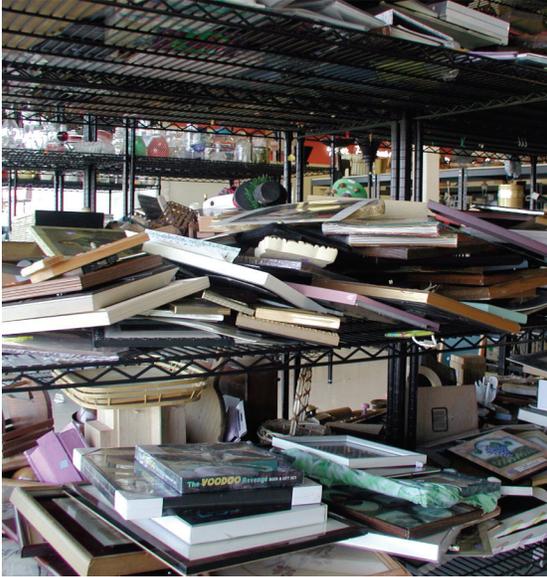


## Seeing Green: How the Visual Representation of Sustainability Shapes Consumer Perception

Tate Ragland  
ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY, USA  
tragland@asu.edu



Goodwill, Scottsdale, Arizona, USA (Photo: T. Ragland)

### Introduction

Sustainable and environmentally friendly products have outgrown their reputation as overpriced, underrated versions of their mainstream counterparts. The business of “green design” has increased exponentially over the last 25 years and many ideas that would previously have never made it past the proverbial drawing board are now coming to fruition (1). With this influx of sustainable products into the marketplace has come the need for increased brand and product differentiation. Consequently, communication designers and brand managers are confronted with the challenge of creating branded identities for these new products that communicate and highlight intangible characteristics such as social responsibility. However, this design challenge is not just a matter of corporate identity – it is inextricably tied to the nature of visual imagery in contemporary culture. This paper examines the branding of sustainability and the role of visual imagery in the creation of socially responsible brands.

The image research for this paper was conducted over a five-month period from August to December of 2007, and as a result, this paper is a temporal analysis of sustainable representation. Undoubtedly, this is not an exhaustive study of the entire history of environmentally focused images. However, great effort was made to select images that circulate in the cultural arena where many eco-conscious consumers reside. Analysis and categorization of the images took place concurrently with the image collection and three methods of study were used in “reading” the images – audience studies, compositional interpretation, and semiology (2). In total, 40 images were selected for further analysis, the results of which will be discussed in this presentation. In the interest of brevity, only a few images will be specifically discussed in this paper in order to allow room for the development of the conceptual framework for the study.

## **Images, Emotion, and Brand**

For the purposes of this paper, “sustainable”, “green”, and “eco-conscious” will be understood to mean, “marked by or showing concern for the environment.” This definition, taken from the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, is purposefully broad because it is meant to encompass a wide range of products and images. Even images that merely hint at the subject of sustainability contribute to the larger influence of the movement on culture. “Visual representation” is defined as photographs, advertisements, or illustrations that can be found in current newspapers, periodicals, and books. Not all images analyzed specifically reference the use of “green” products or traditional methods of responsible consumption. Rather, the images presented reference emotional themes in sustainable representation.

Oftentimes, the most persuasive images we face on a daily basis are focused on a message of impending danger or fear. In fact, “fear appeals are one of the main persuasive strategies applied by advertisers to get an audience to adopt a recommended course of action” (3). As a result, brands that are in the business of selling eco-conscious products are catering to consumers that are accustomed to seeing images in the daily papers and popular magazines that instill a feeling of fear. Accordingly, brands play towards the opposite end of the emotional spectrum to provide a feeling of relief to customers that will consequently sell their product.

Companies spend millions of dollars each year on branding campaigns aimed at changing consumers’ perceptions in the hopes that they will “make the switch.” However, the methods by which designers effect these changes in attitudes go largely unnoticed. Often, methods in communication design are reduced to issues of shape, color, and typography. Although these factors are all important in the design of visual materials, the influences that affect the ways in which consumers perceive products are often related more to cognitive, physiological, or emotional response. For instance, the emotional component of semiology is what makes advertisements successful because emotional stimuli are memorable or “sticky”. “Sociological findings state that in order to acquire the attention of an audience... they first need to be activated through a stimulus” (4). In the world of branding, these emotional stimuli are made manifest in the advertising, packaging, logo, etc. that make up the brand identity.

To begin a discussion of brand identity, it is necessary to first look at the components that influence and craft brand identities – images. Photographs are perhaps the most ubiquitous of all images in modern society. Because they are everywhere, photographs wield the greatest power of persuasion. According to Manuel Castells, “information is becoming the key ingredient for success in the twenty-first century,” and images are the key to understanding this new information society (5). How then, do images communicate information? In the case of product and brand image, information is communicated visually through the elicitation of emotional response. Emotion in advertising is not a new concept. However, as the severity of the environmental situation increases, stronger emotional appeals are being used in the branding of this social movement and related products. In the consumer behavior model used by many eco-conscious brands, fear based imagery in everyday life triggers what researchers refer to as “need recognition” (6). Once consumers recognize this need in their lives to make a change, they begin the process of search and evaluation. This is the point at which brands become critical to the customer. In David Aaker’s 1996 book, *Building Strong Brands* he presents a model of brand identity development called “brand as organization” (7). Building a brand identity using this model means brands base their core image on the value propositions of the organization such as environmental responsibility or commitment to a social cause. As a result, brands use imagery in the packaging and advertising that is diametrically opposed to the imagery that fosters need recognition. These brands are then seen by consumers to reflect their own social morals and values and, therefore, build a relationship between the two.

