

Words Are Worth a Thousand Pictures

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The Poynter Institute and Stanford University have research data to show that web page text gets more attention from readers than graphical content. Using a method widely used to observe newspaper reading habits, precisely tracking the eye movements of a web site visitor, an accurate record is created of what a person actually looks at on screen. This often differs from what people say they look at.

Using news-reporting sites, the Poynter-Stanford study found that readers looked at full articles first 92 per cent of the time and at news briefs first in 82 per cent of cases. Photos on the pages were viewed first 64 percent of the time, banner ads were viewed first in 45 percent of cases and other graphics were seen first in 22 per cent of instances.

Here are a few highlights of the study:

- After firing up the first screenful of online news, the eyes go initially to text, not to photos or graphics, as one might expect. Instead, briefs or captions get eye fixations first, by and large.
- Contrary to much current belief, banner ads do catch online readers' attention. For the 45 percent of banner ads looked at, the subjects' eyes fixated on them for an average one second. That is long enough to perceive the ad.
- Graphics other than banners were looked at 22 percent of the time, and also received about a second's eye fixation. Sixty-four percent of photos were looked at on average about one-and-a-quarter second.

Following are a few examples of what was learned from eye movements that indicated that at least some reading was taking place:

- 30-year-olds were more likely to read local news than either 60-year olds or 20-year-olds. And 20-year-olds read more science and sports news than did other age groups. Virtually all ages read opinion articles in healthy proportion to their total article reading.
- Eighty percent of all participants read crime and disaster coverage. Females were very slightly more likely to read this category, but males were more likely to read more items.
- Sports was read equally by males and females - 70 percent of the total for each gender. But, no female read heavily in this category, while 11 percent of the men did.
- A higher proportion of women read local news than did men, and by a tiny margin also read more heavily in this category. Overall, 48 percent of all participants read local news.
- Somewhat more men than women read national news and by a small margin, also read more items. Overall, 67 percent of all participants did some reading of national news.