

Sucking in the skim reader

 By [Carolyn Cramer](#)

12 Sep 2013

They could be anywhere. The guy in the cubicle next to yours, your friend who spends all day on Facebook, your boss or even your mother...

In fact, the truth is, they're everywhere, even here, on this page...

The Skim Reader.

Skim readers are a content producer's nightmare. The internet is blamed for a lot of things like the decline in print journalism, the rise in accessible pornography, pirating of television shows and music, but it is also to blame for the rise of the skim reader.

The internet can be a pretty overwhelming place with all its accessories. Every other website has embedded hyperlinks and rotating headers and catchy headlines. Facebook and Twitter make distraction and skim reading the norm of internet habits. So most people go onto a website, see a long body of text and (in their heads at least) run screaming into the distance, arms flailing in the air.

We are a generation of internet users who go in to get what we want, or get distracted trying. Even as I write this I am aware that it will look like just a blur of words to the skim reader, too dense to bother with, unless they see a key phrase of interest.

So what's a content producer to do? Before this gets any longer and you lose interest, allow me to make a few suggestions.

Headings help

Every good designer will tell you that headings break the text (even within a story). They make long copy easier to digest and help your reader find the section they actually WANT to read. Bullet points, though they may seem tacky, also work well for the lazy reader (who - these days - is all of us).

Don't lie

While it is important to use catchy headlines to grab attention, don't lie to your potential audience about the content of your article. If you use a sensational or misleading heading to grab attention, but your content fails to deliver, you're ultimately just pushing people away and making them mistrust you.

All the pretty pictures

Pictures are on the increase. If you can find an image that will convey your message quickly and powerfully, use it. It adds texture to your article. Just make sure it suits what you're saying

Keep it short

The shorter your article, the more likely it is that your audience will read it to the end. As lovely as waxing lyrical is, also keep your sentences short.

Hyperlinks are great

Hyperlinks are great because they enrich your own content. However, you will lose the skim reader who clicks on an interesting link halfway through your article to whatever website you yourself are directing them. If you must use them, ensure that the link opens in a new browser; otherwise you're making an amateur mistake, taking people away from your own webpage.

Go forth and conquer the scourge of the internet: The Skim Reader.

ABOUT CAROLYN CRAMER

Carolyn Cramer heads up Coz it counts, a boutique PR agency which focuses on telling the stories of South African NGOs. Coz it counts clients include Afrika Tikkun, WWF, the conservation organisation, and Relate Bracelets. Visit www.cozitcoounts.co.za for more or find them on Twitter www.twitter.com/cozitcoounts.

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