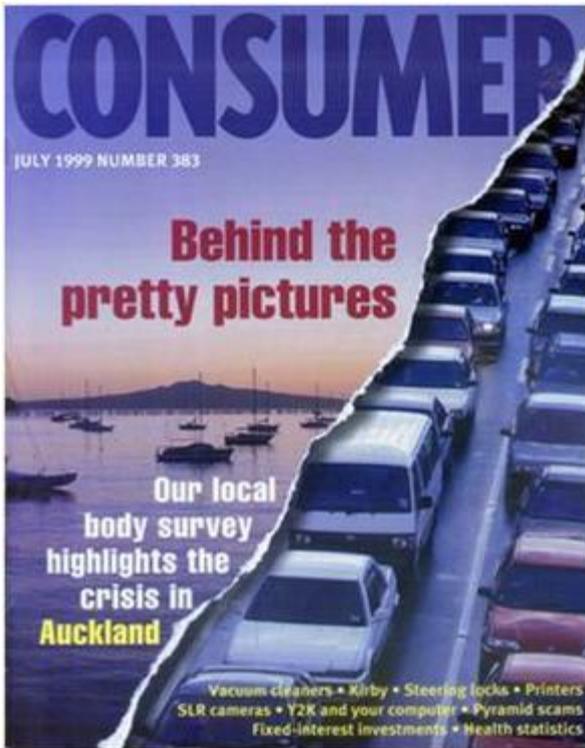


Figure 3: Front covers of four Consumer magazines. Clockwise from top left: A (July, 1999, p. 1); B (June, 2001, p. 1); C (October, 2006, p. 1); D (April, 2008, p. 1).

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 mastheads usual function: to increase a publications visibility on the retail stores shelf.



Figure 4: Front cover of North & South (March, 2001, p. 1).

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 *ConsumerConsumer*. (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 by 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). *ConsumerConsumer*, 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 fulfils 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.

CONTENTS

cover story
8 How well is your council doing?
Monitor survey: The best and worst local councils, the highest and lowest rates, and what readers think of their local government

products & appliances
20 Y2K and your computer
The best way to check what, and how
24 Kirby vacuum cleaners
The best will we think you should avoid
26 Vacuum cleaners
High priced and not priced models
28 Computer printers
Inkjet and laser models
31 Steering locks
The good and the terrible
32 SLR cameras
Time to store up from a compact?

money
14 Fixed-interest investments
Put one in a major series on investment options

services
36 Health services
How do we compare with overseas?

food
18 Cheese
Common questions answered

Stop press: Board news
*Deputy CEO of Christchurch and Margaret Bennett of Auckland have been re-elected to the Board of Consumers' Institute, along with new Board member Mary Whelan of Christchurch.
 Board chair Henry Carr has retired at the end of his three-year term.
 The results of the Institute's AGM, including the election of office holders, will be reported in our next issue.*

regulars
3 Watchdog/Readers write
Uninsured phone call bills, pyromaniac schemes, investment warning, fly traps, carpet beetles, house buyers' traps, supermarket trolley scanners, ethics education, dog bites, Wi-Fi addresses
35 Subscription information
How to buy our magazines, binders, books and back issues
36 Can you help?
The Internet: getting the best, kids' use
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1 **Consumer** July 1999

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



Figure 5D: Consumer table of contents, April 2008, pp. 2-3.

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 & SouthConsumerConsumer* 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.

Contents

March 2001

| | | | |
|--|----|---|---|
| Features | | | |
| Driving Blind | 30 |  | Columns |
| How hard to dig up dirt on just how safe you'd be if you had a crash in your car? In a review of three Zealand car safety standards CAROL DEBONO discusses there's no such thing as a quick and easy answer. | | | Politics 92 R.D. BOURKE looks at the current right-based approach to political reform. |
| Down The Track | 42 |  | Letter From Umbria 94 SUSAN BUCKLAND writes February's game column. |
| Is the proposed closing of the rail link the end of the line for the Colenso/EDMUNDS COOPERATION region? | | | Learning Issues 95 TOM HUGHES looks at the state of the state of the state. |
| Bat Out Of Hell | 52 |  | Staying Alive 97 SHEILA DOUGHERTY challenges the use and effectiveness of anti-arrhythmia treatment. |
| MARGOT BUTCHER delves deep into the psychology of the opening Tansen with Mark Richardson. | | | In Review 98 CHRIS SCHREIE is impressed by Southern Cross's first and perfect Paralympic win in wheelchair tennis. South is back again with three international recommendations with David Coburn and Bruce Store highlight new contemporary and classical offerings. How Good On The Go does a review by JENNIFER WOODS. |
| Mill Stones | 62 | | On Screen 102 MARGARET KEENE looks back to the film about James and Billy Elliot. |
| All readers expect 20 years ago to feature 100 magazines are now feature and without 50 year olds. The chemicals are killing them, they say but, as ALEX SPENCE found, proving it is another matter. | | | North & South Word 120 GORDON WILSON's insight and insight. |
| Doctor In Charge | 72 | | Places In The Heart 122 Photographer MICHAEL JACKSON reveals the Winter Hills that burst on English, the nation. |
| Medical Association head Pippa MacKay talks to LAUREN QUANTANCE about a half year, abortion and health care funding. | | | Last Picture Show 123 Have you seen by DEREK WHITE. |
| The Ballad Of John Yefash | 78 | |  |
| It's been 11 Christmas over 22 years in jail, but BOB HARVEY looks that to be 1046 year pulled away John Yefash is making performance worse. | | | |
| Journeys | 84 | | |
| ALEX SPENCE answers the question "Why would you want to go to Larn?" | | | |
| CONTRIBUTORS: CHRIS WILSON | | | |
|  | | | |

