

Terminating an Employee? Proceed With Care.

By June Campbell

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What's more important to your web site: pictures or text?

If you have an ecommerce web site, you need the answer to that question. Your profits depend on it.

Over the years, we've heard a lot of opinions on this topic. Some webmasters formed opinions through studying log files and conducting online surveys. Others relied on personal preference.

However, thanks to Stanford University and the Poynter Institute, we now have some concrete research to use in our quest to design the most effective sites. The Stanford Poynter Project sheds light on how site visitors spend their time.

Some will find the results surprising. Others will have their opinions confirmed. The four-year study demonstrated that our online reading patterns are the precise opposite of our reading patterns when we read newspapers or magazines.

When we read print newspapers, we read at the breakfast table, in the coffee shop or on the subway. We browse -- a headline here, a picture there. We look at the pictures first, then read the text if it interests us. People who layout print publications know this, and they design accordingly.

Many concluded that the same patterns would apply on the web. But it's not so. We do the exact opposite.

Surfing isn't a casual activity that we do comfortably while waiting for the bus. It's something we do sitting in a chair staring at a monitor that isn't friendly to the eyes. Moreover, we're likely to be distracted by telephone calls, incoming email and co-workers in the next cubicle.

Online, we need to get the information as quickly as possible. We head straight for the text. The study found that surfers look first at article text (9266141f the time) and briefs (8246600620f the time), and thirdly at photos. We read 7046605314f the article, as compared to the 30 6.369354e-314're likely to read from a magazine or newspaper. Then, when we're finished with the text, about 220f us glance at the web site's pictures.

Banner ads and photographs attract more attention than artwork.

Oddly, the study also showed that although only 2220051200f site visitors glance at pictures,

45”heck out banner ads for approximately one and one quarter second.

Other miscellaneous findings from the study:

1. Sports readers read more content than any other type of reader. Males and females read sports in equal numbers, but 111f males read heavily compared to 0127f the females.
2. Thirty-year olds read more local content than twenty year olds or sixty year olds.
3. Females read more local content than males.
4. Twenty-year olds read more science and sports than other age groups.
5. When reading online, we read serially. That is, we jump back and forth among sites, returning to the ones that interest us.

So what conclusions can we make from the Stanford Poyntner Project?

First, we must consider that these researchers studied the online behavior of a small group of Americans who routinely access news web sites. More research is needed to determine whether the results will generalize to international readers, or to users of ecommerce web sites.

Critics of the research argue that the results are less significant when applied to people who are accessing the web with high bandwidth connections. However, although high bandwidth is making gains in North America, many people, both in North America and in other parts of the globe, are using dialup connections or are accessing the web with wireless devises.

That being said, the following conclusions seem logical:

1. Text is important. It's words that hold the attention. Give visitors the information they need, and present it well.
2. Use eye-catching headlines and sub-headlines. Remember, over 900f your visitors glance here first.
3. Although few click on the banner ads, the one-second glance will generate an impression that can help with branding.
4. One second doesn't allow time for visitors to view rotating animations in banner ads. It's better to put the full message, including your logo, in each frame of the animation.
5. Pictures are still important, but use sparingly. Pictures and animations that distract the viewer from reading the text are counter-productive.

You'll find the Standford Poynter Project at this link:

<http://www.poynter.org/eyetrack2000/index.htm>

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