Balance

The arrangement of the elements must create an overall sense of balance within the design. Balance refers to the distribution of visual weight within the space. The importance of balance is that the viewer’s eye will gravitate toward the heaviest part of the ad and may not reach important elements having lighter weight.

The visual weight of an element is determined by its lightness or darkness and by its color. Darker colored elements are visually heavier than lighter colored ones. Bright colors outweigh dark ones, including black.

The size of the element does not determine its weight. A relatively large area of a light color may be required to balance a small area of a dark one. A small spot of a bright color can even outweigh a larger area of black.

Balance may be symmetrical or asymmetrical. Generally, asymmetry is a bit more interesting visually, but plenty of ads use both types. The KitchenAid ad at (above far left) is symmetrical while the Kikkoman ad beside it is asymmetrical.

You can identify whether an ad is balanced relatively easily. Take a piece of plain paper and cover each half of a design.
vertically, then horizontally, then diagonally from corner to corner. You should be able to see whether the visual weight is concentrated in half the design in any direction. The ad above has just slightly more weight in the right half vertically. There's quite a bit more weight in the top half and the upper right half diagonally. This tells you that the design is unbalanced. It is both top and right heavy.

The good news is that there are lots of ways to cure an ad that is top, bottom or side heavy. First, take another look at the original ad below. Now, look at how some small changes seem to make you feel more comfortable when you look at the revised versions. On the next page, you'll find two more examples of how to achieve a sense of balance.

1. Add some visual weight to the lighter part of the ad by adding another element. It could be a line, a color block or other graphic element, or an additional pictorial.

2. Add some weight to the lighter area of the ad by increasing the weight of existing elements—make them bigger or bolder. Another way to increase the weight of an element is to color it more brightly.

3. Reduce the weight of the heavier element. The simplest way to do this is to make it smaller. I also reduced the weight of the frame by making the image a bit larger within the frame.

4. Move the heavier element closer to the center of the page. In this version, both the photo and the text block have been moved closer to the center and more negative space has been distributed to the top and left.
5. Lighten the heavy element by changing its color or integrating a light colored element into it. An example of this is to place a white headline over a dark area of a visual.

In the original ad at left, the viewer's eye is more powerfully drawn to the large dark area of negative space than to the subjects of the photo or any other element, for that matter. When the dark area is lightened by the larger headline, not only is it easier for the viewer's eye to move around the page, but also the washing machines and people in the photo actually appear to be larger.

6. Allocate more space to the lighter objects. It takes a lot of light area to balance even a relatively small dark area. Almost 3/4 of the total space in the ad at left was allocated to light colored negative space and just a few tiny typographic elements.