Introduction

Today psychology dominates the study of visual branding. But the concepts that underwrite psychological research cast a veil over brands, masking what brands have learned to do. In this book we lift the blindfold by means of rhetorical and historical analyses. Visual branding needs to move beyond purely psychological accounts.

RHETORICAL VERSUS PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Consider the Tide ad in Figure 0.1, next page. Psychology explains that laundry detergent is a low-involvement product: consumers will minimize their investment in deciding which brand to buy. Hence, ads for detergent will only be peripherally attended, and heuristically processed. A consumer may enjoy the pretty colors of the ad for a fleeting moment, and then attach a positive feeling to the Tide brand. The large number of days mentioned in the caption will be heuristically processed as an extreme value, and nudge up consumer perceptions of Tide’s effectiveness.1

Rhetoricians approach this Tide ad differently. We see a complex visual metaphor that relates Tide to a stained glass window. Such a window will project a beautiful array of colors for centuries, which suggests that Tide can protect colors on clothing for a very long time. Stained glass, along with the Biblical reference (“on the seventh day He rested”), call to mind the authority of scripture and church. The consumer is invited to believe in Tide, to have faith in its capabilities and efficacy.

The historically aware rhetorician also absorbs clues that date this ad to the twenty-first century and not any earlier era. We can easily date the ad by noting that: (1) the brand name and logo appear only on the package; (2) the brand name is emblazoned on a shield which merges into the remainder of the package design; (3) the picture bleeds to the margins of the page; (4) the picture has been constructed in software rather than photographed in a studio; (5) the picture takes over the entire ad, so that words are inscribed on it; and finally (6) by the brevity of the copy and its subservience to the picture. It was not possible to produce such an ad 100 years ago. It was borderline feasible 50 years ago. Today such visually accomplished ads are commonplace.

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Visual branding

The rhetorician sees the consumer as a culturally and historically located creature. Rhetoricians also see consumers as capable: able to draw a wealth of inferences from a picture. And rhetoricians see advertisers and brand managers as clever: able to visually guide the consumer toward favorable

Figure 0.1  Contemporary ad for Tide detergent

The rhetorician sees the consumer as a culturally and historically located creature. Rhetoricians also see consumers as capable: able to draw a wealth of inferences from a picture. And rhetoricians see advertisers and brand managers as clever: able to visually guide the consumer toward favorable
inferences about the brand without ever making an explicit verbal claim which could be subjected to criticism, and dismissed as incredible. Finally, the historically minded rhetorician asserts that both consumers’ facility and advertisers’ ability emerged in history.

**ADVERTISING AT THE JUNCTURE OF DISCIPLINES**

Scholars in the humanities also claim to know advertising. As we step away from the business disciplines and out of the shadow of psychology, toward aesthetics, design, history, and literature, rhetoric transforms into a familiar and welcome notion, but also grows slippery and indistinct; it becomes a Humpty Dumpty word, one that means whatever the user wants. Humanities scholars need to hear that we will apply classical rhetoric to illumine visual branding.

Classical rhetoric is the original rhetoric of Greece and Rome. One central idea animates classical rhetoric: that in any persuasive situation, there can be found a short list of devices able to accomplish the rhetor’s purpose. There are only a few routes to exhort a crowd to war. There are only so many ways to eulogize a dead hero. Only a few gambits can persuade a jury to acquit. That’s what Aristotle meant when he defined rhetorical skill as the “ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion” (Aristotle *Rhetoric* I.1.2, Kennedy 37). The means can be grasped because they are small in number; the list is short.2

There is nothing novel about treating advertising as the rhetoric of a consumer society; that point has been tossed about a thousand times. But in most such claims, rhetoric is only a catchphrase, cueing the vague notion that a grab bag of tricks can be found out. Labeling advertising as applied rhetoric sounds grander than stating “today commercial persuasion is one common example of persuasion.” Only when we fix the meaning of rhetoric, by specifying classical rhetoric, does the assertion gain traction. From an Aristotelian stance, to claim that there is a rhetoric of visual branding translates to: “there are only six types of brand logos,” or “all the pictures that might promote a brand can be grouped into a dozen categories.”

