



Respect Your Readers' Habits

An awful lot of nonsense has been written about how people read on the Web. An army of self-appointed experts has been spouting snappy dictums as if they were ironclad fact.

Nobody reads on the Web. They just look at the pictures.

Write as if you were speaking to a highly intelligent 10 year old.

Keep it really short, and dead simple.

Your readers have the attention span of a gnat. So, write in short sentences and short paragraphs, one per page.

I would like to know what these pundits think people have been doing with their computers when not browsing the Web.

Microsoft's Office suite of programs, which includes Excel, Access, Word and Powerpoint, is so ubiquitous on business and home computers that if you ask the average user what their operating system is, they will often reply, "Umm, Word?"

The kind of documents they are writing in Word, and reading onscreen, are not short, snappy and picture-heavy with one paragraph per page. They are more likely to be wordy, stuffed full of big sentences and paragraphs, unillustrated and go on for pages and pages.

The Web is now the primary source of news for many people in the West, and they are reading it on web pages with the same characteristics: long, scrolling, single page documents written, for the most part, in a traditional journalistic style.

If the site's publishers are doing their job well, then they are making concessions to the nature of onscreen reading by providing a descriptive headline and subheaders, an introduction in large or bold type, a summary on conclusion and a list of relevant links. The writers and editors of these articles helped create the habits their readers first picked up in print, and now they are reinforcing those habits in the medium of pixels.

So if you are responsible for the written content of a corporate website bear in mind the habits your readers have formed over a lifetime.

Don't underestimate them or assume their habits are not the same as yours.

Provide them with in-depth, thought-provoking stories about the firm's products and services, its people and their values, and what it collectively believes in.

Then, persuade your designer to lay out the articles with the same respect for the reader as they were written with.