

chapter 4 |

# Attention!



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## The Point of Attention

*The scarcest resource for today's business leaders is no longer just land, capital, or human labor, and it certainly isn't information.*

*Attention is what's in short supply.*

—**Thomas H. Davenport  
and John C. Beck,**  
*Harvard Business Review*

*The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgement, character, and will.*

—**William James,**  
*The Principles of Psychology*

Attention is the coin of the Internet. In the economy of attention, value is measured by Time × Intensity. How long have you paid attention to me? And how intently have you stared at me? That is my net worth.

Of course, the Internet is built on the old economy of capital, labor, goods, services, and money. But parallel to the traditional market there has always been another exchange in which we trade attention with each other. And the Internet has dramatically increased the volume of trading on that floor.

Even though attention is not gold, it is valuable. When business people talk dreamily of eyeballs, click-through streams, stickiness, and ideas spreading virally, they are hoping, of course, that winning someone's attention may pay off in purchases, or at least goodwill. But millions of other people simply post because they want us to notice what they care about, to share their focus, or to get our attention. When a visitor writes to praise our text, we blossom; and when we respond thoughtfully to their e-mail or discussion post, their next message often shines with pleasure. We like the attention.

But what exactly is attention? It is an intangible energy, a subjective and intensely personal experience. You cannot put your thumb on it. Researchers can find no particular lobe of the brain in which attention resides. Scientists can track eye movements, and guess what you are attending to on a Web page, but they cannot share your experience of attention as it is pulled here, sidetracked, or diffused.

Attention acts as a scout. If we have a conscious purpose, we can direct our attention very efficiently. If we have a sharply defined goal on a visit to a Web site, we tend to represent the quest to ourselves in words, and as we scan, our attention seems to pick up any of those words in the text. Unfortunately, this kind of scanning is hard to do on-screen because of the fuzzy display of text. So we direct attention to certain areas (at the top of the page, for

instance), and we look for certain formats (such as headings, bold-face phrases, the first line of a paragraph) because we expect that if the words show up in those spots, the text will be relevant to our concern. Primed to catch certain words, attention seizes on them—if it can spot them. When pursuing a goal like this, human attention turns out to be an excellent hunter.

And when we actually pay attention to something, our mind ignores the other things in the neighborhood. If we try, we can attend to several different items at once, but we soon feel the strain. Essentially, our being is built to focus. Attention acts as a kind of filter.

In fact, research shows that we usually devote attention to only one thing at a time, even if we switch quickly from one to another. In most cases, what we think of as multitasking is actually just shifting our attention from one thing to another and back. At any moment, our attention is one-pointed, but the point shifts from moment to moment.

When we do not have an intensely felt or fully articulated goal, attention seems to float over the page, watching for targets of opportunity, eventually swooping down and pouncing on a particular object. Why does undirected attention seem to be pulled to one object and not another?

First, it seems, a certain instinct for self-preservation directs attention. We seem to be genetically wired to notice sudden change because that could suggest danger. Anything that changes the scene dramatically, introduces something new, or transforms something that we were already familiar with, draws our attention instantly. We may be annoyed to find we are looking at a flashing text or inverted video advertising insurance, but our attention went to the motion automatically. Similarly, attention descends on any word or phrase that has a different format from the rest of the text—bold-face, say, or blue and underlined. We can see the physical difference long before we understand the difference in meaning, as we move from one word to another. Attention tends automatically to ignore the routine, and swoops down on the exception.

Next, passion draws attention—good old greed, lust, envy, curiosity, hero worship, ambition, rage, or vanity can arise in a

*To sustain attention takes a steady, dynamic flow of impulses.*

—James Austin, *Zen and the Brain*

*The hunter is the alert man.*

—Ortega y Gasset,  
*Meditations on Hunting*

split second, triggered by a mere word, nudging attention toward the scene. Whatever we have a passionate interest in, our attention discovers, even in the most unlikely places.

And if a phrase evokes any strong feelings, our attention is quickly drawn to the emotion-laden text. Then, if we are what the psychologists consider normal, we can, if we want, withdraw our attention just as quickly without thinking too much about the subject. But if we are anxious, defensive, neurotic, or downright crazy, we will take more time to ponder, fondle, and digest the words. In either case, attention is riveted to the text's area and significance for as long as it takes to enjoy and then disengage.

People, too, attract our attention inadvertently. Think how quickly you size up a stranger. But if you see a friend, or someone you love, your attention settles on them. Just seeing the name of the object of your affection, attention circles the text. Love, and its companion, desire, guide attention.