To apply classical rhetoric to visual branding violates deeply held tenets of psychology. Psychologists know that an advertisement, when viewed by a consumer, is naught but a stimulus. Like any visual stimulus, it can be arrayed in an $N$-dimensional conceptual space, where each dimension indexes a property shared to some degree by all visual stimuli.3 Each dimension or property – how vivid, concrete, or complex the stimulus – permits of infinite gradation. Just as the deep structure of Chomsky’s grammar enables us to construct an infinite number of sentences, so also, assumes
the psychologist, must there be an infinite variety of persuasive stimuli. Viewed from the standpoint of psychology, only a Cartesian model, a coordinate geometry of infinite gradations, can bring order to this plethora. The psychologist knows that classical rhetoric must be mistaken in its search for distinct types or gambits. Infinite must trump discrete.

Psychology dominates discussions of branding in scholarly journals in marketing, advertising, and consumer research. Rhetorical perspectives remain rare. Today it is difficult for a scholar in the business disciplines to escape the root psychological mindset: stimulus → response. The psychologist knows that to study brand logos, you first construct a set of graphic designs with carefully varied stimulus properties, then expose these logo stimuli to consumers, who respond on rating scales. Statistical analyses of these stimulus–response pairings reveal which logo properties influence which consumer responses. How else to gain knowledge of visual branding?

We'd ask the reader coming from a business discipline to be honest with yourself: does not that experimental and psychological account sound appealing? What other knowledge of brand logos could there be? If not backed up by experiment, and theorized in terms of underlying universals, can any alternative method even claim to give knowledge? Thus does psychology tighten its grip: don't you brand managers want to be scientific?

Historians will respond vigorously: of course there are alternative paths to knowledge! Stimulus and response experiments, however powerful, do not exhaust the possibilities. Although historians cannot perform experiments, we commit no solecism to speak of historical knowledge. Except, alas, that none of the major marketing, advertising, and consumer journals publish much historical work either. We may have knowledge of history, yes; but is this scientific knowledge, knowledge that could yield theoretical advances? Scientific and theoretical knowledge are what the major marketing, advertising, and consumer journals aspire to produce. Longitudinal content analyses – mathematized data examined over time – may appear in these journals; but history, of the kind seen in Marchand’s (1985) book, is notable by its absence.

Scientific psychology is as resolutely anti-history as it is anti-rhetoric. Note how we could slip in the statement that “consumers” would rate the logo stimuli. We did not have to be precise, or indicate that we meant “returning veterans attending college on the GI Bill in 1953,” or “white, upper-middle-class American students, all aged 20–22 when the research was conducted, whose median SAT score was at the 90th percentile.” From a psychological perspective, just as any stimulus can be termed an ad, any member of Homo sapiens, in any setting, can be called a consumer. Theoretical knowledge strives to be universal. The goal in psychology is
not to study affluent and academically accomplished American college students; it is to produce universal knowledge. And that’s why – wait for it – consumer psychologists based in the USA use only smart affluent college students in their experiments. The goal of a scientific psychology is to identify processes which are universal across *Homo sapiens*. Therefore, any convenient supply of *Homo sapiens* will do when conducting an experiment.

Our sarcasm is fueled by bitter experience. Psychological research strives to be timeless. It intends to produce universal and enduring theoretical findings. That makes it okay to use the narrowest sample and the most restricted and artificial stimuli. The protestation by psychologists: we’re not studying these students or any one real brand, but universal truths, of which these handy consumers and artificial brands are but instances, on a par with any other instance. Got it? The narrower the sample and more artificial the stimuli, the greater the generalizability of the findings. By studying no particular consumer or brand, general truths, applicable to all consumers and brands, emerge more clearly.

Does that stance leave you shaking your head? Then you may be receptive to this historical and rhetorical analysis of visual branding. You will find no factor analyses of seven-point rating scales here, and no artificial brands. We examine real ads sampled from over a century, real brand logos as these morph over time, and long-term trends in the technological and economic substrate on which brand advertising rests.

A third shortcoming of psychology, as pursued in consumer and social psychological experiments: it is besotted with words. *Logos* dominates *eidos*. If you look over the experiments published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, and the *Journal of Advertising* – journals that we’ve read, reviewed for, and published in for decades – you will chiefly find words manipulated, not imagery. There are exceptions. But the vast majority of psychological studies of consumer persuasion create their experimental designs by varying words in either the instructions or the ad stimulus. The consumer is approached as a careful reader of prose. Would the results generalize to subjects who had not spent the entirety of their young lives studying written instructions in school, and who had not been selected to be above the 90th percentile for scholastic aptitude? Might these research designs reflect the verbal proclivities of the professors who devise them, more than the distinctive features of advertising and branding? Good questions.

