



Understanding how people read your direct mail results in higher response rates

By Hugh Chewning

With a series of extensive eye-camera studies, Professor Siegfried Vogele, dean of the Institute for Direct Marketing in Munich, Germany, analyzed the precise movement of a subject's eyes as he or she opened and read a mailing.

The study established that people read the outer envelope first. Then, after the envelope, the reader turns to the letter, the enclosure and finally to the response device.

If we pass the reader's inspection of our envelope, on average we only get about 11 seconds before the reader decides to read the letter or trash it.

With such a short time to make our sale, knowing how readers examine our direct mail packages is essential. Fortunately, with Professor Vogele's findings, we can now boost our response rates by positioning our most powerful copy to increase its readership. (And we can better position required copy that could otherwise distract the reader's attention from our sales argument.)

Here are the report's most significant findings.

Using eyes flow to get your envelope opened

Professor Vogele's research confirmed that on average, the reader gives us

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only 7 seconds to persuade them to open the envelope.

Surprisingly, most of the 7 seconds is spent on the back of the envelope as it's being opened. The front of the envelope may get *first* attention but the back gets *longer* attention.

When opening an envelope. . .

- The eyes first fix on the recipient's name and address (Teaser copy should be nearby since the reader's attention goes here first.)
- Then quickly, the eyes take in any headlines or pictures near the address.
- The gaze next moves to the return address in the upper left
- Then across the page to the stamps, meter impression or postage indicia before the envelope is turned over for opening.

Once the reader turns the envelope over, their eyes go to the upper left, quickly checking out any pictures or copy. The eyes then jump to the upper right as the envelope is opened. (Most readers open envelopes from right to left with the eyes following the finger movement.)

Remember, with the reader spending only 7 seconds on the front and back of the outer envelope, our message must be quick and to the point.

Positioning your letter's sales argument to boost results

Common sense tells us that we're going to get better results if our recipients read the letter. Professor Vogele's studies tell us:

- Readers start at the top of the letter reading first their name in the address and salutation
- Then, they go to the end of the letter to see who signed the letter
- And from the signature, readers typically go to the P.S.

But rather than going immediately from the salutation to the signature, most eyes tend to skip down the page pausing for a brief fraction of a second to take in text that's highlighted.

Underlining is the most common way to call attention to your text but it can also include highlighting with color and using sub-headlines.

When you do use underlining, it's best to underline just a few words rather than a whole line. And regardless of how you highlight text, do so to emphasize benefits to the reader.

After the reader completes their scan of the salutation, signature and P.S.,

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they often return to highlighted text. Use this to your advantage by highlighting text that includes benefits to the reader.

Who is writing?

When a letter signer's signature is difficult to read, the eyes tend to go to it repeatedly and body language indicates a negative attitude on the part of the reader. It does help to print the letter signer's name under the signatures but, if you can, avoid "creative" signatures. The reader wants to know who is writing.

The beginning of your letter is at its end

Once the reader sees who signed the letter, most eyes automatically turn to the postscript. Nine of ten readers will read the P.S. before moving back to the top of the letter.

The postscript is really the beginning of the letter rather than its end.

Keep the P.S. to an average of two to three lines and use it to restate the reader's benefits, the offer and to issue a specific call to action.

The impact of illustrations

No graphic element plays a greater role in determining how your direct mail is read than illustrations. Before any word of text is even noted, eyes will be attracted to photographs and/or drawings.

Typically, the reader will go to the pictures first, then the headlines and then to highlighted portions of the letter. Four of five readers participating in the Vogele studies followed this pattern.

Use illustrations to stress benefits rather than your company or product.

If you use a large picture, put it at the top of the letter to pull the reader back to the beginning – rather than having the eyes move back to the highlighted text. And when you use multiple pictures, put the largest picture at the top of the page. The eye will go here first but then be released to move through the text.

Leading the eye with your layouts

Readers typically go to the enclosure after the letter but before the response form. The reader will scan your enclosure quickly and then, if they decide it's worthwhile, they begin with the front cover.

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From the front cover, about one-half of your readers go to the inside of a folded enclosure while the other half turns to the back cover.

Just as with your letter, readers will give first attention to illustrations with their eyes jumping from one illustration to the next before moving on to large and mid-size headlines, while smaller, sectional headings go largely unnoticed.

Once inside a folded enclosure, the normal eye path starts with the reader entering at the upper left corner and then moving quickly to the upper right corner. The eyes then move in a sideways "U" going slightly across the center of the spread and then exiting at the lower right.

In 70-80% of the pieces studied, the readers moved just across the enclosure's center "gutter" from right to left and then quickly moved on off the page at the lower right.

However, if you use a compelling illustration at the far left and smaller or no illustrations to the right, the reader is more likely to extend the "U" further to the left and getting more of your message read.

In cases where the only illustration was in the lower right, the eyes tended to simply move down to that spot from the top of the spread, taking in little else on the two facing pages.

Closing the sale with the response device

Professor Vogele's research confirms much of what you already know about response devices. Yet his findings make a wonderful "checklist" as we move to close the sale.

- Use a separate response device, rather than one that must be cut or torn from another enclosure. Separate reply cards are 3 times more effective than those that are attached.
- Put the recipient's name and address on the reply card. This implies you're waiting for a reply and encourages a response.
- Use an individual's name in the return mailing address. It tells "who" is waiting for the reply.
- Use tear-off stubs -- they are like having a receipt -- and use color to set off anything that is to be detached.
- Make sure all of your reader's logical questions are quickly answered. Tell them what to do, how to do it and what risk they're taking. (A risk they

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overcome thanks to your Guarantee.)

- Describe the benefits the reader will receive when responding.

And be sure to tell your reader what to do, how to do it and when to do it.

Directing readers' eyes to your most powerful sales proposition is virtually certain to increase your response rates. And as direct marketers, we owe it to our clients to practice every technique known to increase their profitability.

In my next post, we'll review "*How graphic devices affect readership of your direct mail.*" Follow these, and the other lessons from Professor Voge's studies, and you should see higher response rates.

Let me know how these techniques work for you.

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