Visual communication in consumer journalism: The supra-textual design of *Consumer* magazine in New Zealand

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Abstract

*Supra-textual design theory can be used to understand the manner in which a document communicates visually to its readers, that is to say, to understand the document’s visual rhetoric. This article uses supra-textual design theory to reveal the visual rhetoric of a highly successful and influential New Zealand consumer-rights magazine, Consumer.*

In part, *Consumer*’s visual appearance mimics other magazines, but in several important ways the magazine’s visual design is in marked contrast to other magazines. The overall effect is to present *Consumer* as a readable, yet scientific and comprehensive, magazine.

*Consumer* visually communicates a profound message to its readers: that *Consumer* should be read and its information relied upon. By transmitting this message visually and repeatedly, *Consumer*’s readers may be more likely to accept it without question, surely the objective of all rhetoric.

Keywords

Supra-textual design, visual rhetoric, consumer journalism, *Consumer*.

Introduction

There are a range of writing techniques that can be employed to make text as comprehensible, enjoyable and influential as possible (for instance, Bryson, 2001; Strunk, White & Kalman., 2005; Truss, 2003; Williams, 2002). But to focus solely on these elements is to ignore the role played by the visual aspects of the text. The visual appearance of a document will help determine whether the document is read. It is easy to overlook these visual elements or to dismiss them as peripheral, but collectively they form the publication’s visual rhetoric,
intended to produce an instinctive response in the reader (Kostelnick, 1996; Kostelnick & Hassett, 2003).

In turn, although analyses of visual communication frequently use semiotics as the basis for study (for instance, Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; McAuley 2006), this paper uses the less commonly encountered theory of supra-textual design (discussed below). This is done to demonstrate a different way of analysing visual communication, revealing fresh insights into how visuals can be discussed.

Supra-textual design theory is used to identify the visual techniques used by Consumer, a New Zealand consumer-rights magazine, to transmit its message to readers. Consumer journalism is considered in this article because of the marked popularity and influence of this form of journalism. Internationally, consumer journalism has had a long and successful career. In the United States, for instance, books such as Upton Sinclair’s book The Jungle (1906), which exposed unsanitary conditions in the meatpacking industry, and Ralph Nader’s Unsafe at Any Speed (1965), which questioned the automotive industry’s commitment to health and safety, were national bestsellers and influenced government policy (Hannis, 2002). Today, consumer magazines—such as Consumer Reports in the United States and Which? in the United Kingdom—have large readerships and are regarded as national institutions (Chatriot, Chessel & Hilton, 2006).

Consumer journalism champions consumer rights, including the right to be protected from unsafe products, the right to information to make informed choices, and the right to be protected from the detrimental effects of monopolies and cartels (United Nations, 2003). This, no doubt, has contributed to the success of consumer journalism—we are all consumers, after all. But it would be wrong to assume consumer journalism is successful simply because of some inherent appeal. Consider Consumer magazine in New Zealand. Published monthly by the not-for-profit incorporated society Consumer NZ, Consumer has certainly enjoyed long-term popularity. First appearing in 1959, in 2007 Consumer had an estimated readership of 230,000, making it the nineteenth most-read magazine in the country (Anonymous, 2008; AGB Nielsen Media Research, 2008, AGB Nielsen reports results for 77 magazines, excluding giveaways).

The magazine’s contemporary success and influence is widely acknowledged. In May 2008 Consumer won best trade professional magazine at the Qantas Media Awards, the country’s leading print-journalism prizes (Qantas Media Awards, 2008). When the long-time chief executive of Consumer, David Russell, recently resigned from the organisation, the
government made him a Companion of the Queen’s Service Order for community service and New Zealand’s Massey University awarded him an honorary doctorate in commerce (Allen, 2007; Anonymous, 2008). During his time at Consumer, Russell became widely recognised in New Zealand, due to his frequent appearances on television and newspapers, commenting on consumer issues. Indeed, Massey University described Russell as “the national face of consumers’ rights…widely acknowledged as a driving force in the changes and development of consumer protection law” (Anonymous, 2008, p. 4).

One aspect in Consumer’s strategy to succeed in this competitive media environment is the visual appearance of the magazine. As David Russell declared when Consumer was redesigned in 2006: “[T]he look of the magazine is important” (Russell, 2006, p. 2). This article begins by deriving from the theoretical literature an analytical lens with which to consider Consumer’s visual rhetoric. The article then describes the research method, analyses the visual communication elements of the magazine, and presents the conclusions.

