



Merchandising

► by Keith Evans

Win or lose with your ad illustrations

The never-ending battle for effective advertising — that attracts more readers per dollar invested — is usually won or lost by the ad illustration.

Attention grabbers

Nothing grabs the attention or piques the interest of magazine readers better than an attractive, dramatic picture. Strong, benefit-laden headlines are a vital part of any advertisement. But the headline is quickly overlooked unless it is paired with an eye-grabbing illustration.

I don't like most automobile advertising. In my opinion car ads are some of the duller in the business. For the life of me I can't, as I write this column, associate a single automobile advertisement with a brand name. Whether on TV or in magazines, new car ads look too much alike.

Auto ad illustrations are virtually all photographed on wet roads. The car zooms along a scenic, rural highway, being driven at high speeds by attractive young people. Never mind that most cars are driven in stop-and-go city traffic. In ads for sport-utility vehicles (SUVs), each vehicle is shown climbing hills or plowing through mud or snow, driven by attractive drivers. But we know that most SUV owners seldom, if ever, drive under these conditions. It is hard to distinguish one car advertiser from another. To make matters worse, most brands of cars and SUVs also look very much alike.

Are you guilty?

Some advertising people have argued that ads for registered bulls commit these same sins. Virtually every bull or female illustration has the animal posed alone in a pasture and photographed from the side. The front legs are usually close together with the rear leg closest to the camera set back. The head is up, sometimes showing evidence that a bull was posed with a nose ring and strap that was edited out when the ad was produced. It is a fact that not all bulls of a single breed look exactly alike, but the good ones appear to be very similar. What's more, it is the business of the standard livestock photographer to make them all look alike, because that seems to be what herd owners and advertisers want — or think they do.

In the December 2003 edition of a popular breed association publication, there are 161 of these standard photographs of bulls and females. There were 10 in a single one-page ad. Numerous ads had four to seven standard photo illustrations on a page. It is hard to distinguish one from another. Talk about boring — the auto people have nothing on us.

A successful illustration must set the ad apart from its competitors. It should grab the reader's attention immediately and make him or her anxious to learn more. It should be dramatic, not static. The illustration should show action, or implied action. It should involve the reader's self interest, and, if possible, demonstrate the product. But not a single ad in the magazine accomplished all this. Most failed on all counts.

One ad that used a standard photo as the main illustration managed to do fairly well. The photo of the featured bull was done very well. The photographer had snapped the shutter when the bull appeared to be looking at a female and was about to move in her direction. The headline implored, "Look at BigJack (not his real name) from any angle." Along with the main illustration there was a rear view of the bull grazing in a pasture, and a conventional photo of one of BigJack's top-selling daughters. In addition, the ad featured a copy block that told more about BigJack and his offspring. The ad plan worked fairly well, even with its conventional photography.

I've learned throughout the years, mostly from great advertising artists, photographers and copywriters, that it is possible to add drama and action to beef cattle advertising illustrations. Picturing photos of animals on the move, or about to move, can accomplish this. Photographing from a different angle adds interest. A low shot from the front or the back can be very dramatic. If the bull

must be shown in a standard photo, it can be used as a smaller, second photo further down in the ad.

One of the really great livestock illustrations for a breed of bulls didn't include a bull at all. It featured a great-looking crossbred calf that showed his sire's heritage, standing in front of his less than desirable mother, who looked protectively over the calf's back, directly at the photographer. Most bull customers sell calves or yearlings. Advertising the end product can show real benefits and be more effective in attracting readers than showing a standard side view of the sire of the bulls that are for sale.

Human interest

People are interesting. Research shows that close-up photos of people in ads attract high readership. A dramatic close-up picture of a customer who testifies to the value of a breeder's seedstock can sell bulls without ever showing one. But a snapshot of the satisfied customer won't do, the

picture must be lighted and staged by a professional.

Most people don't like to promote themselves too aggressively. They get embarrassed. However, buyers are interested in the person or the family that is responsible for producing the seedstock they might want to buy. The people who design and guarantee a breeding program can be more interesting and eye-catching than an ad with a standard bull photo. It would be a unique illustration in today's beef cattle books.

True, producing dramatic, eye-stopping photos is difficult. I have spent two days or more with a photographer just to come up with one usable ad photo. I personally have traveled halfway across the country to take a photo for an ad and a promotional piece, only to arrive home empty-handed. On the other hand, I have had many extremely productive days taking photos and working with photographers who know their business and who won't settle for average or standard.

Advertising is a costly investment at best and nearly a waste at worst. Because of this, ad illustrations that force more potential customers to stop and read the sales message are a sound investment.

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