

Looking Good Imagery In Publicity

Speakers: **Seamus Concannon, designer with Creative Emergency Service**
Joyce Morgan, arts editor, Sydney Morning Herald
Antonia Seymour, Sydney Dance Company

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By Tracy Ellis

SAMAG's July seminar was conceived to examine the role of effective imagery when developing a successful communications strategy. To explore this topic, **SAMAG** brought together three industry professionals: a designer, an arts editor and an arts administrator, to offer different perspectives on devising a successful visual campaign to promote your cultural product.

How can a key image or “hero shot” be added to your unique style, brand and message to manipulate the marketplace or, in short, how does imagery lead to sales?

Freelance art director **Seamus Concannon** thinks he knows the answer. “One of the things I’m going to show you,” he says confidently, “is how to make money.”

A designer with over 15 years' experience, Concannon has worked for several high-profile advertising agencies and has tutored at the University of Western Sydney. When Concannon did his study in typographic design back in 1978-79, the technology was very different but many of the basic design principles still apply.

“Besides putting things into press and posters there are other ways of getting to your audience,” says Concannon, and he repeatedly stresses the importance of “clarity” and “emotional savvy” – using lateral thinking to find a way to your target audience’s hearts and minds.

Concannon showed several examples of many campaigns he had worked on, even including some unsuccessful ones to share the lessons of his mistakes. For instance, a striking and humorous campaign for Acuvue contact lenses was ultimately unsuccessful because the accompanying text and the product placement within the design was too small to be read by anyone who needed glasses or contact lenses.

A cute campaign for a personal trainer, that featured a muscle-bound torso with inflatable attachments photo-shopped in to replace the nipples, won awards all around the world, “but Dale [the personal trainer] only got a few phone calls out of it,” admits Concannon.

Concannon points out that your logo and branding has to be strong enough to withstand the toughest environments, such as a six-point font size in black and white news print on a page surrounded by other advertisements competing for attention.

He illustrated the importance of marrying a good image to a good slogan with some very effective posters he designed for the Taxi Club, a late-night bar in Darlinghurst famous for its clientele of transsexuals and drag queens. One ad, a stylish black and white shot reminiscent of old Hollywood and featuring a glamorous tranny seductively holding a feather duster, had the slogan, “Now there’s less of the slap and more of the tickle”, reflecting the club’s makeover as a more upmarket establishment.

Joyce Morgan has specialised in arts journalism for more than a decade and has also worked for **The Australian, ABC Radio**, and as a journalist in London, Hong Kong and Sydney, and recently returned from a year in the US as a recipient of a **Getty Fellowship** for arts journalism.

As arts editor of the **Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)** Morgan says that she is constantly “on the lookout for images that are not predictable, that are surprising”. Competition is very tight and she emphasises that her primary responsibility is to **SMH** readers. “My job isn’t to sell tickets to your shows.”

When approaching an arts subject for a feature she always has to ask, “what’s the story here and how can we illustrate it?”

“There is an emphasis on what we call ‘the mix’,” says Morgan, explaining that in the news pages, known in the trade as “front of book”, there is an effort to provide light and shade in the mix of stories and images. It is here that arts images can be imaginative and uplifting, “particularly the case for page three photographs,” she says.

They always prefers to shoot their own images for the **SMH**. “Very rarely will we use an image supplied by a performing arts company,” says Morgan. Occasionally they will use what she refers to as “stand-alone images” that can run with just a caption and no story, although this is more likely in the front of book and less likely in the cultural pages because, as she explains, “culture comes from conflict” and words are needed to give those “arts images context”.

“Some art forms do lend themselves more to images,” says Morgan. For example, music can be harder to illustrate. There are a lot of clichéd images, such as “a conductor on a podium waving a stick, looking slightly barking”.

Individual editors will also have their preferences. “I don’t like people pointing guns,” admits Morgan. Another pet hate is photographs with the subject in the distance. She likes to see faces and “see who they are”.

Always include basic information with your press images, such as captions, credits and a description of who or what is being photographed. “These things are important at the pressure of deadline,” she says.

Morgan shared some other dos and don’ts, such as: “Don’t send hi-res images. It can, and it has, brought my e-mail crashing down right on deadline.” It’s helpful for an editor to know there is an image available and she suggests a link to a website where they can be downloaded. Otherwise, forward images only on request or with permission. It is advisable to offer a selection of vertical and horizontal shots.

Inform the arts editor if there is a dress rehearsal or any other appropriate photo opportunity they can send a photographer to and be sure to accurately describe what the scenario will be.

Photographers need time to work so allow 20-30 minutes for a decent shoot. Some nightmares for photographers include “the handover”, or the cheque presentation; “the group shot”, where the photographer is supposed to fit everyone in; or being asked to include someone not of interest to the average reader, such as a sponsor or someone behind the scenes. Morgan cautions that while the photographer might concede for the sake of being polite, the shot may not make the paper.

It is also important to properly brief the subject and ensure that they are actually available and willing to be photographed, which might seem obvious but photographers are sometimes faced with subjects that either don’t like being photographed and “scowl all the way through the shoot,” or want power of veto over which shot is used. Morgan stresses that they do not give veto over images, just as they don’t give veto over editorial content.

She also suggests choosing appropriate locations when you have the opportunity to set up a shot and to think about where the shot is going to be seen. For instance, a shot of Pavarotti on the steps of the Sydney Opera House might work well in an Italian newspaper but is not special enough here, where Sydneysiders can see the Opera House every day.

And if you really want to get your foot in the door, “one of our favourite words is ‘exclusive’,” says Morgan. “It helps the chances if we know that we have that image to ourselves.”

The **Sydney Dance Company’s Antonia Seymour**, provided an effective imagery-in-publicity case study using examples of **SDC** campaigns from a number of shows.

Unlike many other companies, the **SDC** only creates one new work each year. “You’re only in the marketplace for a short time,” explains Seymour, “and spend the rest of the time touring, nationally and internationally.”

The **SDC** also has a diverse audience base that might only attend one in three productions, so the company does a lot of research into their own imagery and develops their primary branding to reflect each show “as opposed to the company”.

They conduct extensive audience research every five years and a commonly expressed response is a love of artistic director Graeme Murphy’s production values and “an expectation to expect the unexpected,” says Seymour.

One problem, says Seymour, is that the imagery “has to be created four to six months before Graeme has even choreographed anything,” and the audience often expects to see a show featuring the exact dancers and imagery from the poster.

Seymour guided the **SAMAG** audience through a range of production posters used to promote various **SDC** works. They can be viewed on the poster gallery of the SDC website: sydneydancecompany.com.

It was interesting to learn the background to many of the images: **Mythologia** took three days to shoot; **Underland** was shot by acclaimed Australian photographer Bill Henson; **Free Radicals** was shot by New York photographer Lois Greenfield, famed for her high-precision, mid-air photography; **Air** was an underwater shoot and **Ellipse** turned out to be a campaign that couldn’t be used in the US because it featured naked buttocks.

With bold images as their primary marketing device and a program of regular audience research, the SDC has been able to reach some interesting conclusions about imagery in publicity. In one survey they asked the audience to compare two prominent **SDC** campaigns, **Air** and **Underland**.

Air, shot underwater to evoke an anti-gravity environment, depicts a poetic and dreamy body, swathed in silk and floating in space and the general consensus was that the image was “beautiful and complete,” says Antonia, but that it “gave away everything,” while the Bill Henson image for **Underland**, which is dark and moody, depicting a body that is hard to make out in entirety, against a blurry night-time cityscape, was considered to be intriguing, engaging and mysterious, and ultimately, more effective for the questions it left unanswered.

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