The literature

Metadiscourse is the name given to various textual and interpersonal elements writers use to impart ideas to their readers. It is a rhetorical practice used by writers to explain what they are saying, identify their intentions, and assist their readers grasp the meaning of their texts (Vande Kopple, 2002). Textual elements include connectives, such as the use of explicit sequences (for example: first, second, third) and references to other parts of the text (for example, as previously mentioned) and code glosses, including explanations and clarifications (including in other words, defined as).

But whereas such devices are part of the text itself, the relationship between the author of a document and the reader begins before the reader reads a word (Bernanke, 2005). The visual features of the document can determine whether the reader will make the effort to read the text. These visual features can be regarded as a visual metadiscourse, giving the textual information shape and structure.

Scholars have identified three main factors to consider in order to clearly communicate visually with readers. The first is to make a good first impression that fulfils the reader’s visual expectations (Shriver, 1997). Readers often regard reading as a chore and will only read as far as they feel they need to. So, if the reader forms an initially poor impression of a document, they are less likely to read it. Kumpf (2000) notes that in deciding whether to read a document a prospective reader will consider its “heft” (Kumpf, 2000, p. 407). A document
that is inappropriately hefty may not be read. For instance, a reader would expect the instructions for the construction of a kitset wheelbarrow to be only a few pages long. Confronted with a 20-page instruction book, the reader may simply decide to construct the wheelbarrow by trial and error, rather than read such an inappropriately long document to learn how to undertake such a comparatively simple task.

The physicality of the document is also relevant. A reader expects the physical nature of a document to match the intention of the document. It has long been accepted that, generally speaking, writers and publishers should use the highest production values for their documents that they can afford (Weiss, 1982). For example, assume a firm wishes its representatives to be perceived as professional people working for a well-resourced, professional organisation. It is likely the firm would ensure the business cards used by its representatives are produced on sturdy cardboard, perhaps with raised text and design features.

The second factor is to present the ideas in a clear and coherent visual style (Moore and Fitz, 1993). An important aspect of this is the external skeleton of the document (including the table of contents, page numbering, headings, and headers and footers). Many readers skim documents, looking for indicators as to how much time and attention they need to devote to reading. The external skeleton quickly shows the reader how the document is assembled, helping the reader to find the material they want to read, thereby encouraging them to read (Kumpf, 2000; Souther, 1962).

In the document proper, information must be arranged clearly and concisely across the page, grouping different types of information in easily differentiated units, demarcated with blank space (Kostelnick & Roberts, 1998). The balance between the text and the space should be appealing to the eye. Chunking is a term used in graphic design to denote the grouping of related information together. Chunking prevents text looking too dense and makes it easier to distinguish different ideas in a document. Information is grouped into words, sentences, paragraphs and sections, and blank space separates the various chunks. Information can be presented as text, lists, tables, break-out quotes, case studies, etc. It can also be grouped using headings, subheadings, different typefaces, borders, shading, etc. This allows the reader to absorb information in the document and then prepare for more information as they proceed further into it.

The third factor is to use visual material to present an appropriate authorial personality to the reader (Kostelnick, 1998). The visual appearance of the document can indicate to the reader the personality of its writer. Care must be used to ensure the document’s visual appearance
indicates an appropriate personality. For instance, educated readers expect designers of quality publications to produce professional graphical images and not to fall into certain obvious traps, such as producing misleading graphs or using poor graphical design. If there is too much extraneous material included in a graph, for example, this can result in a graph that one design theorist terms “chartjunk” (Tufte, 1983, p. 107).

Similarly, readers will be more likely to read a document that conforms to the form or conventions expected of it (Kostelnick & Roberts, 1998). For instance, a document that is laid out as a memo but reads like a personal letter will confuse and distance the potential reader. The reader may even question the competence and trustworthiness of the writer of such a document. The overall visual look must also strike the same tone as the text. Intellectually demanding text that is presented within a visually garish context of borders, lines and boxes would be jarring to the reader. The effect would be “much like viewing a reading of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* given by a cartoon character” (Kumpf, 2000, p. 404).

