



PICTURES THAT SYMBOLIZE BELIEFS, IDEAS, AND THEMES

Images & Metaideas



Background

How A Research Project For A Newspaper Used The Power Of Pictures To Get A Read On Their Future.

Within pictures there are “METAIDEAS” which gives the image its power. The stronger the image the more compelling the metaideas held within it. I learned this first hand while working on a research project for USA Today in spring 1999.

TOM CURLEY, then publisher of USA Today, was looking ahead five years and needed to understand how people’s needs for news and information might change. He charged his VP of Marketing, MELISSA SYNDER, to outline the critical questions and then direct brand research to find the answers. I met with MELISSA, LISA DUBOSE, a savvy writer colleague of mine, and CHRIS WRIGHT-ISAK who would design the research, together we framed out some initial questions. What is news? What is information? How do people feel about digital news vs. the paper? What is the future role of a news organization?

In June we agreed to touch down in six key cities to do qualitative research. We knew that we needed to speak to a diverse set of people in our focus groups. The question now became; “WHAT WOULD WE USE AS STIMULI IN THESE GROUPS ?”

I proposed non-verbal stimuli that would use the power of photo images to spur conversations in the focus groups. Photo “METAIMAGES” that symbolized ideas such as family, country, nature, freedom, money. etc. I went looking for a wide array of diverse pictures that would open up the field in which we would ask the questions, “What news and information is important in your life?” What news do you need? What news

do you want? What kind of information is helpful? What media do you want to receive your news/information in? Why?

We were asking these questions in the context of American culture and life. The images that I selected ran the gamut from familiar, poignant, relevant, beautiful, even mundane. I also brought in images from a more global perspective such as war, conflict, spirituality, that pointed to our larger human experience. I pulled pictures from many different sources and ended up with around a hundred that we culled down to a picture pod of around sixty. This became the ARCHIVE OF VISUAL TOUCHSTONES that we exposed, in all six cities, for people to connect to and ponder over.

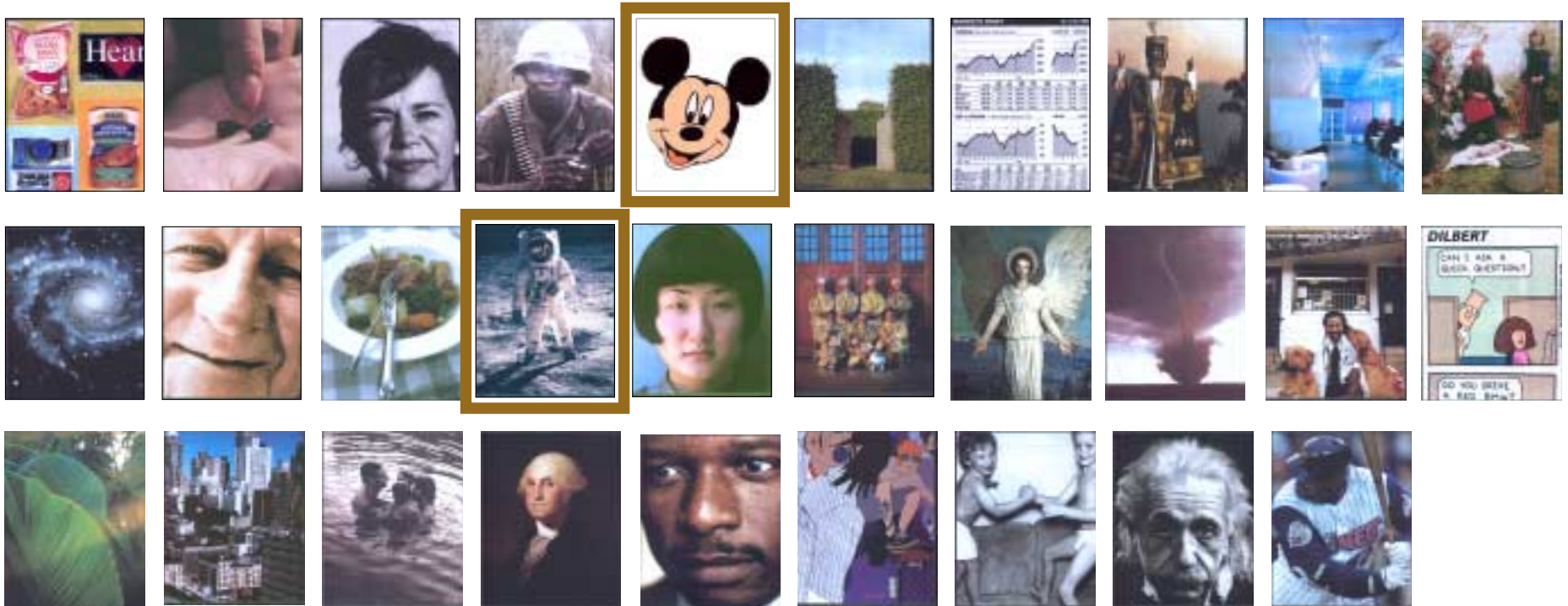
By designing the research stimuli using images we were able to get to genuine conversations on what news and information people really needed to navigate their increasingly smaller yet more complex world. Women specifically spoke about the need for more news that went below the surface to reveal more of the reasons behind events. Conversations evolved into a richer understanding of the distinct ways that people engaged with the on stand and online news. The images on the walls of the focus groups worked to uncover real data.