Figure 6: Table of contents from North & South (March, 2001, pp. 5-6).

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.

The battle of the binge: bulimia

Much of Miranda's life has been a constant, secret battle. Now 57, successful, happily married with four grown-up daughters, she says it's at least 10 years since she made herself throw up, but she still feels "unsafe" – as if, given certain conditions, she could still be tipped back into bulimia.

Miranda developed the illness as a teenager. "I'd piled on the weight at boarding school. Two years later at varsity I went to a party, had a lot to eat and drink and felt quite nauseous, and later discovered I could make myself sick. It felt so good."

By the following year, bulimia was well-entrenched. "Sometimes I'd vomit regularly

– once, twice or even more times a day. Occasionally I was coughing up blood. I knew I had a problem. I was scared stiff but was completely trapped."

She'd buy ice cream because it was easily digestible and avoid foods that were difficult to throw up.

"I'd binge then feel awful, so I'd vomit and feel empty and light – but then I felt worse. It was a vicious cycle of guilt. I was brought up with a puritan ethic, so the sheer waste of food just added to all that existing self-condemnation. And the biggest irony was that I never lost any weight."

She never sought help: "I thought I was

the only person in the world doing this."

She married and had children. "I was utterly exhausted – breastfeeding and throwing up." She hid the bulimia from her husband, until finally he confronted her about it.

With his support and concern she started to confront the fact that her health was at risk, and to change her behaviour. Her diet became more balanced and healthier, and she gradually lost weight.

"The day I realised I could get halfway through a meal, say I'd had enough and leave it, was wonderful."

With "cognitive therapy", the aim is to change a person's distorted thinking, particularly about their weight and body shape. With "behaviour therapy", the aim is to change eating behaviour. This may include keeping a food diary and working towards eating three "proper" meals a day, sitting at a table and using cutlery, and eating with other people.

Family therapy aimed at helping people understand the personal background to their problem may also be helpful.

In general, success rates are higher for people with bulimia.

There are no drugs approved specifically for eating disorders, but research has shown some patients with bulimia benefit from anti-depressants, particularly if psychological therapies aren't effective.

Don't expect a rapid recovery. Many people require treatment for years and relapses are common. A person with anorexia may appear to recover, only to plunge into bulimic behaviour.

Families need help too

Eating disorders are really hard on families. Parents have to cope with children who have become devious, manipulative and deceitful. As well as lying to avoid eating, other behaviour also becomes obsessive. "Our daughter couldn't have rubbish in the rubbish tins," says one parent. Another girl couldn't bear to have "full-body" shampoo on the bathroom shelf.

Family life becomes a battleground and other children miss out as the attention and energy is focused on the one with the disorder.

For many parents, support groups provide a safety valve. "You get help in practical terms, tips from other

"It was like she had two different personalities. She'd been a good student, attractive, sociable. She excelled at sport and singing. She was caring and she worried about people. When the anorexic creature took over, she was horrible, bitchy, nasty – a closed book."

Teresa, whose daughter developed anorexia at 17.

parents. You can even have a laugh sometimes," says a parent.

Family therapy can also be valuable. One couple, initially hesitant about therapy, says it has helped them continue supporting their daughter while accepting there is a limit to how much they can do. And it's helped them hold the family together.

Health privacy issues

Parents and other caregivers can use the Health Act to obtain information about their children. The Health Information

Privacy Code set up under the Privacy Act also allows health professionals to disclose information about their patients, in certain circumstances.

But both acts allow health professionals to withhold information, even if the children they are treating are under 16 and still "minors". If they couldn't do this, the children might be reluctant to accept help.

If you think information has been wrongly withheld, you can complain to the Privacy Commissioner. 