These three factors—making a good first impression that fulfils the reader’s visual expectations, presenting a clear and coherent visual style, and presenting the appropriate authorial personality—work together to create the supra-textual design of a document (Kostelnick, 1996). The supra-textual design governs the reader’s initial engagement with the document and, once engaged, works with the rhetoric of the text to give the reader a consistent whole. Supra-textual design operates in three ways or modes: textual, graphical and spatial. The textual mode covers the signals imparted by the text itself, including the title of the document, subheadings and page footers. The graphical elements include the use of boxes, page colouring, and charts. The spatial mode covers the physicality of the document, including such factors as its size, the thickness and shape of the pages, and how the pages are bound together (staples, ring binder, etc.). All three modes must work in concert. Consider text that is intended to be distributed to farmers at a convention. The best supra-textual design for such text may be to present the information in a few short sentences and bullet points (textual), coupled with a striking logo (graphical), on a mini-brochure that can be folded up and placed in the pocket (spatial).

A document’s supra-textual design is usually conceived by a group of people. For example, the supra-textual design of a magazine may be devised by the magazine’s designer, along with its editor, senior management and suggestions from individual authors. Despite so many people being involved in this process (or, perhaps, because of it) the supra-textual design of a document may not always work as intended. For instance, colour tabs inserted into an engineer’s monthly report may engender a positive response from readers (that the document
appears professional and information easy to access) or a negative response (that the writer is extravagant or obsessively well organised). Further, supra-textual design may need to be altered over time (De Vries, 2008). The persistent use of the same supra-textual design in a periodical can create a strong identity for a series of documents, but “the very act of repetition can induce readers to take supra-textual design for granted as well as diminish the impetus for innovation” (Kostelnick, 1996, p. 31). As such, changes in a document’s supra-textual design over time may be revealing.

Finally, the creator(s) of a document’s supra-textual design must remain aware of the cultural context of their design. Images that resonant with readers in fundamental ways may also have greater impact on them. For instance, as part of its effort to discredit the second Iraq War, a Greek newspaper ran a photograph on its front page of a badly wounded Iraqi boy. Although a powerful image in itself, the photograph’s impact on the viewer was heightened by the fact it paralleled an image of the crucified Christ used by the Greek Orthodox Church (Konstantinidou, 2008). Similarly, Blair (2004) cites a US television political advertisement for the presidential incumbent, broadcast during the Cold War. The advertisement did not mention the president’s challenger, but by using the image of a child picking flowers followed by that of a mushroom cloud suggested that the challenger was a trigger-happy warmonger. The Cold War climate helped create this resonance in readers, the visual argument leaving gaps in the argument for viewers to fill in themselves. The designer must therefore “anticipate visual associations readers have with certain symbols” (Kostelnick & Hassett, 2003, p. 115).

Likewise, analysing the supra-textual design of similar documents can shed light on the document we are interested in. When it first appeared, the supra-textual design of American newspaper *USA Today* was sufficiently different to that of conventional newspapers to indicate that the newspaper was less serious in its approach, but was sufficiently similar to that of conventional newspapers to indicate it was still a newspaper. Designers may therefore mimic or contrast their images with those found elsewhere, “like charts and graphs in popular publications that are embellished with pictorial elements” (Kostelnick & Hassett, 2003, p. 55).

**Research method**

This article solely considers the hard-copy version of *Consumer* magazine; space constraints preclude an examination of *Consumer Online*. The three main elements of supra-textual design are considered in their three modes—textual, graphical and spatial.
The literature review above indicated that analysing changes in supra-textual design over time can be revealing. To that end, this article considers the supra-textual design techniques used in the issues of *Consumer* magazine published in the 10-year period June 1998 to May 2008 inclusive. Ten years is a sufficiently long period to detect the variety of techniques used in the magazine and assess how these techniques have evolved over time. Although analysis of the supra-textual design of all the issues of *Consumer* in the survey period is undertaken below, the focus of the study is on an illustrative selection of issues of *Consumer*, drawn from across the period analysed. This allows us to consider in detail the magazine’s supra-textual design.

The theoretical literature also emphasised the importance of a comparative approach when analysing supra-textual design. This analysis therefore compares and contrasts *Consumer*’s supra-textual design with that of a competing magazine, *North & South*. In many ways the magazines are similar. Both tend to publish articles of interest to a similar readership (middle-class New Zealanders), both are published monthly, and the price of both is similar—based on a one-year subscription, the price of an issue of *Consumer* is currently $7.18; the price of an issue of *North & South* over the counter is $7.50. But there are two marked differences between the publications: (1) whereas during the survey period *Consumer* was only available by mail order, *North & South* was also sold in shops; and (2) whereas *Consumer* does not publish paid advertising, *North & South* does. Analysing the visual similarities and differences between the two magazines helped bring the supra-textual design of *Consumer* into sharper focus. For comparative purposes, one issue of *North & South* is considered below, drawn from the middle of the survey period and featuring a major story also found in an edition of *Consumer* published around the same time.

