

Read Me

 By [Marion Scher](#)

7 May 2015

When I became a journalist I thought I would be telling really important stories, making a difference in people's lives. Well, maybe that was a bit starry eyed but I like to think for a number of years I did that well.

That was before the internet and online reading. Now don't get me wrong - I read almost solely online myself and am as guilty of page hopping or skimming as the next person, but this makes me even more aware of how hard it is to get someone to read a whole page of text.

If you want someone these days to even click on a story it has to have a catchy heading, such as today's lead stories on *Huffington Post*: *'The World's Sexiest People Are Armenian Women and Irish Men; Single Mom Fired From Daycare Center for Facebook Post Saying She Hates 'Being Around A Lot Of Kids'; Gay Kiss Cam Moment Has Dodger Stadium Crowd Cheering'*... Note the caps on each word to further entice you to click.

Looking at these headlines - what do they tell you about people's reading habits? Professor Andrew Dillon, of the University of Texas School of Information conducted research on how the way people read online impacts their ability to comprehend texts on paper. "We're spending so much time touching, pushing, linking, scrolling and jumping through text that, when you sit down with a novel, your daily habit of jumping, clicking, linking is just ingrained in you. We're in this new era of information behaviour and we're beginning to see the consequences of that."

This means that you have to ask yourself each time you send out any information, from internal communications to media releases to incredibly boring reports and even more boring annual general reports - DOES ANYONE BOTHER TO READ THEM?

What's the answer? According to Dillon 'As technology moves, the content providers adjust and, since screen real estate and human attention are at a premium, shorter texts, increased use of animation and colour and a concern with getting the message across quickly all come to the fore. This is the new norm.'

Here are some guidelines on grabbing and keeping people's attention:

- Keep text super short and sweet
- Use pictures/graphics/animation where possible
- TELL A STORY - use human interest to grab people's emotions
- Make sure the copy is relevant to whoever it's aimed at
- Give your 'story' a beginning, middle and an end - don't just ramble on

- NEVER, EVER PUT FIGURES INTO TEXT - use graphs, graphics

Research has also shown that when we hear information, as in data or test results, we take in the words whilst trying to work out what they mean. But when we hear stories, our brain acts as if we're feeling the stories. Now I'm not saying lie to your readers but even if you have to have a fictional story to illustrate your point it's better than a list of boring figures.

Readers connect the best where they feel the story - reach their senses, sight, touch, taste, feel and smell. Here images can work just as well as words.

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ABOUT MARION SCHER

Marion Scher (www.mediamentors.co.za) is an award-winning journalist, lecturer, media trainer and consultant with 25 years' experience in the industry. For more of her writing, go to her Bizcommunity profile or to Twitter @marionscher.

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