Emphasis

A well designed ad must have one element that slightly dominates all the others. This is the emphasis (also called focus or focal point) of the ad. It is the first thing about the ad that the viewer will notice. And, it will be the beginning point of the path his or her eye will travel as it circulates around the page.

The dominant element doesn't have to be the largest element. But, you almost always will find it at the point of highest contrast or brightest color in the ad. There also may be a secondary emphasis—an element that has another high contrast area. In the ad at left, the area of highest contrast is the small area of color on an otherwise black and white page. A secondary emphasis is the figure's face because it is a very light area entirely surrounded by black.

What happens if the ad is composed almost entirely of bright colors? The emphasis is still at the point of highest contrast. You can spot both the primary and secondary emphases quite easily on the Hanes ad above. The area of brightest blue contrasts the highlight on the model's leg. Almost as strong a contrast appears on the package picture in the lower right corner.

Undefined emphasis. If too many of the elements in an ad have about the same level of dominance, the viewer’s eye will bounce randomly around the page. Notice how this happens when you look at the FTD ad. When an ad can't be viewed in a fairly orderly manner, the viewer quickly becomes irritated and looks away.

The solution for FTD is a fairly easy one. Make the blue color blocks and background pattern lighter. Then, the bouquet and headline will stand out more prominently as the primary and secondary emphases. Another option is to select the extract colors for the headline and/or from the photo, for instance reds, pinks and purples. In that case, the yellow flowers would become the focal point.

Overemphasis. A designer also must take care to assure that the dominant element does not overwhelm the others. If an
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element is overly prominent, the view's eye may freeze on or keep returning to that point without exploring the other elements.

For a few moments, stare at the strawberry in the Minolta ad at left. Now, try to look at the right-hand page of the ad. Even in this small size, you'll probably find it difficult to keep your eye from returning to the strawberry. That's because there's no element on the right side of the ad that can begin to compete with the strength of the left side. Since the ad is trying to sell photocopiers, not fruit, the illustration detracts more than it contributes.

A solution: Add one or more bright red element to the right page... perhaps a couple clusters of smaller strawberries to visually convey the idea of duplication. Position them strategically to draw the viewer's eye to the headline and the picture of the copier.

Misplaced emphasis. Another pitfall in selecting the emphasis element is misplacing it—in other words, choosing an emphasis that isn't very relevant to the message of the ad. The basic message of the ad below is that being seen in this new sports coupe will get you noticed. The one unique coat in the dry cleaners window is a metaphor for how you'll stand out. Unfortunately, the car doesn't stand out in this ad. Most of your attention is drawn to the glowing neon name of the dry cleaners in the top half of the page. And what kind of guy wears multicolored polka dot coat anyway? A clown, an attention-seeking jerk? Are they saying this is a great car for jerks and clowns?