So, to draw attention to your text:

- Make scanning easy by putting key terms where attention knows to look first—at the top of the page, in headings, and so on.
- Write about topics that people are looking for. When they spot one, they'll pay attention and praise your text as relevant.
- Respond to the purposes that bring visitors to your site. The more you use the terms they think of to explain their goals, the quicker their attention will pounce on your text.
- Avoid distracting visitors with a lot of off-topic text, links, and images. Keep the focus.
- Write something new, as the poet Ezra Pound suggested. Surprise, oddness, and unfamiliarity attract attention. Put key terms in a format that stands out.
- Let your own passion show through the prose. Mention feelings and interests. Yes, it's OK to get emotional; in the cold world of the computer, those strong feelings capture attention.

*Each of us literally chooses, by his way of attending to things, what sort of a universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit.*

—William James,  
*The Principles of Psychology*

- Talk about people. We're always interested in people. If your audience has some heroes or heroines, indulge in a bit of biography.
- Reveal yourself. Hey, you're a person. Letting that secret out will automatically interest other people.

## Simplicity saves attention

Attention turns out to be a limited resource. We only have so much to give.

Allowing targets of opportunity to swim into view takes only a little attention. Scanning for a particular topic takes more attention. The process of reading takes a lot. Having a particular term or topic in mind, anticipating where the target words may appear, we can scan fairly smoothly. When we spot a likely target, we shift gears and actually read the word, to confirm that it is related to the topic we are concerned with. We are, first, a user, and second a reader. More generally, we turn attention to an object first, and only then do we identify its meaning, a much more complicated task.

Reading demands a great deal more attention than scanning because we must pick up the general theme of a passage by skimming for thematic markers, spotting the key words, piecing together an interpretation back in our mind, and then returning to the text to test our evolving idea, refining it as we move forward. We only have a limited amount of attention to devote to this process. Interestingly, what can strain our capacity for attention is the very act of reading if the text grows more complex. The simpler the text, the less strain.

When we are reading on-screen, and the effort eats up a lot of our attention, we have little attention left over for navigation or other tasks. When the text itself grows tangled, our attention may blow a fuse. Messy text, combined with the poor legibility of characters on-screen, may require more attention than most of us have available. Result: we do not comprehend, think about, or act on the message.

Simplicity helps our readers preserve their fragile attention and ensures that they can focus on our meaning.

*Because of information technology, the object of the person's attention is capable of both learning from the person's past behavior and expressed preferences, and then behaving differently toward that particular person, based on this learning.*

—Don Peppers and Martha Rogers,  
*Enterprise One to One*

*When attention is fully deployed into behavior, it means, quite literally, that the person leans into just one activity at a time.*

—James Austin, *Zen and the Brain*

*When you are awake and conscious, your locus of attention is a feature or an object in the physical world or an idea about which you are intently and actively thinking.*

—Jef Raskin,  
*The Humane Interface*

## Writing means paying attention

As you write for the Web, you have a lot of things to pay attention to—your evolving understanding of the subject, your sense of your guests, your progress in building the formal structure of your text, and your feel for the way your words will work on-screen. In wrestling with a paragraph, for instance, your attention may dwell on the event you are trying to describe, then turn to a particular group who cares about the subject, switching back and forth repeatedly as you work to express your idea in terms they will understand. In editing a passage, you may notice that your attention is following along very nicely until, all of a sudden, you are thrown out of the text as your attention goes into orbit, launched by some irrelevant but interesting analogy. You direct your attention as you dig into your notes, and you watch your attention as if it were a reader's, to see how your own text makes it jump or keeps it hanging in there, as you review your output.

As a craft, writing has always demanded concentration, which most people think of as walling out the rest of the world and putting a tight rein on attention. But writing for the Web demands that you pay more attention to small groups in your audience and even individuals, at times; that you change your habits of writing to make your text work in the Web environment; and that you keep consulting a standard structure to see how you are matching its model. This multiplicity of points of attention can make you dizzy if you try too hard to exert control. Better to relax and follow the conversation as best you can, recognizing that it's natural for attention to move.

People who read what you write are very aware of your attitude toward them and toward your topic. Between the lines of your text, they can sense when you have paid attention to them, when you have been sensitive to their concerns, and when you share their interests and their passions.

In this sense, attention is the soul's antenna—soft, sensitive, quick, alert. It picks up facts we cannot articulate. It senses moods, possibilities, points of view. It goes where imagining can only follow, inside our own body and across the Internet. As the eyes and ears of the spirit, attention is what we communicate. In our virtual conversations on the Internet, attention is the exclamation point.

**See:** Austin (1999), Broadbent (1957), Conner (2001), Dalglish (1995), Davenport and Beck (2001), DeRuiter and Brosschot (1994), Green (1991), Goldhaber (1992, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1998), James (1890/1950, 1925), Lanham (1994), Palmer and Rock (1994), Pashler (1998), Thorngate (1988, 1990), Titchener (1908), Treisman (1982).

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