

Getting Looked Over, Without Getting Overlooked:

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Getting Looked Over, Without Getting Overlooked:

By Matthew Cobb, copywriter

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Scanning and Skimming Practices

Whether you're writing e-mail messages or Web site sales letters, you need to know how to hold the attention of different types of readers. Even the readers that don't actually "read."

Most readers will either scan, skim, or both, especially when reading online or when reading long pieces. Optimizing the writing on your site for those who scan and those who skim isn't extremely difficult, but it does require an attention to detail.

First, let's take a look at what these terms mean.

Scanning—involves looking for particular elements, such as headlines, subheadings, and text that is highlighted, bold-faced, or otherwise emphasized. Scanners read only the elements that "stick out," their eyes moving from one attention-grabbing word or phrase to another.

Skimming—involves looking over the entire page but only superficially, like a speed-reader. Skimmers may see the same elements that scanners do, but they don't focus that much on anything specific for very long. They glance over all of it, just trying to get the basic idea.

Getting Looked Over, Without Getting Overlooked:

Most readers do a combination of scanning and skimming. They might scan a page and find a headline that grabs their attention, then skim the paragraph beneath it. Only when they find something really interesting will they go back and read.

Sometimes, the information in the various headings and emphasized text is all the information a visitor needs. In fact, a visitor to a consumer sales site should conceivably be able to make their entire buying decision based solely on the headlines and emphasized text.

It's important to note that scanning and skimming isn't

something that was created by the Web. (It just seems like it sometimes.) Audiences have been skimming newspaper headlines and flipping through TV channels for quite some time now.

6 Steps for Writing for Scanners and Skimmers

In the Information Overload Age, consumers have grown tired of sales hype and marketing fluff. They're already predisposed to skimming and scanning. Short attention spans and a high level of skepticism are becoming a part of their nature.

But all is not lost. Optimizing for scanners and skimmers (and turning them into readers) isn't easy, but you can do it if you take a steady approach and revise carefully. Here's an example of how you can do it:

Step 1) Write out the main points of your sales argument (which some will call a sales "pitch," but since I want to persuade rather than "pitch," I look at this process as a kind of debate...hence, a sales argument.) These main points will be your subheadings. List them as a skeleton outline for your piece, and leave space beneath each.

Step 2) Below each main point, write down the main words and phrases associated with each point in your argument.

Step 3) Start writing the body of the piece. Here, you'll explain everything in full detail. People

Getting Looked Over, Without Getting Overlooked:

who read the body of your message want details, so you should provide all the relevant information that you can imagine a potential customer might want to read.

Step 4) Take the words and phrases you generated in Step 2 and thread them throughout the body of the message. Make sure they work within the context of the paragraphs (in other words, don't just throw them in anywhere.) Use bold-facing, italics, underlining, or highlights to draw attention to these words or phrases. (Just don't go overboard... too much emphasis can come off as "salesy", and you'll need to only use as much emphasized text as you think your audience will deem credible. An ad for a luxury car won't use as much emphasized text as a sales letter for the latest mail-order kitchen gizmo.)

Step 5) Look at all you've written and come up with a headline that ties it all together with a strong, unique benefit. The headline should generate curiosity and target a specific audience. Statistics and testimonials generally make strong headlines by getting attention and establishing credibility, which is important for making a connection with your target audience.

Step 6) At this point, you've written your first draft. As you read back through what you have, ask yourself a few questions: Does my headline lead logically to my subheads? Do my subheads lead logically to the emphasized text? Does the emphasized text fit logically into the context of the body? Most importantly, can a visitor make a buying decision based solely on the headings and emphasized text?

Sometimes, you'll find that certain elements no longer fit the original argument. Your approach may change. That's okay. Revise until everything flows together and makes sense during the first reading.

Never be afraid to go back and rewrite. Always use the strongest material, even if that means deleting half of

what you've already written. It's the only way to get your best work.

The truth is, most readers won't make it to the body of your message. That's okay—don't expect them to. Not all of them will be right for your offer.

You need be able to get your points across with good headlines, subheadings, and emphasized text. If you can do that, you won't have to be afraid of how—or whether—your visitors actually read the entire page.

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Email . . . Lookin' Good!

By Todd N. Thompson

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An often overlooked aspect of online marketing is the importance of how your sales message is delivered. To say this in a more direct way would be to say, "does your email message arrive to the reader in a format that is easy to read, easy to understand, and does it let the reader know you are serious about your business?"

Formatting your email for success is critical. Here is the golden rule to follow. Never format your emails to be greater than 60 characters per line. If you go greater than 60 characters, some of your readers will have trouble reading your email due to how their email software renders the message.

Let me illustrate my point with two sample emails.

Email Message # 1 Hello Jim,
Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah. Blah blah
blah blah blah
blah blah, blah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah blah blah
blah blah blah
blah, blah blah blah blah
.... Thanks, John Doe

Getting Looked Over, Without Getting Overlooked:

(Line width in this example is greater than 60 characters)

Email Message # 2 Hello Jim,

Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah. Blah blah
blah blah blah, blah blah blah blah blah blah
blah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah blah blah blah
blah, blah blah blah.

Thanks,

John Doe

(Line width in this example is set at 60 characters to
guarantee a nice presentation in your customer's email
programs.)

I know you will agree that example # 2 is a much better
looking email message than message #1. In fact, I bet you
have deleted email that looked like #1, because of the way
it looked. Right?

Don't let your email messages suffer this tragic fate
because you did not take the time to make them look Good.

Steps to Writing Good Looking Emails

Limit Character width to 60. Use a hard return (that means
hit the 'enter' key when you get to 60 characters, or
before 60 if the next word is long). I create my messages
using Textpad. TextPad ® is a powerful, general purpose
editor for plain text files. Easy to use, with all the
features a power user requires. (Go to: TextPad.Com and
download the trial copy.)

Avoid using ALL CAPITAL letters. This is viewed as
'screaming' in the cyber world.

If writing your messages in HTML, use font color 'black'
for the text of your messages and use color fonts to
'accent' specific words.

Always use blank lines between paragraphs and between your
signature file and the cordial exit (Thanks, Sincerely..
etc).

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A good looking email is a short message with impact . . .
not a 'book'!

Todd N. Thompson is an Internet marketing consultant, speaker and marketing expert. You can view his latest project, the "Royal Responder", the best follow-up autoresponder service available on the internet today, at <http://www.royal-responder.com/good>



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