MORE HELP

Eating Disorders Association
Ph: 09 818 9561;
anorexia@xtra.co.nz

Eating Disorder Services, Wellington
Ph: 04 473 5900;
weds@xtra.co.nz

Eating Disorders Service, Auckland
Ph: 09 376 0656;
eat@xtra.co.nz

Christchurch Eating Disorders Service
Ph: 03 337 7707;
eatingdisordersservice@healthlinksouth.co.nz

OUR ADVICE

If you think your child, or a friend or relative, may have an eating disorder, seek professional help as soon as possible.

Research shows that the sooner eating disorders are diagnosed and treated, the better the chances of recovery. The longer the condition remains untreated, the greater the likelihood of physical damage. Long-term eating disorders also make other mental health problems, including depression and suicide, more likely.

Figure 7: A page from a Consumer article (July, 2000, p. 13).

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.

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Figure 8 A & B: Consumer statements. Left to right: A (October, 2006, p. 42); B (September, 2007, p. 1).

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*

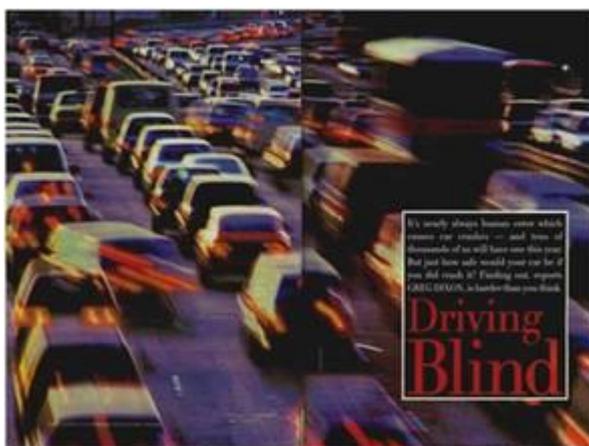


Figure 9: A Consumer binder and bound copies of the magazine.

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* The 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.



For Sale: The Best And The Worst Of Used Cars

Small
Best: Honda Civic (1991-95), Ford Laser (1991-95), Mazda Civic (1992-95), Honda Civic (1992-95), Toyota Corolla (1992-95)
Worst: Daihatsu Mira (1990-95), Honda Civic (1992-95), Suzuki Hatch (1992-95), Daihatsu Hiace (1992-95), Subaru Impreza (1992-95)

Medium
Best: Peugeot 405 (1992-95), Subaru Liberty (1992-95), Nissan Skyline (1992-95), Ford Falcon (1992-95), Mazda (1992-95)
Worst: Ford Falcon (1992-95), Mazda (1992-95), Nissan Prairie (1992-95), Holden Commodore (1992-95), Nissan Cavalier (1992-95)

Large
Best: Mitsubishi Pajero (1992-95), Mitsubishi Pajero (1992-95), Nissan Commodore (1992-95), Ford Falcon (1992-95)
(The large cars performed worse than the all-car crashworthiness average)

4WD
Best: Mitsubishi Pajero (1992-95), Range Rover (1992-95), Holden Suburban (1992-95), Ford Ranger (1992-95), Nissan Patrol (1992-95)
Worst: Suzuki Hiace (1992-95), Daihatsu Hiace (1992-95), Daihatsu Hiace (1992-95), Holden Commodore (1992-95), Suzuki Hiace (1992-95)
(This list is not an indication of the car's performance, but rather a list of cars that are not recommended)

Source: Personal observations, accident records, crash test data, and other sources.

Figure 10 A, B & C: Supra-textual design examples from the North & South article on car safety. Clockwise from top left: A (March, 2001, pp. 30-31); B (pp. 36-37); C (p. 40).

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.

MOTING: USED CAR SAFETY

How safe is your car?

A million plus accident records are giving a clear steer on the safest used cars. **HAMISH WILSON** sifts through the data.

THE GOOD



Holden Commodore VT Toyota Corolla

THE BAD



Daihatsu Charade Mazda 121

THE UGLY



Daihatsu Rocky/Rugger Mitsubishi Pajero

THE GOOD and the bad
 In our search we published results of 1000+ cars in a sample of the entire car market. This shows how cars have behaved in real life accidents and the results give an indication of which models are likely to offer the best protection.

THE UGLY
 The worst cars are those that are not recommended. These cars are not recommended because they are not recommended.