## **Sustainability and Brand Identity**

According to Martin Lindstrom, author of *Brand Sense*, brand identities are created from the different sensory stimuli associated with a corresponding product or service. Of these stimuli, visual cues are the most influential and have the “power to persuade us against all logic” (8). It then stands to reason that visual stimuli from images are paramount in the creation of brand identity. As a result, photography

and the images produced by it provide a more emotionally centered way of thinking about consumer experience and consumption (9). So if the images we see on a daily basis shape and color our view of the world and its accompanying social issues and dilemmas, how then can designers set about the task of creating brands that aim to alleviate the problem? According to Veronique Vienne, the solution is not a congratulatory pat on the back of consumers communicated by images of clear blue skies and lush green vegetation. Rather, designers must challenge the status quo and rethink the very core of consumption. “The age of sustainability will give designers the chance to spread their wings at last. No longer relegated to making products merely profitable and appealing, they will be inspired to imagine the future” (10). All of this seems to point to a need for a cultural shift in ideas of consumption. Chris Riley’s definition of brands as “business ideas that have achieved cultural influence” highlights the responsibility brands have to lead the way in this cultural shift (11). If brands can produce ideas that shape culture, then brands are the keyholders to the future of sustainable consumption.

### **Image Analysis**

To better understand the practical application of these techniques, it is important to review several examples of visual stimuli. An editorial cartoon from *The New York Times* entitled “Global Warming Tax” demonstrates the visual representation of sustainability without the ubiquitous use of the color green. A man seated in an armchair represents the IRS as he collects the smoke from the refineries in a yarn ball. The clever use of smoke circles as yarn is a semiological reference to emissions. By illustrating the smoke as something tangible (yarn), the cartoonist not only makes a link between the image and the article, but also references the cultural practice of drawing smoke as a series of connecting spirals. Although the gray tones of the cartoon are a byproduct of the image’s method of distribution, the color also works with the subject matter of smoke and emissions, which are often thought of as gray or brown. The compositional and semiological elements of this cartoon exhibit an opposing model of sustainable image representation in comparison to the green, nature-inspired images of magazines and advertisements.

A photo of a “phantom forest” in Kansas City illustrates semiology in a three-dimensional setting rather than the two-dimensional applications traditionally shown. The image depicts an installation of newspaper stacks in a grid pattern in Volker Park. In this instance, the layout of the newspaper stacks is symbolic of the layout of trees in an orchard or forest. Similarly, each stack of newspapers symbolizes the trees that were cut down to make the newspapers. This simple act of substitution sends a powerful message about the destruction of natural resources for objects that are used fleetingly. Images, particularly photographs, often exhibit several of the themes revolving around sustainability such as recycling, reappropriation, and lifecycle extension. Though most are subtler than this installation piece, many images in our daily lives make reference to the need for sustainable living (12).

Another illustration from *The New York Times* entitled “Saving the Planet, One Book at a Time” shows a forest of tree stumps serving as seats for people reading books with word pun titles. The book titles refer to issues relating to deforestation and tree cutting. The article appeared alongside an article in the Book Review section of the paper that discussed the environmental impact of books. Though many people do not think of the effect book production has on our environment, this image draws attention to the issue. The book titles, in combination with the tree stumps, create a composition that speaks volumes through its subject matter. These images mimic the findings of a 2005 study from Columbia University that found that images that evoke a feeling of alarm in viewers produce the strongest negative affect when compared with other visual representations of climate change (13). In other words, images that invoke feelings of fear or alarm in viewers are most effective at communicating the negative affects of not living sustainably.

### **Conclusion**

The images presented send a clear message to viewers about the state of our planet. When these viewers then go out into the world as consumers, their vision of sustainable products is undoubtedly colored by the barrage of visual information they have absorbed by reading the newspaper, watching television, or flipping through books and magazines. Consequently, everyday images contribute to the

success or failure of sustainable products in the marketplace. The message and vision that is being propagated by our visual culture cannot help but tint our view of the world and influence our behavior and buying practices. However, these mainstream images are only half of the equation. The remainder of the responsibility lies with companies and brands. As evidenced by the images presented, emotional branding is only gaining momentum in the marketplace. It is critical to remain mindful of the ethics involved in the branding of all products, but specifically those products that respond to an underlying emotional tenet.

The implication for designers is critical. Particularly in the world of branding, designers have a voice in the creation of product identities, packaging systems, advertising campaigns, and other forms of branded communications. It is important that designers embrace their role in the design of brands, not only for personal and professional gain, but because brands are cultural ideas with a critical mass. Using brands as a platform for designers to make a change in the world is a positive step towards a productive relationship between corporations, designers, and culture. Design has always had the ability to influence cultural ideals and societal norms; yet the isolated nature of the profession has kept designers from spreading their ideas to society at large. The rise of brands in our economy and their influence in the formation of contemporary cultural values make brands the ideal medium for designers to effect change.

## NOTES

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