There’s nothing wrong or trivial about studying verbal persuasion. Outside of advertising and branding, a great deal of everyday persuasion proceeds verbally. But brand advertising is distinguished, among all other persuasive activities today, and as compared to past attempts at persuasion...
down through the millennia, by its reliance on pictures and graphic design. Everyone knows that advertising accounts for a large chunk of the persuasive activity that occurs each day in America. Not everyone realizes that American print advertising has grown more visual, more pictorial, every decade for the past century. Magazine ads from after 2000 are measurably more pictorial than ads from as recently as the 1980s, which are more visual than those from the 1950s. Not only are pictures bigger, and more intensively crafted, but words occupy less and less of the ad, becoming fewer and fewer in number. Ads from the 1920s read like tomes.

Scholars are free to study whatever they want; but it seems silly when an entire discipline, self-identified as responsible for advancing knowledge of advertising and branding, persists in constructing verbal experiments when the chosen topic provides a privileged and unique opportunity to study pictorial persuasion. Yes, words do persuade. Fine; so study radio commercials, or voter pamphlets, or the pitches of used car salesmen. The opportunity posed by print ads, and the branding that occurs there, is to study how pictures persuade.

Finally, psychology is not the only competitor of rhetoric. The discipline of semiotics also lays claim to visual branding. But rhetoric is not semiotics. Alas, if you are in business, or reading this in a business school, both semiotics and rhetoric may sound equally fusty and obscure. For those interested, we lay out the differences in Box 0.1.

DEFINITIONS AND SCOPE

Visual

Visual branding includes any effort to identify and promote a brand using pictures, visual elements, or visual arrangements. These last two vaguer categories require expansion. Color provides a good example of a visual element. There does not have to be a picture for color to be present and used in branding; visual elements are distinct from pictures. Typeface is another example of a visual element, as are spokes-characters, such as Tony the Tiger for Kellogg’s. The configuration of visual and verbal elements in a brand’s trademark is an example of a visual arrangement used to brand.

Pictures vary as to content and style. In terms of content, pictures may be more or less representational, and may depict people, scenes, objects, and much else. We will touch on pictorial content in this book, but it is not central to our aims. The problem: there is no short list of pictorial content. That makes pictorial content refractory to rhetorical analysis. There are
short lists of pictorial styles and of stylistic devices in pictures; hence, a rhetorical analysis of pictures will gravitate toward a focus on style. Pictorial content is also problematic because it seduces: the tendency is to climb through the pictorial window, to deal with the objects behind, and then quickly move on to the social and cultural matrix from which the ad emerged. This distracts from inquiry into the branding performed by the ad. Ads may be valuable to social and cultural historians, but this book is not a social or cultural history. We study the history of visual branding by means of the stylistic devices deployed in ads.

A final note on scope: television commercials are visual, and more: the pictures move and make sounds, as do web animations and videos. But the history of visual branding in these media is shorter; much shorter, in the case of animated web ads. And sampling is much harder to pull off. The same concerns apply to product packaging. Although visual branding occurs on television and the web and on packaging (and in contests and sponsorships and specialty advertising giveaways), within the limits of a book-length treatment we must stick to print advertising, and the pictures, elements, and arrangements that occur there. And among print media, magazines, more than newspapers or billboards, give access to the fullest panoply of techniques and technological capabilities. In short, we examine visual branding as it has been pursued in magazine advertisements from the beginning of the twentieth century down to the present.

Brand

Ah, but what is a brand? In mundane terms, a brand is a corporate asset, like a patent or other piece of intellectual property. In concrete terms, a brand is an identifier attached to products and services; it names the good offered for sale. A brand is not to be confused with the corporate entity that currently owns it; we collectively label that enterprise and its employees as the advertiser in some contexts, and in others, as brand management. The brand is not its owner.

But none of these definitions take us far. Brands are incorporeal entities that exist independently of their owners and of the goods that they name. Brands exist and are developed primarily in discourse. Brands are cultural things. Although incorporeal by nature, brands, like souls, are multiply embodied. Brands can be made concrete and present as objects, as names, and as visual representations. Brands are complex signs. But none of its representations can ever be “the” brand.

Confused? Sorry, it can’t be helped. Brands are special. Brands have analogues, but brands and branding are cultural things unique to late capitalist social arrangements. There were no brands in Renaissance Italy, or
Rhetoric? Semiotics? What’s the difference? Viewed from a mainstream, psychological standpoint, both disciplines sound equally marginal or on the fringe. This box sketches a contrast, the better to position the rhetorical approach to advertising.

