



How To Communicate More Effectively Part Two of a two part article...

I know, I know...this is late...

I do appreciate a number of you reminding me recently. I take it on the chin...

Mind you, it's very flattering to know that you are missing my ramblings...

It's the right reason for what it's worth. Just mega-busy.

Since Christmas, I've just not had time to finish this article. I drafted it quite some time ago, but haven't really had a couple of hours to finish it.

Okay, apologies over. Now to the meat...

In part one, we looked at the main reasons why 97 out of every 100 people do not read an ad, direct mail, insert or email they are looking at – and why response levels are dropping off the cliff...

This month, we continue the theme, with some fascinating stuff about how people look at direct mail. *(I have similar research on ads too, but that's for sharing in a later article...)*

It's invaluable information about how you can give your message an above-average chance in the morass of mediocrity we all have to face every day.

What it also clearly confirms dear reader, is that words are now KING. Why, oh why, has it taken so long...?

Yes folks, finally, the research you are about to read, undertaken by forward thinking individuals in scientific, analytical and controlled tests, confirms without a shadow of a doubt, that in these exceptionally tough times, the humble copywriter is now the most important person in the whole communications process.

Don't believe me? Read on ...

In 1986 at the unforgettable International Direct Marketing Symposium in Montreux, Switzerland, Professor Siegfried Voegelé, Dean of the Institute for Direct Marketing in Munich, West Germany, delivered an unbelievable session that all present will never forget.

It was a live demonstration during which he shared some incredible research he had been running, regarding eye cameras.

Eye-cameras had been used worldwide for a number of years to study reading habits and patterns. But Professor Voegelé added loads of significant refinements that, for the first time, provided scientific evidence of how typical recipients look at and read direct mail packs.

The research is now 20 years old. But don't let that put you off. The findings are as relevant today, as they were then. More so, actually.

The only reason that any meaningful stuff hasn't been done since then, is basically that no one cares anymore. Only a handful of people seem to care in our business and most of them will be retiring soon...

What a state of affairs...

(a) Envelopes

Not surprisingly, the front of the envelope got first attention in 70-80% of the cases.

Recipients looked at their name in the address, then quickly read the message or any pictures near the address. Then they looked at the return address in the upper left corner (this is a mainland Europe and U.S. thing, rarely used in the UK. Perhaps we should start...).

They then looked across the envelope to the stamps, or postage indicia before the envelope is turned over for opening.

All of this took a couple of seconds.

Once the envelope was turned over, the eyes immediately looked at the upper left, and checked out any pictures or copy that might be there. They then jumped to the upper right as the envelope was opened. Most envelopes, predictably, are opened from right to left and the eyes follow the finger or letter opener.

Studies showed that only seven seconds was devoted to the envelope, including the removal of all the elements. And here's an interesting snippet. Since most of the seven seconds was spent on the back of the envelope as it was being opened, back-of-the-envelope messages should logically offer greater selling opportunities.

But how many envelopes sent out today, are printed reverse as well? I bet it isn't as high as 15%. The main reason – cost. But, as we know, it's not what it costs, it's what it delivers...

Oh, for a quid every time I've had to say that...

Show these facts to your pin-stripe who always wants everything as cheap as chips and let me know how you get on...

Overall, the average time spent in reviewing the envelope contents was 11 seconds.

Remember, this was 1986. I have some up to date conversions for all elements at the end of this article ...

(b) The Letter

The eye-camera studies pretty much confirmed what had previously been known about how people read direct mail letters.

They showed that readers started at the top of the letter, going first to their name in the address and salutation (if the letter is personalised) and then proceeded to the end of the letter to discover, through the signature, who is writing to them.

They took in the P.S. at the same time. (As I have shared with you before, tests confirm that nearly 8 out of 10 read the P.S. before they start reading the body copy.)

This confirms what the professionals have always known - **the P.S is really the beginning of a direct mail letter, not the end.** Believe it or not, there are still dinosaurs out there that disregard this and refuse to use a P.S.

The Voegle studies gave us some more vital information. When recipients commenced looking at the body of the letter, they skipped down the page, pausing for a brief fraction of a second to take in sub-heads and any highlighted words.

These pauses he called "fixations" and on average lasted only 2/10ths of a second. The times between fixations he called "jumps" took only 1-5/100ths of a second.

Professor Voegle discovered some interesting things about signatures too.

When a signature was difficult to read, the reader tended to go over and over it and body language indicated a negative attitude on the part of the reader.

This is very interesting and should scare some people out there half to death, whose signatures are scrawls or worse.