Both *Consumer* and *North & South* are reproduced below courtesy of the copyright holders (Consumer NZ and ACP Magazines, respectively).

**Consumer’s supra-textual design**

*Reader’s visual expectations*

The primary role of supra-textual design in this regard is to help convince the reader that the document is worth reading. *Consumer* was solely posted to subscribers’ letterboxes in clear plastic wrappers, so the first thing the prospective reader would see was the front cover. *Consumer* therefore used its front cover to make a good first impression on the prospective reader. As the basis for discussion, Figure 1 depicts four front covers from across the period (*Consumer*, July, 1999, p 1; June, 2001, p. 1; October, 2006, p. 1; April, 2008, p. 1. Unless otherwise stated, all page references below refer to *Consumer*).
As Figure 1 testifies, the overall appearance of Consumer’s front covers has not changed markedly over the period. Theory suggests that this may be because Consumer is simply uncritically repeating its supra-textual design over time. However, as discussed below, other elements of the magazine’s supra-textual design have changed radically over the period, suggesting the magazine does regularly review its visual rhetoric and alters it if need be. If so, this implies the front cover of Consumer has remained effectively unchanged because this aspect of the magazine’s supra-textual design works effectively.

Figure 1 Front covers of four Consumer magazines (July, 1999, p. 1; June, 2001, p. 1; October, 2006, p. 1; April, 2008, p. 1).
Looking first at the textual mode, all four covers carry the name of the magazine (the masthead) in large bold letters at the top of the page. Off-the-shelf magazines (that is, magazines sold on bookshop racks to the general public) also frequently use a large masthead, as their titles need to be clearly visible to potential purchasers amid the visual noise of the other magazine covers on the shelf. As an example, Figure 2 depicts the front cover of an issue of *North & South* (March, 2001, p. 1).

As it was not sold off the shelf, *Consumer* did not need a masthead to cut through competing magazines on a bookshop rack. As such, *Consumer* therefore may not have needed a large masthead. It would appear *Consumer* had a large masthead because readers *expect* magazines to have large mastheads. In other words, in order to convince the reader to open the magazine, the masthead signalled to the reader that *Consumer* indeed *is* a magazine.

To reinforce this perception, the cover of each *Consumer* lists a range of stories contained within its pages. Each has a cover story—advertised in large print with an accompanying full-page illustration—plus a list of other stories in the magazine. For instance, in Figure 1A the cover story is about local government, and the list of other articles includes vacuum cleaners, pyramid-selling schemes, and fixed-interest investments. Off-the-shelf magazines use the same technique: the cover story stands out on the bookshop rack, and, having attracted the reader’s attention, the list of other articles helps convince the reader the magazine contains a lot of other interesting material. With the *North & South* cover, for example, there is a cover story, *Driving Blind* (an article about car safety), with three other stories listed. As a mail-order publication, *Consumer* did not need to do this. Nevertheless, all four *Consumer* covers
boast a cover story and list other stories in the magazine. Again, supra-textual design theory would suggest *Consumer* does this is because it is what readers expect of magazines.

But *Consumer* also uses the front cover to emphasise one essential point of difference between it and its competitors. *Consumer* is alone in publishing scientific tests of products. The four *Consumer* front covers in Figure 1 all list product tests, including vacuum cleaners and printers (Figure 1A), webcams and electric frypans (1B), digital cameras and three-wheel strollers (1C) and clothes dryers and digital camcorders (1D). In fact, the lists of articles on the covers of all 110 *Consumers* in the survey period each included at least two product tests—a monthly reminder to the reader about this distinctive characteristic of *Consumer*.

Looking at the graphical mode, the page-sized *Consumer* photographs on Figures 1A and 1D depict people. Indeed, looking at all 110 *Consumer* cover stories for the 10-year period under scrutiny, 66 (60 per cent) featured people. Of all the covers featuring people, 48 (73 per cent) featured people who were white (the remainder tended to be Māori) and appeared middle-class, and 55 (83 per cent) were younger people (that is, people aged 0 to approximately 40). This gives us a clue about *Consumer*’s target readership: *Consumer* is a magazine for young, white people, for it is largely they who stare out from its cover to engage the reader.