Semiotics is much more general than rhetoric. Anything that can function as a sign – anything that can stand for something to somebody – is fair game for semiotics. Neither words nor conventional symbols are necessary for the sign-function to operate. Signs are everywhere. Some semioticians, imperialistic in spirit, would subsume art, language, literature, philosophy, and any other arena where meanings operate, making semiotics the master human science.

Semioticians were among the first to examine how pictures, and visual elements within pictures, could function as signs. If only because linguistics had already secured its position in the universities, semioticians have been wont to study what linguists do not and will not consider: signs not carried by words. Hence, anyone interested in visual branding needs to come to terms with semiotics; it has a historically well-situated claim to supply the fundamental concepts for understanding how visual branding works.

Rhetoric is much less general than semiotics; it could even be described as a derivative, tertiary discipline. The writ of rhetoric is confined to the public address that calls an audience to action. In Greece and Rome, this meant either an appeal to a jury, or a speech exhorting citizens, or a paean coaxing an emotional response. The first two applications survive essentially intact in the contemporary world: we still have juries, and citizens still vote. The paean seldom occurs any longer in traditional form (for example, funeral orations are rare), but has been replaced, and greatly expanded as a share of discourse, in the arena of brand advertising.

All three elements are important for defining the scope of rhetoric. Firstly, private settings are not appropriate venues for rhetoric. The man who applies rhetoric at the family dinner table is a curious sort of humbug. In everyday life we have many occasions to persuade, but rhetoric cannot help us here. Use of rhetoric on family members would be unlawful force. Secondly, rhetoric also presumes an audience: a large number of individuals who bear an arm’s-length relationship to the rhetor. When we speak to one person or a few people in private, we may coax, cajole, plead, or implore, but we do not have much opportunity to apply rhetoric. Thirdly, rhetoric is not about explaining, teaching, discussing, conversing, or any of the myriad other uses to which signs can be put. Rhetoric is laser-focused on getting members of an audience at arm’s length to do something the rhetor wants them to do. Rhetoric is instrumental communication. It falls a vast distance away from poetry, art, or any other expressive, self-focused use of signs. Rhetoric only applies to motivated sign use. The rhetor is an interested party who attempts to move an audience.

Two things should be clear from the contrast thus far: semiotics is a much more fundamental and general discipline; but rhetoric maps much more tightly onto the advertising enterprise. Accordingly, semiotics suffers from a version of the failing that plagues psychology: because semiotics aspires to embrace all forms of sign use whatsoever, semioticians tend not to study any one domain of sign use in depth.
That baleful urge toward universality drives many semiotic accounts deep down to the micro-operations whereby a sign stands for something, since only these micro-operations are truly universal across all the human contexts in which signs appear. In the visual sphere, this leads to long disquisitions about the meaning of a curved line or a camera angle, and disputes about what rule allowed us to infer “stained glass” from the Tide ad in Figure 0.1. Often the semiotician never makes it up to the level of the whole page, replete with verbal text, pictures, and brand markings tangled together, where the rhetorician plies his trade.

A second vice of semiotics, historically accidental but deeply woven into the fabric of its discourse, is the drive to treat pictures as a language. One sees this particularly in Continental semiotics, where de Saussure, a linguist, was the father of the discipline. This urge leads to loose talk about the grammar of pictures, or the codes in the ad. We depart from semiotics in denying that pictures can be a language. Visual elements conform to nothing so precise as a code. Computers run on code. Humans draw inferences. The advantage of rhetoric is that it steers clear of these commitments and encumbrances, free to be omnivorous about what persuades, and how, subject only to a ruthless pragmatism.

Introduction

the Roman Empire. There were no brands before capitalism reconfigured the world. Brands are new, as new as the Industrial Revolution and mass markets and media.

A brand is like a nation, which has a flag, a seal, and many other signs, but which is not its flag, or its seal, or any of its representations. A brand is protean, like a symbol, in being able to generate meanings without being tied to any single one. There’s nothing novel about symbols, which have existed throughout human history, and maybe before. But brands differ from other symbols, most of which cannot be owned, nor sold, nor bought. Brands are unique to our culture, the culture of late capitalism, when the market rules and so much of everyday life revolves around selling while at work, and buying when not working.