OUR ADVICE

- Whenever you drive, drive safely. Avoiding crashes beats all the safety devices in the world.
- Keep your car maintained in the safest condition you can – good tyres, brakes and steering can all help avoid the actual crash.
- Always, always wear a seatbelt. In the front, always wear a seatbelt. In the back and back seats.
- Check your current car on the charts. What you see may help you decide whether to carry on driving, or to consider an upgrade.
- If you decide to upgrade, put together a short list of safer models before you set out to check the car yards. If you are buying models from the mid 90s on, look for driver and passenger airbags. Many models have the mid air bag airbags as an option if not a standard feature.
- Can't find your car in the LTA's booklet? That could be because it did not crash in sufficient numbers to make it into the ratings.

MORE HELP

Used car safety ratings booklet
 01-9000-0000
 LTA website: www.lta.govt.nz
 Online members only

FROM CONSUMER ONLINE
 Used car profiles with safety ratings
 Online members only

www.consumer.org.nz

Figure 11: Consumer article on used-car safety (October, 2004, pp. 38-39).

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 NZ's 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).

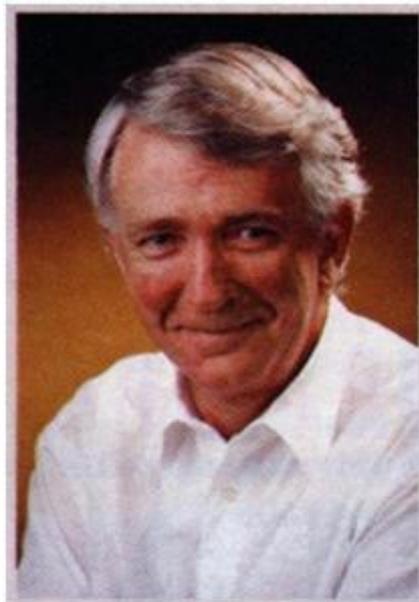


Figure 12: Image of David Russell in *Consumer* (September, 2001, p. 2)

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, Russell's editorials, complete with his photograph, appear 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). Russell's 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 *ConsumerConsumer*, 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).

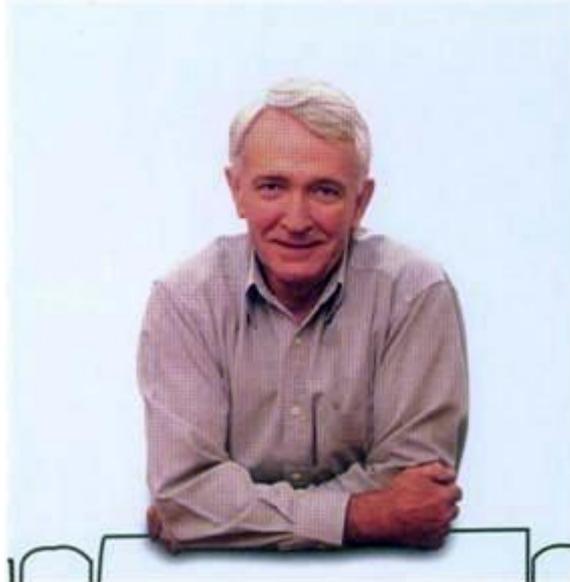


Figure 13: David Russell in a detail from a Consumer marketing flyer (June, 2006).

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 *ConsumerConsumer*. 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 magazines 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 magazines 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.

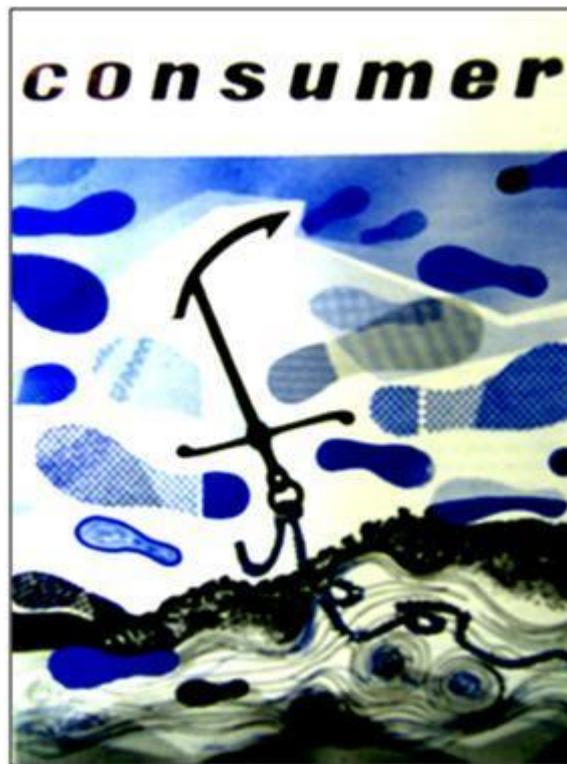


Figure 14: Front cover of the first *Consumer* (December, 1959).

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.



Figure 15: Front cover of first Consumer sold off the shelf (October, 2008).

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