Regarding the spatial mode, *Consumer* is printed on glossy paper and in full colour. This is customary for magazines (*North & South* also uses glossy paper and colour photography), so again this fulfils the reader’s expectations. But the heft of the two publications is markedly different. Whereas the *North & South* issue is 124 pages long, the *Consumers* in the survey period were only 40-44 pages long. In part, at least, *North & South* is physically larger than *Consumer* simply because it carries advertising. Indeed, 13 pages of the *North & South* issue considered here are full-page advertisements. Inevitably, given its relative lack of pages, *Consumer* is flimsier than *North & South*. This may imply to the reader that *Consumer* is a more insubstantial document than *North & South*. *Consumer* is clearly aware of this potential problem—in an attempt to bulk up the size of *Consumer*, a few of the pages in each issue are printed on heavier-weighted paper than are the other pages. The effect is marginal, however, suggesting *Consumer* must also use other visual devices to avoid such invidious comparisons with off-the-shelf magazines. This covers all the relevant spatial characteristics of *Consumer*, and the spatial mode of the magazine is not considered further below.

**Clarity and coherency**

The first element to consider here is the external skeleton. The major feature of *Consumer*’s external skeleton is the table of contents, which always begins on page 2 of the magazine.
Four examples are reproduced here (Figure 3), the same four magazines as above have been used (July, 1999, p 2; June, 2001, p 2; October, 2006, p 2; April, 2008, pp. 2-3). A table of contents is designed to clearly communicate to the reader where each article in a magazine can be found. However, whereas the supra-textual design of the front covers of all four Consumers was relatively consistent over the period, Figure 3 reveals that the table of contents has been dramatically altered over time.

Looking at the textual mode, the tables of contents on Figures 3A and 3B arrange the articles by department (that is, topic area), with the department in large type (“cover story”, “products & appliances”, “utilities”, “appliances”, etc.). In Figure 3C the table of contents lists the articles in the sequence in which they appear in the magazine, with the departments in small lettering underneath, expressed as textually striking neologisms (“consumerviews” [sic], “consumertest” [sic]). Figure 3D reverts to the arranging the articles under departments in large typeface, but retains the use of neologisms (“consumerreport” [sic], “consumertest” [sic]).

Likewise, in the graphical mode, the table of contents in Figure 3A comprises most of the page and is accompanied with small photographs. The rest of the page is various notices. The table of contents in Figure 3B is similar, but the rest of the page is largely taken up with an editorial and accompanying small photograph. Figure 3C’s table of contents is minimal, comprising about a quarter of the page and featuring no photographs, with the bulk of the page taken up with an editorial and accompanying large photograph. Figure 3D’s table of contents is spread over two pages, complete with large photographs, with the editorial closely resembling that in Figure 3B.

This constant change and refinement of the tables of contents suggests that across the period Consumer was unsure how best to depict the external skeleton visually.
Figure 3 Tables of contents of four Consumer magazines (July, 1999, p. 2; June, 2001, p. 2; October, 2006, p. 2; April, 2008, pp. 2-3).
Certainly, the table of contents in Figure 3D is reminiscent of the table of contents in the issue of *North & South* under consideration, as shown in Figure 4 (*North & South*, March, 2001, pp. 5-6). It also covers over two pages, arranges articles by department and uses large photographs. It could be that *Consumer* ultimately decided to mimic the approach of such off-the-shelf magazines, in order to fulfil its readers’ expectations of what a table of contents in a magazine should look like.

![Table of Contents](image)

**Figure 4 Table of contents from *North & South* (March, 2001, pp. 5-6).**

Moving from the table of contents into the body of the magazine, the main articles rely heavily on chunking, compartmentalising the text into relatively short passages. The textual and graphical modes often work simultaneously for the desired effect, the process beginning at the start of each article. For instance, consider Figure 5, which depicts the top part of an article on breadmakers (June, 2005, pp. 8-9). The article is titled “bread winners”, with the word “bread” constructed out of visually appealing photographs of bread, paralleling the visually appealing photograph of bread printed on the facing page. The standfirst (the block of relatively large text immediately below the headline) summarises the article, gives the author’s name, and details the benefit the reader will receive from reading it: “BELINDA ALLAN tells you which models are the best things since sliced bread” (June, 2005, p. 8).
Within the body of each long article many supra-textual design techniques are used to help the reader read and understand the information.