To be a cultural thing means to exist primarily in the minds of the people who participate in the surrounding culture. Cultural things are created and renewed in discourse and practices. Any cultural thing will be manifest in many representations, no one of which exhausts the meaning of that cultural thing, but each instance of which pushes and tugs at the overall gestalt. Brand meaning is fluid, sometimes viscous, sometimes tumbling down slope. Brands aren’t like numerals, or signs for mathematical operations; a brand’s meaning is loosely bound and malleable. It mutates and drifts; it has a topology, not a shape. A famous example: until the 1950s, Marlboro was a cigarette bought mostly by women.

A brand does not change its name; that’s as meaningless as the sentence, “its name was changed to its name.” The phonemes stay, but the meaning of those phonemes may change. By contrast, brands do change their visual
representations. The same name puts on different clothes. And as clothes make the man, when its visual representation changes, the meaning of the brand may change, drift, or evolve as well. Brands are thrown, as Heidegger might have said: they are historical entities rather than Platonic forms.

The historical and rhetorical challenge is to take the measure of change in brands, and in branding. Few brands endure as radical a makeover as Marlboro; but almost no brand stays frozen in its original visual representation. Think about how Betty Crocker has changed. Quick now: does that sentence refer to the brand or the spokes-character? The phonemes and even the spelling are unchanged; and the corporate ownership (General Mills) has remained constant. But the Betty Crocker who smiles from a package or ad today doesn’t look much like the matron who looked out from an ad in the 1920s. Yet, she had that same name. And the brand seeks roughly the same demographic, now as then. It is one brand in history: there has to be some overlap in what that matron meant, to the 1920s lady of the house, and what that dimpled, smiling, younger woman, who looks out from a 2015 picture, means to today’s homemaker. And yet, today’s female head of household, however invariant her demographic, does not have the same cultural identity, as the woman who shopped for and bought Betty Crocker in 1925.

Of one thing we may be sure. If Betty Crocker, the brand, were still to use the 1920s or 1930s or 1950s image of Betty Crocker the spokes-character in its 2015 visual branding, the brand would acquire a different meaning in the eyes of today’s consumer than it now has. But that altered meaning would not be the same meaning as those earlier consumers derived from viewing that exact same image.

Cultural meanings, in technologically advanced late capitalist societies, are inherently unstable. Brands navigate these shifting shoals. An unsmiling older woman, of severe countenance, does not mean the same thing to the American female consumer of 2015, as that image meant when that consumer’s grandmother was young. Betty Crocker must be re-imagined, over and over.

Sometimes brands have to change their visual representation to keep their brand meaning steady. Sometimes brands have to change their meaning in order to seize market opportunities or to maintain their market position; then their visual representations must change apace. It may even be that visual representations have to change continually if the brand is to be kept fresh. This dynamic is even more visible in ad executions than in slow-to-change elements such as spokes-character and trademark. But each change in visual representation has the potential to feed back into the brand, and change what the brand means; which is to change the brand, which is only its ensemble of meanings.
You may not be accustomed to reading historical musings about branding. Business journals have no time for such reflections; after all, where’s the (psychological) theory? It is radical to view brands as historical creatures. This raises a methodological question. If real brands are historically situated entities, can brands and brandedness be replicated artificially? Can a stimulus prompt, ginned up in the laboratory, and exposed to a college student rather than a purchaser, reproduce what took a firm decades and billions of dollars to forge out in the world? These questions have been avoided for too long, but are crucial for assessing the contribution of psychological research to branding.

Historical phenomena repay historical inquiry: brands need to be studied in the field, and over long periods of time. Our goal is to help the reader see branding afresh by means of rhetorical and historical analyses. We want to unfreeze the knee-jerk understanding of ads as “visual stimuli,” “processed,” by “consumers.” The actions of branding and advertising produce cultural artifacts, the crafted and crafty designs of culturally situated men and women, aimed at a mass of other cultural beings, with the hope of provoking a desired response, which may be far more subtle than “After seeing that ad, I’d now give this brand a 6 on that seven-point scale.”

Withal, rhetoricians respect the limits of their discipline. Many human responses do belong to psychology, and are best approached using psychological concepts and theories. The rhetorician doesn’t know anything about how to connect the mental responses to the ad occurring at home, to subsequent action in the store. That is an intra-psychic matter. Other human responses belong to anthropology, or sociology, or to other disciplines concerned with the study of cultural things that do not dwell solely within the individual mind. But the designs themselves, these acts of visual branding to which consumers psychologically respond, are not stimuli and do not belong to psychology. Branding is a historically situated rhetorical enterprise whose structures have not yet been glimpsed, and whose divagations have yet to be traced.

