

TO: Scott Baber, designer, *her* magazine

FROM: Karen Hunley

DATE: Jan. 23, 2009

SUBJECT: Rhetorical analysis of *her* design

The purpose of this memo is to analyze the effectiveness of the typography, layout, and other design features of *her* magazine. I will evaluate the design elements of specific parts of the magazine and offer suggestions for improvement, focusing on the May 2008 issue and recognizing that many design choices are consistent across issues.

Magazine cover

As you know, appropriate design of a magazine cover is essential to establish an initial connection with the intended audience. If it does not engage their interest, they will not consider the publication's value beyond that point. In the case of *her* magazine's 2008 issue, I think the cover adequately draws the attention of the intended audience – women – but it could do more to command their attention. Even if a woman had never heard of or read the magazine, she would immediately recognize it was geared toward her, specifically a woman from a middle- to upper-middle-class background who embodies many of the culturally defining characteristics of women – feminine, fashion-conscious, nurturing, to name a few. While it contains just 15 words, the cover communicates a variety of messages to this audience through design rhetoric. As Ehses and Lupton state in their manual *Rhetorical Handbook*, “the effectiveness of a rhetorical design methodology depends on the use of symbols and patterns which are familiar and alive for a given audience. When an image is able to communicate a message without the aid of a lengthy verbal key, its meaning is nonetheless socially determined” (6). The name of the magazine alone no doubt suggests that it targets women, but there is more to the cover that may persuade a certain type of woman.

To begin with, the script font used for the magazine's name is automatically associated with femininity, yet the added pizzazz of the “swingdancer” font would specifically reach a young to middle-aged, conservative female audience. The cover photo assumes that the audience is interested in feminine details, especially when paired with the story that is teased, or highlighted, most noticeably on the cover. “Designing women” is placed in a thick, large, sans serif font that brings to life its background of a sophisticated woman set in an ultra-feminine bedroom. Based on this context, the reader can assume that the teased story is about interior design. These graphic design decisions would connect with the *her* audience through the rhetorical appeal ethos, which aims to “delight or win over ... referring to the finer emotions of sensibility, taste, and philosophical belief” (Ehses and Lupton, 7). The cover design also uses pathos, or the appeal to emotion, by showing a friendly looking dog nestled next to the woman. Just as stories about animals often invoke strong emotions, pictures of them can tug the heartstrings as well. This pairing of a woman and dog would also draw women who are inclined to nurture, another likely characteristic of this traditional, slightly older female audience. Overall, font and graphics merge to create a cover that is identifiable and appealing to the intended readers. Very liberal women or those who do not consider themselves feminine would probably not be drawn to this publication.

However, I think there are ways that the cover design could more effectively grab the audience's attention. The contrast of text and background on this particular cover is not as strong as it could be. The white font of the name of the magazine and featured headline is large, but it does not jump out at the reader. The headline, especially, fades into the soft, neutral-colored background. The shadow on the white letters helps it stand out but does not aid enough in grabbing the reader's attention and piquing her interest in *her*. Perhaps the color of the text, or even the background, could have been rethought to provide sharper contrast, or maybe a trope used on the word "designing" could have helped the reader "see" the content of the article before she even opened the magazine. This word in particular has much potential in that you, the graphic artist, could "design" the word just as a woman reading it in this context could "design" the interior of a home. The trope amplification, which exaggerates elements of letters for rhetorical purposes, would have nicely fit the intended meaning of "designing."

Table of contents

While some elements of the table of contents make it – and, as a result, the magazine – navigable, I also see ways it could be improved. For instance, the large picture of the dolled-up dog at the top of the contents is a rhetorically persuasive way to generate interest in the article with which it coincides, but there is no page number beside the picture indicating where the article can be found or any easily distinguishable hint that there *is* an actual article or feature photo that goes with this picture. The reader must scan the table of contents to find the "canine couture" feature. Even though there is a small teaser for the article on the cover, the size of font and, again, the lack of contrast between the text and background could cause it to be easily overlooked.

On that note, if this or a couple other headlines ("The Skinny on Skin Cancer and "Tales of Motherhood") on the cover did pique a reader's interest, she would not be able to easily pick out those titles on the table of contents page, as they are not differentiated from the rest of the articles. You would not find their page numbers unless you scanned the list from top to bottom. I would recommend that the headlines that appear under "Features" with the other two articles, and, further, that the "Features" listing be treated specially. Positioning the featured articles at the beginning of the table of contents instead of at the end would help the readers "see" the special quality of these articles; you would be directing readers' attention where you wanted it instead of encouraging them to scan the table of contents looking for an article that sparks interest. You could also place the featured article titles/page numbers in a different font from the rest of the listing, or place them a colored box that would effectively contrast with the white page. Through this rhetorical placement and design, you would be informing them what articles are most interesting.

I do think that separating the table of contents with the *her* logo and the category of the following article(s) is a good use of repetition, or a way for the audience to unify the elements on the page. But, again, I would recommend making the logo/category combination more user-oriented by placing the headings in a slightly larger font, leaving them bolded. Readers could quickly find subjects, or "departments" that most interest them.

Article headlines and page headers

I was able to identify effective use of rhetorical figures and appeals within article headlines. The typography of the "Canine Couture" headline, for example, uses a metaphor to convey its

message and merge the text with the photo background. The font's slant and two tones of pink make it both flashy and feminine, often the same characteristics of something considered "couture." A star is also used for the "i" in "canine," telling the reader that the photo spread following this headline is special, "star" quality, just like couture fashions you would see on the runway. The slanted headline, which looks like it's in motion, could also be a metaphor for the toy car in the photo. Also, this dynamic combination of photo and text could excite the reader, encouraging her to flip the page to see what's next and, thus, giving the layout an emotional appeal, or pathos.

The tone that the next article sets forth through headline typography and layout is quite different. Instead of conjuring feelings of fun and excitement, the "Designing Women" graphic choices give the reader confidence in the content of the related article. You take a more sophisticated design approach, using softer background colors and photos of professional interior designers (obvious by their poses or actions in the photograph). It contains ethos by "invoking trust and respect, asking one to identify with a product or idea" (Ehres and Lupton, 14). The headline connects with the rest of the layout, projecting femininity and sophistication through amplified typography.

The same style of headers that appear for all non-feature stories is a good use of repetition, helping the reader distinguish between "department" and "feature articles." However, the headers seem either too integrated or disconnected from their articles in some instances. On page 5, for example, the header blends in too much with the photo, causing the reader to nearly mistake the entire illustration for an advertisement and skip over it. It can be effective to match header color with the photo and/or background, but in this case, it downplays the page. Readers may miss the intended design cue to stop and take notice. I spotted a similar problem on page 40, where I think the header is too discrete to compensate for no other headline. In fact, the advertisements on the bottom command the page more than the article and small photo – the reader would likely skip ahead to another article. In these instances, it may help to increase the size of the logo within the header (like on page 4) and the font used for the name of the department to set apart the header from the article yet assure the reader it is part of the editorial package and not an advertisement..

I hope you find my suggestions for the *her* magazine cover, table of contents, headers, and headlines useful. Many design elements you already have in place should help your audience connect with the magazine content.