In the textual mode, the text of each long article is broken up into shorter, readable chunks. The text usually proceeds as a series of relatively short paragraphs, rarely more than four sentences long and sometimes only one sentence in length. There are subheadings within the text, which break the text up further. Some text is also presented in panels, breakout text, margin copy, bullet points or lists.

In the graphical mode, the external skeleton of the page is made very explicit, assisting the reader in orientating themselves on the page. One is a marker to make it clear where the article finishes. Each long article concludes with a small graphic: a “C” for Consumer. Potential readers can quickly scan a given article to find the C. This tells them where the article finishes, without their needing to look over the page to discover a new article starts there. This reinforces the notion in the reader’s mind that an article is relatively short, and therefore will not require a lot of time to read and so the reader should commence reading. Other graphical elements break up the text into manageable chunks of reading matter, encouraging the reader to read them. There is a “MORE HELP” (or “More Info”) section at the end of most articles, detailing other sources of information. Some articles also have a section titled “Action needed”, which usually uses bullet points to call for regulatory change. There are panels headed “WE RECOMMEND”, “Key findings” or “OUR ADVICE”. These are very conspicuous: usually the typeface is upper case, the heading is in red, and the panel has a red border. Readers who are only interested in reading which products did best in tests or just want Consumer’s advice on a topic, can easily find it by searching out and reading the “We recommend” or “Our advice” boxes. Finally, to make the whole page more appealing to the reader’s eye and therefore more likely to be read, the pages feature a variety of coloured text, coloured panels and photographs.
Figure 6 gives an example of the final page of a long Consumer article on eating disorders, showing many of these techniques (July, 2000, p. 13). The page features short paragraphs (some are single sentences), subheadings, a panel on bulimia, breakout text (the quote from Teresa), a terminating C, a list of sources of additional information in a “MORE HELP” section, an “OUR ADVICE” box, coloured text, and coloured panels.

In the textual mode, Consumer regularly reminds readers of its impartiality by running short statements in the magazine noting that Consumer NZ is independent of all commercial interests and that the magazine’s findings cannot be used for advertising. These appear in every issue of the magazine in the survey period, usually somewhere at the back of the magazine (Figure 7A, from October, 2006, p. 42). Such repetition ensures the reader will receive and remember the message. Consumer has recently taking to emphasising the point far more. From October 2007, it now places a similar statement on page 2, next to the table of contents (Figure 7B, from March, 2008, p. 2). Placing the statement here gives it far greater visibility—most readers will look at this page in order to begin reading the table of contents—
and is shaded in yellow, highlighting it further. Further, and even more strikingly, from August 2007 the magazine has run a subheading under the masthead on the front cover. The subheading reads: “ACCURATE ● UNBIASED ● NOT FOR PROFIT” (Figure 7C, from September, 2007, p. 1). Together, this information conveys a sense to the reader that Consumer has undertaken rigorous analysis without fear or favour, solely for the reader’s benefit.

Within the body of Consumer articles, the text of the “MORE HELP” sections emphasises Consumer’s authorial personality. For example, the “MORE HELP” section in an article on mortgages lists contact details for all the major lenders (April, 2000, p. 20) and an article on maternity care lists contacts details for various organisations involved with births (July, 2001, p. 8). The specificity of this information (website addresses and telephone numbers of other organisations) enhances the idea that Consumer is well-informed and a source of authoritative, factual information.

Many of the sources of further information listed by Consumer are previously published Consumer articles, books published by Consumer NZ, and information on the organisation’s website (for instance October, 2001, p. 9; July, 2001, p. 14). Much like a q.v.entry in an encyclopaedia, the referencing of other Consumer articles and books indicates to the reader that Consumer is an authoritative reference resource, rather than just a magazine. Each February, Consumer publishes a page-long index of articles published in the magazine over
the previous year. A spatial element of an allied Consumer NZ product is relevant here. To help readers keep their magazines safe and in order, Consumer NZ sells its readers binders in which to store their Consumers (Figure 8). These textual and spatial mechanisms help convince the reader that Consumer builds into an authoritative reference encyclopaedia of knowledge. This is quite different from the approach of many other magazines—such as North & South—which do not publish indices or binders. Those magazines are presenting themselves essentially as throwaways.

Figure 8 A Consumer binder and bound copies of the magazine.