The rhetorician sees an advantage to studying brands. We know what the brand sponsor seeks to accomplish: sell goods for profit. No one knows what the purpose of literature is, or whether art has one purpose or many. That uncertainty complicates rhetorical analysis in those spheres. Although a rhetorical analysis of brand advertising will mostly produce findings limited to that sphere, the clarity of purpose in branding may yield new insights into rhetoric itself. Many contemporary attempts to apply classical rhetoric are resuscitations: efforts to port the terminology of Greek and Roman times into the present, and to effect a wholesale carry-over of old knowledge treated as established and perfected. We lack that antiquarian passion. We think rhetoric can be like science, a dynamic
Visual branding
discipline which can forge new knowledge when confronted with new problems. The study of branding offers to cash out that promise.

Visual Branding

To switch to the verb shifts the focus of inquiry: how are brands built, improved, expanded, updated, or refurbished? These verbs drawn from the building trades provide a salutary reminder: brands are property. Key to branding is ownership. The rhetorical criterion for branding, more especially visual branding, is captured in the neologism “ownability,” which we first encountered while interviewing graphic designers employed by ad agencies. Any picture, visual element, or visual arrangement that can be owned can build a brand; and any change to any of these may potentially remodel the brand.

The United States, beginning over a century ago, has elaborated a system of law and regulation that confers extensive property rights on brands, as have other nations. Put another way, because a brand is like a symbol, the limit on what can belong to the brand is undefined, albeit known to be of considerable extent. The boundary on what can be claimed, on what belongs to the brand, is worked out in the courts, and evolves with case law. Much, much more than the name and trademark may be owned; trade dress is the more comprehensive term. In the Epilogue we review some of the conceptual issues that arise at the boundary of what belongs to a brand.

The main thrust of the book, the historical tale, concerns advertisers discovering how to brand visually. Among the great benefits of looking at old magazine ads – the real thing, held in the hand, even as these crumble and smell of the basement – is to discover how rudimentary, how hit-and-miss, were some of those initial efforts at branding. The fitful, haphazard quality is most apparent in the visuals. By contrast, early copywriters had millennia of experience on which to draw in crafting the verbal spiel. And copywriters had news to share: many of the products were innovations, as exciting to our grandparents as a new iPhone today. There was plenty to say about brands, and the writer of paeans had thousands of years of expertise on which to call.

In 1900, there was no color photography. Typeface had only begun to be liberated from lead type. Color printing of any kind was rare and expensive. There was a long history of art, engraving, and iconography, but these designs had never concerned mere things, material goods, mundane conveniences. Visual persuasion had a history, but only in traditional contexts, to celebrate church, king, and noble. There were few precedents for crafting a visual presentation of a new, mundane object, or of how to vary these presentations so that they could appear month after month and
remain fresh while not drifting or veering in signification. And the technology for creating visuals kept changing, becoming more powerful and offering ever more control. The early brand advertisers, they didn’t quite know what they were doing. Their efforts at visual branding were tentative and untutored.

Branding developed in history, and advertisers got better at branding as generation of graphic designers succeeded generation, and as more powerful tools became available. For the student of rhetoric, to examine brand advertising in the early 1900s is to be a fly on the wall in ancient Syracuse, watching trial after trial on the agora, as the first Greek rhetoricians assembled their art. To look at ads from the 1950s and 1980s is to sit at the knee of Shakespeare and his cohort, as medieval rhetoricians reshaped their inheritance from the ancient world. And to look at ads from the 2000s is to take a ride on the transcontinental railroad in 1870, astounded and excited, but having no clue that someday freeways would traverse that land. The moral: we have no more reason to believe that visual branding has reached its acme in 2015 than our great-grandparents had to laud the steam locomotive as the pinnacle of transportation technology. Branding is not a settled art.

