EVERY PICTURE...

Aims

- To give participants basic tools for analysing the information and 'messages' in images.
- To highlight the influence of images on attitudes and behaviour.

Outcome

- Participants will be able to de-construct images used in the media and have a better understanding of how they can be used to affect our perceptions and actions.

What you need

Large poster or advertisement for business or charity (a selection of posters can be downloaded from the image library: www.babymilkaction.org/spin); **Actionpage:** *Every picture….*

What you do

- ▷ Display poster so group can look at it.
- ▷ Ask group to write down one word which comes to mind on seeing the image.
- ▷ Ask each participant to call out their word.
- Is there much similarity between responses? Why?
- ▷ Hand out **Actionpage:** *Every picture….* Explain that images are part of our visual language which we usually take for granted. We need to 'deconstruct' an image to find out how it communicates using the checklist on the Actionpage.
- ▷ Give the group an opportunity to look at the mounted photo. Ask the group to extract as much information from the photo as possible, in order to analyse its 'meaning'.
- ▷ Work through the questions (some may not be relevant to your image), asking participants to call out their interpretations. Emphasise that there is no 'right' answer. The aim is to establish the concept of dissecting an image, and looking more closely at our responses.

Whole group discussion

- Is this an effective PR image? Why/why not?
- How does the image communicate its message?
- Would other groups of people respond to the image in a similar way (age, class, culture)?

Key ideas

- Visual language lacks formal rules (eg grammar), but can be more powerful than the written word in affecting our emotions and attitudes.
- Interpreting an image is similar to reading a written text – it contains a lot of information about the appearance of people and places at one instant in time (eg clothes, weather, setting). However, images can be ambiguous – it is often difficult to put this information together and be sure of what is actually happening.
- Without clues, such as headlines or captions, it is difficult to fix meaning, meanings are 'anchored' by text. This allows the 'meaning' of photos to be manipulated by the media.
- All images are constructed through a process of selection. Even a news photographer decides what to shoot (and not shoot), and the type of film used. The camera angle and composition affect how the photo looks and impacts on the audience. Subjects can be posed, and today's digital software can easily change an image without us knowing.
- The popular media help to create and reinforce many recognisable stereotypes with strong associations (eg trees or green landscape = environment friendly, scientists in laboratory = objective research/modern/progress).
- PR and advertising images do not require the audience to analyse the image in depth. They want reaction, not interaction which may question the 'truth' behind the message.

◆ Stereotypes and the power of images are used very deliberately in advertising and PR. A series of decisions have been made – by photographer, photo library, picture editor, PR or advertising account manager, client – to communicate a message which will affect your attitudes and behaviour.

Follow-up

◆ Reinforce analysis of images. Mount a selection of PR and advertising materials from business and charities, where images are a key part of the message, onto separate sheets of flip chart paper. Divide participants into pairs. Ask each to deconstruct the image using the Actionpage. Write down observations, comments or questions raised by the image on the paper (use arrows where necessary – see example below). Display and discuss.

◆ Produce a poster for a charity, using images and design that will reach a particular audience.

You can't see her face properly – is she trying to hide her identity?

Does this woman know she is being photographed? Probably, because photo taken at same level as woman and close up.

Has this photo been set-up? She looks a bit posed.

Did she give her consent? If so, why?

Was she paid?

Does she know the photographer?

Who is the photographer?

Why did they take this photo?

Where is this photo taken? Can't tell from surroundings. Looks like she might be sitting on a blanket.

She looks like an Asian woman in her 20's.

She looks well dressed and healthy.

Are they both her children?

Why is the baby with the bottle so thin? She's not cradling its head.

Why has b/w film been used – to give a more stark look in keeping with the subject?

Photo dated 7.6.89, but why has it been reversed?

Would it look different if seen left to right?

Professional photographers don't usually use date format.

Why has this photo been printed as a postcard? It's not exactly a greetings card! Who has published it?

I find this image very disturbing – the contrast between a plump, healthy baby & a starving one.

Notes: photo credited to UNICEF; Children's Hospital, Islamabad, Pakistan; taken from postcard *Message in a bottle* published by Baby Milk Action to highlight the danger of unsafe bottle feeding, but also used in other campaigning materials; the babies are twins – the one with the bottle died the day after this photo was taken but her breastfed brother is thriving; the mother was told that she wouldn't have enough milk, and so she should bottle feed the girl; she almost certainly could have fed both twins because suckling stimulates more milk; the mother said, "*use my picture if it will help*".

Actionpage: Every picture…

The advertising and public relations (PR) industries spend a lot of money producing images which aim to affect our attitudes and behaviour. Usually, we do not spend much time thinking about an image – it works at a subconscious level. This checklist asks questions which will help you analyse the messages that the 'persuaders' are using and the techniques they use.

All images are constructed. Advertising photos are obviously posed, but news or documentary images have also been selected to communicate ideas. The photographer chooses who/what to shoot, where to stand, what lens to use in order to convey their understanding of 'reality'. Modern digital technology enables picture editors to manipulate images, eg 'improving' Prince William's smile in Prince Edward's wedding photo.

We need to dissect an image to understand how it works. We must always ask: who is making and using the image; what choices have they made; and what is their objective?

You need to try to get into the mind of the people who are responsible for creating the image on the page. Some questions may be impossible to answer for certain, but assessing the possibilities may help you understand why the photo was taken and the 'messages' it contains.

The subject: who, what, where & when
* Who is portrayed, eg gender, age, health, wealth, clothes, status?
* How would you describe their facial expression, posture and body language?
* What are they feeling? Are they posed?
* Do they want to be photographed? Are they being paid?
* Where is photo taken, eg surroundings, urban/rural, continent, country, studio?
* When was photo taken, eg historical period, time of day, season?
* What are they doing? Is it normal activity? How does it relate to the rest of their lives?
* Does the image give a positive, neutral or negative impression of the people shown?
* Where have you seen similar images used to convey the same kind of message?
* What background information would you like to know?

Context in which image is being used
* What information does the accompanying text, caption or title give?
* Why was this photograph used in this way?
* Who is the intended audience for this publication (age, status, political views, wealth, sex, race etc)?
* Who is responsible for publishing the image? What are their objectives?

Technical
* Colour or b/w film?
* If colour, which colours dominate?
* What effect/impact does the colour have?
* How has the photo been composed, eg camera angle, framing, use of perspective, type of lens?
* Has the image been manipulated, eg someone or something moved or removed, colour changed etc?
* How do these technical effects influence how you interpret the photo?

Put this analysis together to answer the questions:
* What visual symbols or stereotypes do you recognise?
* Where have you seen similar use of images?
* What are the intended messages?
* How effective is the image in communicating this message to you? To other audiences?