...notably the buffoons at AOL who don't even put a name on their direct mail....

The entire scanning process, including a quick look at the enclosures, averaged only 11 seconds per mailing. *Remember, this was 1986. More on this later...*

(c) Enclosures

The studies showed no surprises in sequence. The letter was read first, with the most common order of readership being envelope, letter, enclosures and then the response device.

Before multiple enclosures were read, recipients scanned them all quickly.

Just as with letters, the copy on enclosures was scanned quickly with the average piece getting approximately 10 brief 'fixations'.

The pattern depended primarily on the positioning of graphic elements.

On a 4/6 pager, the normal eye path started with the reader entering at the upper left corner and then moving quickly to the upper right corner. The eyes then moved in a sideways "U" going slightly across the centre of the spread and then exiting at the lower right.

(d) Other Interesting Stuff

(i) 80% of readers went to a vertical shape before a horizontal shape. But diagonal shapes were even more compelling. Circled areas were generally noted before square-cornered areas.

(ii) "bursts" got immediate attention, but generally for a very short period. It was clear though, that such elements can often be distracting since they have a tendency to keep drawing the eyes away from any copy that they may be reading.

(iii) "The Law of Proximity." Whatever was closest to an item, was perceived to be related to that item. Clearly then, it's important to place captions as close to pictures as possible. Remember, captions should always be below, or to the right of an picture or illustration, never above, or to the left.

(iv) Personalised response devices get more attention and generated greater response.

OK then, all fascinating stuff, I hope you agree. Research from the trenches, as it were, to really make you think.

And act, hopefully, otherwise you disregard it at your peril and join the majority with their heads in the sand...

But this research, as I have previously mentioned, *was* conducted in 1986 and an awful lot has happened since then.

So, let's look at the above in the context of where we are now - 2006. In my view, some of the above timings have changed dramatically, purely because our letterboxes and desks have been 'raped' over the last 20 years, by mass mailings put together and written by charlatans...

For what it's worth, here's my stab at where we are now...

Q. How much time does the average person spend looking at the envelope?

A. **Depends entirely on the words used.** Overprinted front only - 1.5 seconds.
Printed front and reverse - 4 seconds.

1986 - 7 seconds. 2006 - 1.5 - 4 seconds

Q. Once a prospect opens the package, how long on average does he/she spend reviewing the contents before he/she decides whether to bin it or read on?

A. **Completely dependent on the quality of the copy.** End of story...

1986 - 11 seconds 2006 - On average, 5.5 seconds

Q. How long do prospects scan enclosures?

A. **Again, this depends greatly on the letter copy.** If the letter, which as we know is read first, really interests the reader, then the enclosures will get a lot more attention. But, for the average crap pack of today, written badly, the timing is about the same as in 1986 - two seconds on average - made up of an average of 5 fixations each 2/10ths of a second, plus attention to any graphic elements.

1986 - 2 seconds 2006 - Crap pack, 2 seconds, well written pack up to 20 seconds

To conclude, let's revisit some more facts. I know I've shared these with you before, but now seems the right time to restate, especially after the above data...

Those individuals you have selected for your forthcoming direct mail campaign, don't want to hear from you. They are not interested in you, your brand or your product.

Your 'positioning' is a bore to them. Your company philosophy sends them to sleep.

They are only interested in *themselves*.

Having said all that, if you have an offer for them that's relevant, interesting and provides them with a real **benefit**, they *may* give you a minute or two of their time...

What's more, if you create, write and produce your mailing in the right way, applying human psychology and acknowledging the way people look at direct mail, then at least your pack has a fighting chance.

Oh yes...and don't forget to deliver it to them, using the right words...nothing less will do in these tough times, when copy is KING...

Keep the faith...

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andy', with a small dot at the end.

See you next month, when I have some wonderful stuff to share with you - good and bad. I've been collecting and scanning like mad.

P.S. Lots of exciting gigs coming up in 2006. London, Dubai, Romania, Slovenia, Jordan and Thailand. Hopefully I'll have all the dates for you next month. I hope to meet some of you at the events...

About the Author

Andy Owen is Managing Director of Andy Owen & Associates, a leading International Strategic Marketing Consultancy specialising in direct marketing. The company has offices in Birmingham, London and Dubai, with associate offices in Cairo, Paris, New York & Los Angeles.

The company's corporate website is www.andyowen.co.uk. The specialist copy division has its own site at www.copywritingthatsells.com

Andy's previous articles can all be viewed and downloaded at www.andyowen.co.uk/articles.html and Andy can be contacted on 0044 121 778 6640, or by email personally at andyowen@aol.com