POSITIONING

This verb, a bit of marketing jargon, refers to how an offering relates to its competitive set; how this book compares to other efforts in the field. There is nothing new about conducting a historical study of advertising; but the position for which we aim is new. Marchand’s (1985) book provides a master template for many efforts. He offers a social and cultural history of American advertisers and consumers in the 1920s and 1930s, conceived as a hinge point where the modern forms of both advertising and consuming were set. Marchand writes not so much a history of advertising or advertisements, as a history of the social and cultural values manifest in ads of this era, along with a history of the people who created these ads and of the consumers who made up their audience. As with any social history, Marchand is keenly interested in the class and gender of those who created advertisements, as compared to that of their audience. As with any cultural history, Marchand wants to understand the source of the values to which ads appeal, and how these values came to be introduced and advanced. Marchand represents the mainstream of accounts written by historians. Ads provide Marchand much of his source material, but serve only as a locus for inquiry directed outside those ads, at the era in which they appeared.
Pollay (1985) anchors a different tradition more characteristic of marketing scholarship. He was among the first to produce a content analysis of ads across a lengthy period. Papers in the tradition of Pollay – and these do tend to be journal papers, not books – might better be termed longitudinal content analyses, rather than histories, as that descriptor is used by humanities scholars. In these efforts, the material of interest – in Pollay’s case, magazine advertisements – is sampled over time in the same way that a survey researcher samples people across space. A vast number of ads were published over the decades studied; the content analyst by necessity samples a fraction. The goal is a representative sample of material, gathered at equal intervals along a time line, much as a survey researcher tries to canvass neighborhoods from across the city and not focus unduly on respondents in one block or district. Once the ad sample is obtained, coders, typically students, are trained on a set of rules and then put to work to count the elements identified as of interest. For instance, Pollay had coders count elements such as ad size, the proportion devoted to a picture if present, whether the ad used color, and similar mechanical elements.

In longitudinal content analyses, anything defined by a rule can be counted; it might as well be labeled content machining. Once the counts are in hand and keyed to the time line, a trend analysis of any desired degree of statistical sophistication can be performed. That is the strength of content analyses: to quantify change and test its magnitude. The weakness: only things that college students can be trained to count may be analyzed. Most of the social and cultural matters discussed by a historian like Marchand will fall outside that ambit: their subtlety is too great. The eye of an experienced scholar sees much more than can be expressed in mechanical rules. For the historically inclined, content analyses are likely to appear both terribly superficial, and too empty of human agents.

In this book, like Marchand, we rely on our own educated minds to examine the time course of branding in ads. The two of us have been looking at ads, sampled from diverse time periods, for a long time now. But like Pollay, and unlike Marchand, we focus on elements visible in the ads, not on what ads reflect about the social and cultural world beyond. And also unlike Marchand, and departing from standard practice in historical accounts, we do not focus on the people who made these ads. There are few proper names in our account, and no biographical sketches. We focus on the ad documents that survived, which we approach as their audience perforce did: as mass media, broadcast rather than addressed, from no named source other than the brand whose ad this is. We assume – and this is more heroic, and less certain of success – that we can know the purpose of these ads. We believe that all the ads we discuss, from the earliest to the
latest, share a single straightforward aim: to brand, to make audiences aware of, interested in, and desirous of the brand, so that the remainder of the marketing effort can bring the consumer to act – to buy. Holding that assumption as our compass, we look at what ads contain, mostly ignoring words, and focusing on what is visible. We study what advertisers show, not what they tell, and how what is shown varies and changes over time. Where Marchand answers “Who?” and Pollay answers “What?” we seek to uncover “How?”

To date, no one has brought a rhetorician’s eye to bear on the visual elements of magazine advertising, sampled over a lengthy period. Rhetorical accounts of advertising have been offered, but there is as yet no history of rhetorical devices used in branding, especially not visual devices.

**PLAN OF THE BOOK**

The chapters in Part I provide a history of visual branding in magazine advertising, in the United States, from before 1900 down to the present. In Chapter 1, we explain the choice of start date, and give a broad brush account of major trends and developments. To highlight change over time, our method is to dip into the ongoing, unending stream of advertising only at intervals: the turn of the century, then the 1920s, the 1950s, the 1980s, and the early 2000s. Picking periods separated by approximately one generation – 25 to 30 years – sharpens the contrast between early, middle, later, and recent efforts at visual branding. The people crafting ads in the 1950s were not the same individuals as those crafting ads in the 1980s or the 1920s.

