

# **WHAT READERS TELL US THEY READ**

**F**or the past few years, information gleaned from researchers and from nationwide readership surveys has been leading us to a deeper understanding of how newspaper readers approach us.

Some conclusions:

› Readers don't spend much time with newspapers. Studies indicate they spend an average of 15 to 25 minutes. That figure doesn't vary with the size of the paper, meaning that bulky papers are read even less intently than smaller papers. That also means that only a small percentage of items in the paper are looked at, let alone read. Research by the Gallup organization suggests that as few as one-fifth to one-quarter of the stories on the front page are read. Photos get higher readership, but even half of them pass unnoticed.

› To attract skimmers, there must be more points of sale. That means segmenting: breaking long stories into smaller bites, using subheads, pullouts, graphics — anything to get the reader to pause.

› More display type should be used. Five- or six-word heads do not tell and sell stories. Dropheads, summaries or pullouts should be used.

› Readers will spend more of their time with briefs than with stories. *The Wall Street Journal's* use of briefs and news summaries on page 1 has worked for years, but probably now more than ever. All papers should consider summaries.

› Readers want things to be in the same place every issue. Too many papers still offer a daily Easter egg hunt on the theory that readers will see more items as they search through the paper for their favorite features. The opposite is true. Readers are like children looking for the eggs; if the eggs are too hard to find, they simply quit looking.

› Most readers don't want a lot of information. They want the important and interesting information presented succinctly and packaged well. That doesn't mean newspapers cannot provide news in depth. Good reporting, packaged well, will still have an audience.

› Information must be made more usable. Too often, newspapers fail to give people the information they need to act.

› The foundation of a community newspaper is records copy. Newspapers should examine whether they are carrying all the police, fire, hospital, real estate, legal and calendar items they can obtain. And they must package these for ease of reading.

Excerpted from:

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