

## Reviews

### **"Understanding Visual Illiteracy: A Study of Comprehension of Pictorial Messages Among Farmers"**

*Publication based on the thesis by Milton Munoz, edited by Richard Powers, Department of Agricultural Journalism, University of Wisconsin, Madison.*

Visual specialists, researchers and others have long disagreed over the role of visuals in communicating information to various audiences—especially audiences with low education. In more trite terms the question can be summarized as: "A picture is worth a thousand words—or is it?"

Milton Munoz, a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, studied 206 Columbian farmers. He expected that literate farmers would be able to comprehend illustrations better than illiterate farmers, and that literate and illiterate farmers were expected to notice different pictures based upon page location and subject value.

Munoz found, however, that there was no difference in perceptions of the two groups. He did, however, find that they varied in their ability to comprehend the meaning of pictures. Literates, he found, were better able to comprehend the meanings of line drawings and picture sequences. Literates were also more adept at using visual cues, such as arrows and numbers, to increase their understanding.

Results suggest that, with literates, visual information is conveyed better by illustrations that are clear, simple and provide only essential details. Too much detail, or details taken out of context, tend to inhibit understanding, especially for illiterates. Variables related to pictorial comprehension include pictorial arranging skill, education, mobility and mass media, and agricultural information exposure. In addition, age was negatively related—younger subjects out-performed older ones.

The author concluded that visual literacy is a learned skill that deserves added attention in both research and educational programs. The author believes that educators and communication specialists may sometimes use pictures under the mistaken assumption that pictorial information is automatically easier to understand. This suggests what we've suspected all along—that "a picture is worth a thousand words"—sometimes, under certain circumstances, with some audiences.

*Clifford Scherer  
Cornell Rural Communication Research Program*