Turning to the graphical mode, Consumer articles frequently include tables, be they summaries of test results, financial products, or the results of user trials or reader surveys. Figure 9 shows a table for a camera test (December, 1998, p. 35). The information is highly technical: details of product brands, model numbers, and place of manufacture; ratings of product performance; prices; product weight; focal length; and code letters for extra features. Much of the information is presented in the form of symbols, giving it an even greater technical appearance, and the guide to the table gives a host of additional technical details. To make it easy for the reader to see which products performed best in the test, the products are listed in order, with the best performer at the top. With scrupulous accuracy, the table notes that many models were equally ranked. Such tables highlight an important aspect of Consumer’s authorial personality: that the magazine is written by technical experts.
Figure 9 Table from *Consumer* magazine (December, 1998, p. 35).

The supra-textual design of *Consumer*’s articles did not change appreciably over the survey period, suggesting it works effectively. The overall effect of many of the techniques discussed above is that the general look of *Consumer* articles differs markedly from long articles found in *North & South* magazine. For instance, consider the *North & South* cover story on car safety. The article focussed on used cars, and the same topic appears in *Consumer* (October, 2004, p. 38-39). Comparing the supra-textual design of the two magazines shows that each presents quite a different authorial personality. The *North & South* article is 11-pages long. The first two pages comprise a large, atmospheric photograph of cars on a motorway. This is shown as Figure 10A (*North & South*, March, 2001, p. 30-31). Photographs of many of those interviewed are also included in the article. The text is largely comprised of long paragraphs, occasionally broken up by breakout text, panels or a large capital letter indicating a new section. Figure 10B depicts two pages from the article (*North & South*, March, 2001, p. 36-37). The article includes one table: a small, relatively non-technical table summarising crash-test results for the best and worst performing used cars. This is given as Figure 10C (*North & South*, March, 2001, p. 30).
South, March, 2001, p. 40). The table was two per cent of the article’s total page area, indicating it is only a minor part of the article.

Figure 10 Supra-textual design examples from the North & South article on car safety (March, 2001, pp. 30-31, pp. 36-37, p. 40).

By contrast, the Consumer article on car crash data is only two pages long (Figure 11). The photographs are small, non-atmospheric, and represent cars, not people. Large text at the start of the article states emphatically which cars did well and poorly in the test. The article’s text is broken up considerably using short paragraphs, subheadings, panels, and colours. Consumer’s advice is presented separately and conspicuously as a set of bullet points at the top far right under “OUR ADVICE”, and sources of more information (including Consumer Online) are listed at the bottom far right, under “MORE HELP”. There is a large, technical table, complete with a guide, which together comprise 21 per cent of the article’s total page area, indicating the table is an integral and major part of the article. To be sure, there are some similarities in the two articles’ supra-textual design. Both feature a standfirst and use colour on their pages, for instance. But the differences far exceed the similarities. Ultimately, the
authorial personality of North & South is of a loquacious generalist, taking the reader through a wordy, relatively non-technical story. By contrast, the authorial personality of Consumer is of a no-nonsense technical expert, who makes the information as accessible and concise as possible.

Figure 11 Consumer article on used-car safety (October, 2004, pp. 38-39).

The magazine’s use of one final aspect of supra-textual design in the graphical mode should be mentioned. The instantly recognisable face of Consumer NZ’s long-time chief executive, David Russell, frequently appeared in the magazine during the survey period. This was usually in the form of his photograph accompanying an editorial penned by him, found on the highly conspicuous second or third pages of many issues (Figure 12A is an example, September, 2001, p. 2).

Figure 12 Images of David Russell (Consumer, September, 2001, p. 2; Detail from a Consumer marketing flyer, June, 2006).
Russell was not the only member of Consumer’s staff to write editorials, but his appeared most often. Of the 110 issues in the survey period, Russell’s editorials, complete with his photograph, appeared in 62 issues (56 per cent of the issues). The second most common contributor was David Naulls, editor of the magazine for the latter part of the survey period. His editorials, along with his photograph, appeared 17 times (15 per cent). Russell’s image would no doubt have appeared even more frequently had he not left the organisation recently (his farewell editorial can be found at April, 2007, p. 2).

By using Russell’s image so frequently in the magazine, the reader would associate the magazine itself with this highly regarded and recognisable champion of consumer causes. It was presumably for the same reason that his face also frequently appeared on Consumer marketing material. Figure 12B is a detail from a Consumer marketing flyer (June, 2006). It was possibly Russell’s departure that necessitated Consumer’s recent stronger assertions of its authorial personality in its own right.