In September of 1999 we presented to USA Today, in their Arlington, VA office, a rich research document that offered concrete insights into peoples habits, beliefs, needs and feelings about news and information in their world.



Metaideas. Ideas Behind Pictures

(A pictures worth a thousand words because of metaideas held within it.)

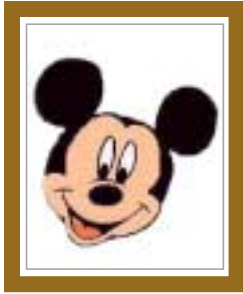


The pictures above are a sample of the ones we used in the USA Today focus groups. They symbolize [Love](#), [Innocence](#), [Joy](#), [Hope](#), [Fear](#), [Pain](#), [Divinity](#), [Humor](#), [Hate](#), [Wonder](#), [Grief](#), [Pride](#), and other human experiences. Watching how people responded to the pictures in the focus groups expanded my awareness of the power of a single image. The power of any image is all the beliefs, or metaideas, behind the image.

Consider the framed images of Mickey Mouse and Buzz Aldrin standing on the moon in 1969.
[What are the powerful metaideas within these images?](#)

Mickey Mouse

(A national icon symbolizing American innocence)



Picture:
Mickey Mouse
Walt Disney



Metaideas within the image:
Innocence, Goodness, Joy, Fun

Bob Greene the famous Chicago newspaper columnist says,

“Mickey Mouse is the quintessential symbol of innocence. Subliminally, he represents a lot of things we've lost. He represents how things used to be simple and fun and free of darkness. If there's a more poignant symbol, I don't know what it is.”

The face of Mickey Mouse is especially touching in a post 9/11 world. Mickey will always symbolize more innocent times when “Gosh” and “Oh, boy” were adequate responses to the life's challenges.

Man On The Moon

(A universal image because of the metaideas it represents to humanity)



Picture:
Buzz Aldrin on the moon
1969



Metaideas within the image:
Humanity, Wonder, Exploration, Awe, Pride

Although this event took place in 1969 it remains to be a powerful, timeless image. It was the United States that put the “man on the moon” however the event was so large it became nationless. A human figure carved on a wall of a cave and an astronaut standing on the surface of the moon both symbolize the human story. Our need to dream, to explore, to venture into the unknown is a universal theme that has played out again and again throughout time.

While gazing at the landscape of the moon with Buzz Aldrin said, “**Beautiful! Beautiful! Magnificent desolation.**” This is one expression from a long chain of human explorers. The image powerfully symbolizes this unending quest.

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