Throughout, we primarily sample from leading magazines directed at women, such as the *Ladies Home Journal* or *Good Housekeeping*, supported in the early years by examples from competitive publications mostly now forgotten. We stick to a restricted sample of products as well, again with the goal of capturing what changed and what did not. The American economy grew enormously over the period. There were also changes in printing technology and the economics of magazine production, such as the advent of color photography, and a sustained decline in the costs of color reproduction. Entire new product categories, the fruits of technological innovation, came into being. These external factors are acknowledged, but are not our primary concern. We want to know why color photography replaced color illustration, once technological and economic developments permitted. The focus is on what ad designers could do with color photography, and later with computer graphics software, once these tools were in hand.
After the initial broad brush survey, Chapter 2 reproduces and comments upon selected ads from each period. By the close of the chapter, the reader will have seen copious examples of visual branding, early and late, and be able to grasp viscerally and immediately how visual branding has changed over the past century.

Next, the chapters in Part II focus on the brand’s trademark or logo, seen in more conventional treatments as the central element in visual branding, but here presented as only one aspect. Chapter 3 introduces a rhetorical typology of brand marks. We distinguish six possibilities for arranging verbal and visual elements to construct a mark. Chapter 4 establishes how type of brand mark varies systematically with product category, and explores the implications. Chapter 5 discusses the evolution of brand marks over time.

In Part III, we examine other major devices used for visual branding. Chapter 6 examines typeface, Chapter 7 discusses spokes-characters, Chapter 8 explores color, and Chapter 9 reviews pictorial style. These chapters emphasize history less, and rhetorical analysis more, in part because historical discussion of these elements is woven through earlier chapters. The Epilogue returns to the conceptual issues broached in this Introduction.

NOTE ON STYLE, TONE, AND APPROACH

The tone is more relaxed than a journal article. The tie is loosened, slacks replace the suit, the arm drapes over the chair and gestures. We try to avoid the hedged and bland. Our commentary is more critical than would be allowed in a peer-reviewed journal article. McQuarrie has retired from university teaching and Phillips holds an endowed chair. We feel free to be blunt.

In terms of reference style, there are endnotes and a References section. In text and in the notes, we use the author (year) style of citation. In text, we strive to cite only protagonists, people such as Marchand (1985) or Pollay (1985), whose work is foundational, and to whom we must refer more than once. When we want to direct the reader to the literature on the topic, or provide background, we pack multiple author (year) citations into an endnote, in an effort not to litter the text with these citations. All the citations, whether in-text or in the notes, can be found in the References.
AUDIENCE

Although we dream of being read widely, by anyone interested in brands, advertising, or visual design, in our sober moments we target a more narrow audience: young scholars. The highest and best use of the book is to have it assigned as reading in a graduate seminar. That seminar will probably be offered in a school of business, but may be offered in a school of communication, a school of design, or even in a history department. A good seminar reading is provocative. It adopts one perspective, which clashes with other perspectives also assigned. The diverse portfolio of seminar readings sets up an illuminating discussion.

A seminar reading may be contrasted with a textbook intended for a survey course. Textbooks have to give equal weight to all currently accepted perspectives, and to provide magisterial coverage for everything collectively considered important. Textbooks are expected to be comprehensive, and to address a topic large enough to justify a 15-week course. Branding might meet that breadth standard; marketing, advertising, and consumer psychology surely do; but visual branding, not so much. A seminar reading is free to narrow its coverage, and be more idiosyncratic in its treatment of controversial questions. It will be combined with other readings, and its student readers will be advanced. A seminar reading can attack; it can drill deep deep down; it can take one approach and push it to the hilt, without looking over its shoulder at bystanders, clucking that the authors skimped on this and glossed over that. A seminar reading is liberating to write.

Our second audience is the practical men and women engaged in visual branding at their day jobs. We don't presume to give brand managers or art directors advice about how to brand; this book is a work of scholarship. But we do think that experienced practitioners might benefit from understanding the history of how they earn their daily bread. And we believe a rhetorical analysis of the space of possibilities for visual branding may be fruitful, again in the hands of a veteran, who has a moment of leisure to reflect on what works and why. That practitioner is ill-served by current academic accounts, which remain in thrall to a defunct psychological apparatus.

Because the audience spans disciplines, and stretches outside academia, we have tried to unburden the main text of most references, attempted to avoid statistical esoterica in-text, and minimized jargon. Endnotes provide expansions where needed; our target audience of young scholars includes assistant professors, out to make their own mark in one of these topic areas, and we owe them the extra background and technical information that notes supply.
Last, we’ve provided a companion website at https://www.e-elgar.com/visual-branding-companion-site. This site contains 20 additional reproductions of ads, with these figures marked in-text by a WA prefix. The site also contains a bonus chapter, useful to instructors and students, describing possible research projects. The suggested projects give pointers for work designed to challenge or extend the findings we report.