

REACHING READERS IN THE INTERNET AGE

A. INTRODUCTION

Today's reader is very different from his or her predecessor of only a decade ago. In the last ten years, the digital stimuli pulling at the attention span of the average reader have increased dramatically.

Most of us live today in a world of "always on" connectivity – from the cell phone to the laptop, and everything in between.

One can bemoan the change but for what purpose? The fact is the world has changed and will continue to change. The challenge is how we as authors and publishers befriend the change and bring readers content that informs and engages.

B. BACKGROUND

Common sense tells us that especially young adults, having grown up reading online, have different expectations of the reading experience than those of the pre-internet age. The internet read is quick, staccato-like, with lots of visuals – unlike anything that existed before it. As a result, the young adult does not have the patience for linear, page after page of text – specifically, 99% of the books published today.

The studies that have been done to date suggest that the "always on" lifestyle of today's young adult may actually impact the adolescent brain – requiring new approaches for reaching readers. See SCIENCE page below.

The anomaly is that although the means of distributing information have changed dramatically in the last decade, the format of books have not kept pace. Young adults are creating their own compressed, alternative forms of content – e.g., abbreviated writing styles used while tweeting or texting – yet writers and publishers still attempt to reach readers with a template rooted in the 19th Century.

C. NEW APPROACHES

It is our position that the format in which information is presented to today's consumer needs to be crafted to engage the internet-age reader. Whether delivered in old-fashioned print (books), or digitally (online), material should be presented in a style that meshes with the young adult mind – used to receiving content in short and fast bytes with lots of visuals and white space in between.

It is for this reason that we have developed the "skinny" book series with several distinctions from traditional nonfiction writings:

1. Less material – a synthesis. Longer is not better.

Length does not equate to impact. A University of California study compared the comprehension levels of students who received a 600-word explanation of how lightning formed with those who received an 80-word summary. The latter group scored significantly higher.

“A common instructional practice is to provide a lengthy verbal explanation, such as a textbook passage or classroom lecture. Indeed, instructors may believe that providing a lengthy verbal explanation fulfills their responsibility to provide information to the learner. Unfortunately, this practice is not very efficient for students ... In the present study, there was no instructional treatment more effective in promoting retention and transfer than a summary. By reducing the load on the cognitive system, summaries may enable students to carry out the cognitive processes necessary for meaningful learning.”

When Less is More: Meaningful Learning from Visual and Verbal Summaries
Mayer, Bove, Bryman (Journal of Educational Psychology, 1996)

2. Shorter sentences – on average about 20% fewer words per sentence.

Given shortened attention spans, “less is more.”

“In an environment with a higher degree of distraction and heavier information demands, we often have the feeling of being distracted and unfocused ... (the result is) INFOSTRESS ... we must always be aware of the limited scope we have for receiving information.”

The Overflowing Brain: Information Overload and Limits of Working Memory
Torkel Klingberg, Stockholm Brain Institute (2009)

3. Lots of visuals and white space.

We know that people learn in different ways but most of us learn visually. Drawings, photos, symbols, charts and graphs assist the learning process.

“Psychologists have recognized the importance of the capacity to use various kinds of symbols ... we garner messages through words, pictures, gestures, numbers, patterns and a whole lot of other symbolic forms.”

Multiple Intelligences, Howard Gardner (Perseus, 2006)

In 11 recent studies, students who received information in words and pictures performed better on tests than students who received the same information in words alone.

“Comparison of people’s memories for words with their memories for pictures ... shows a superiority effect for pictures.”

How People Learn, National Research Council (National Academies Press, 2000)

4. Stories and dialogue.

Facts, information and concepts are easier to understand and remember when wrapped in a narrative.

“Stories are easier to remember – because in many ways, stories are how we remember. ‘Narrative imaging – story – is the fundamental instrument of thought ... rational capacities depend upon it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, and of explaining ... Most of our experience, our knowledge and our thinking is organized as stories’.”

A Whole New Mind, Daniel Pink (Riverhead Books, 2006)

To the degree that non-fiction writing can match up with real-world experiences, it will engage the reader and have a deeper impact.

“Design and tell stories that enhance understanding of the concepts. Studies show that stories engage all parts of the brain because they touch on a learner’s experience, feelings, and actions.”

How the Brain Learns, David Sousa (Corwin Press, 2006)

5. Conversational, with “visible author” in the story.

Words on a page are squiggles to be deciphered. But, when the reader feels the author is speaking to him, the whole process is altered. No longer is the reader pulling words off an inanimate page, now there is engagement.

“Research on discourse processing shows that people work harder to understand material when they feel they are in a conversation with a partner, rather than simply receiving information. Conversational style ... when authors are visible, students might see the author as a ‘personal guide through an otherwise difficult terrain’.”

E-Learning and the Science of Instruction, Clark and Mayer (Wiley, 2008)

D. CONCLUSION

With mass adoption of the internet and related digital devices, young readers are deluged with electronic stimuli and distractions. As a result, writers and publishers must work harder to capture their attention and willingness to engage.

Our “skinny” book series is one idea of how to convey important information to the young adult. There will be others. The format of nonfiction writing must keep pace with the amazing changes of our lifetime.

ADDENDA

A. SCIENCE

Studies are supportive of the premise that the constant always-on mindset of the digital age can cause systemic changes in our brains – especially in adolescents.

“A study done at the University of London found that constant emailing and text-messaging reduces mental capacity... the brain is forced to be on alert far too much. This increases what is known as your allostatic load, which is a reading of stress hormones and other factors relating to a sense of threat. The wear and tear from this has an impact.

“As adolescence hits and people become more conscious of an inner life, many notice that their minds are hard to control. ... One reason ... the nervous system is constantly processing, reconfiguring, and reconnecting the trillions of connections in your brain each moment. ... two neuroscientists from MIT studied what happens in the brain when people are distracted by internal thoughts (adolescents) when doing difficult tasks. They found that lapses in attention impair performance....

“When you experience over-arousal over a long period of time (such as constant emailing and texting), your allostatic load increases. This means your level of markers such as cortisol and adrenaline in the blood become chronically high. ... Studies are showing that a high allostatic load can kill existing neurons, and stop the growth of new neurons in the hippocampus, important for forming memories.”

Your Brain at Work, David Rock (Harper Business, 2009)

B. JUST FOR FUN

1. In 1500 Niccolo Machiavelli presented his famous work, *The Prince*, to the ruler of Florence, Lorenzo Medici, with this preamble:

“I have not found among my possessions anything which I hold more dear than, or value so much as, the knowledge of the actions of great men, acquired by long experience in contemporary affairs, and a continual study of antiquity; which I now send, digested into a little volume (about 70 pages) to your Magnificence.

I trust to your benignity that it may be acceptable, seeing that it is not possible for me to make a better gift than to offer you the opportunity of understanding in the shortest time all that I have learnt in so many years, and with so many troubles and dangers; which work I have not embellished with swelling or magnificent words, nor stuffed with rounded periods, nor with any extrinsic allurements or adornments whatever, with which so many are accustomed to embellish their works”

2. *“Un bon croquis vaut mieux qu’un long discours.”*

Napoleon (1805)

Translation: “A good sketch is better than a long speech.”

3. *“A picture shows me at a glance what it takes dozens of pages of a book to expound.”*

Fathers and Sons, Ivan Turgenev (1862)

4. *“Nobody has shown (most writers) how much excess or murkiness has crept into their style and how it obstructs what they are trying to say. If you give me an eight-page article and I tell you to cut it to four pages, you’ll howl and say it can’t be done. Then you’ll go home and do it, and it will be much better. After that comes the hard part: cutting it to three.”*

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