While many factors contribute to the emotional impact of a design, color is by far the most powerful. Just how powerful is color? Research reveals all human beings make a subconscious judgements about a person, environment, or item within 90 seconds of initial viewing. And, between 62% and 90% of that assessment is based on colors alone.

Color scheming affects virtually every aspect of the selling process from product design, to packaging to the retail selling space. In the food service industry, researchers discovered that people tend to eat more and faster in restaurants decorated in warm colors such as orange.

Color decisions are never made lightly by designers. They agonize over color charts and chips. They research trends and the impact of colors on the viewer. The color decisions made by designers create identities for businesses, affect the appearance of products and their packaging, determine the tone for advertising and promotional materials, and set the mood for the selling environment.

Each January, Communication Arts magazine, a trade publication of the design industry, announces its color trends for the year. And, there are numerous commercial enterprises devoted to formulating and standardizing colors, researching their impact on human emotion and behavior, and predicting color trends.

Different color schemes may have greater appeal to different audiences or may make one company’s ad stand out from its competitors. At right, an insurance company made its ads stand out from the pack using an intensely bright scheme of primary and secondary hues and contrasting white.

On the next page you’ll see a campaign in which the color scheme was chosen for its nostalgic look of the “good old days.”
In advertising, it is especially important to be conscious of the color schemes you create because they must carry through the entire campaign—which means across all media. Yes, broadcast advertising is color schemed just like print advertising. If you're observant, you'll begin to notice that different commercials have very different looks, due in large part to the colors used.

So, how do you come up with a color scheme? There are several ways. The most basic is a monochromatic scheme. That means you choose one basic hue, green for instance. Then, add variations of that color to your palette. Go lighter and darker. Add a bit of the adjacent colors on the color wheel. (More about that in the Color Mixing and Printing lecture).

Another easy way is to start with a neutral color—browns, beiges, black, gray and white—and combine it with brighter hues. Primary colors, red, yellow and blue always work well together. The one thing you want to avoid is a color combination that “vibrates,” such as red and aqua.

Color placement also is important in ads. If you place a particular color at different locations on a page in roughly the shape of triangles, it will contribute to the movement of the viewer’s eye to important elements in the ad. Notice how triangles are formed by the brightest colors and whites in the ad at left.