**Conclusions and further research**

A reader’s interaction with a document begins before they read a single word of it (Bernanke, 2005). Supra-textual design techniques comprise the visual rhetoric of a document, convincing the reader that the document is worth reading and, once reading has begun, that it is worthwhile continuing to read (Kumpf, 2000). There are three main supra-textual design techniques: making a good impression that fulfils the reader’s visual expectations (Shriver, 1997); presenting ideas in a clear and coherent visual style (Moore and Fitz, 1993); and presenting an appropriate authorial personality (Kostelnick, 1998). These techniques can be deployed textually, spatially and graphically, and be revised over time (De Vries, 2008; Kostelnick, 1996). Images that evoke a deeper resonance in the viewer may carry greater power and express what cannot be expressed in words (Konstantinidou, 2008; Blair, 2004). To help reveal these visual techniques it can be instructive to compare the supra-textual design of one publication with that of other similar publications (Kostelnick & Hassett, 2003). This article has sought to understand the supra-textual design techniques used in the highly influential New Zealand consumer-rights magazine, Consumer.

In order to make a good first impression that fulfils the reader’s visual expectations, Consumer’s front covers essentially mimicked the visuals of off-the-shelf magazines, such as having a large masthead and cover story. This helped to convince the reader that Consumer indeed is a magazine, and can be read and enjoyed as such. But a primary point of difference
between *Consumer* and off-the-shelf magazines—that *Consumer* publishes scientifically based product tests—was also emphasised on the cover, by the listing of product tests. This also encourages reading, by emphasising *Consumer*’s unique benefit to readers.

Once the reader as been convinced to start reading, they must be convinced to continue. This requires the document’s ideas to be presented a clear and coherent visual style. To this end, *Consumer* employs a highly explicit external skeleton, including headers and a table of contents that categorises articles by department. The supra-textual design of the table of contents has been significantly altered over time, perhaps because *Consumer* was unsure how best to present this information. The articles themselves frequently have explicit external skeletons and consistently use chunking—including headlines, standfirsts, subheadings, short paragraphs, panels, and breakout boxes. These all serve to break the text up into readable passages, including visual signals to readers regarding where they can find essential information, such as which products *Consumer* recommends. All this encourages the reader to read the material.

Finally, and overall, *Consumer* must visually present an appropriate personality to its readers. *Consumer* presents itself as scientific and impartial, appropriate for a consumer organisation. The magazine’s use of technical tables and citations to other *Consumer* articles emphasise the magazine’s scientific competence and encyclopaedic comprehensiveness. During much of the survey period, the image of David Russell frequently appeared in the magazine, associating *Consumer* in the reader’s mind with this highly regarded consumer champion. Following his departure, *Consumer* now runs highly conspicuous proclamations of its accuracy and independence.

The application of supra-textual design theory has revealed how *Consumer* visually communicates a profound message to its readers: *Consumer* should be read and its information relied upon. This is the core of *Consumer*’s visual rhetoric. By transmitting this message visually and repeatedly, *Consumer*’s readers may be more likely to accept it without question, surely the objective of all rhetoric.

As to future research in this area, it was beyond the scope of this paper to assess how *Consumer*’s readers’ expectations were initially created and maintained. Why is it that the magazine’s readers apparently expect the magazine to be a blend of the scientific and the popular? Analysis of older consumer-rights texts and the culture from which the consumer movement sprang would help shed light on those issues. A glance at the front cover of the first *Consumer* magazine indicates the supra-textual design of the magazine was then prosaic.
(Figure 13). This simple design may simply reflect a simpler age, but it may indicate *Consumer* was initially expected by its readers to be a Government publication free of any concessions to commercialism.

![Figure 13 Front cover of the first Consumer (December, 1959).](image13)

This, in turns suggests another avenue for future research. For nearly all of its life *Consumer* was only available by mail order. But recently Consumer NZ decided to make *Consumer* available as an off-the-shelf magazine, sold in bookshops, supermarkets and major magazine retailers. The first magazine sold this way was the October 2008 issue. The cover proclaimed it to be a “NEW LOOK LAUNCH ISSUE!” (Figure 14).

![Figure 14 Front cover of first Consumer sold off-the-shelf (October, 2008).](image14)
However, as this research has demonstrated, Consumer was already modelling itself on off-the-shelf magazines. Indeed, the supra-textual design of the magazine did not in fact change markedly with that issue. It would be instructive to consider in future the extent to which the magazine does change its supra-textual design in light of such a fundamental change in the way the magazine is distributed.

References


Consumer. Wellington: Consumer NZ.


