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Text and images in promotional materials – what type of information is important for customers?

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Abstract. In promotional materials, such as shop newsletters, the visual message is used more and more often, while shortening the descriptions of products. Although the image often attracts attention first, it may not necessarily maintain it and not always allows to assess the quality of the product. In the case of technological products, technical specification seems to be particularly important in the process of purchase decision-making. Simultaneously, its appearance seems to be a feature of minor importance. In this study, two types of newsletters were compared: containing large images and short descriptions, and containing small images and long descriptions. Participants were asked to read the offer and evaluate the attractiveness of the products. The aim of this study was to compare the assessment of the attractiveness depending on the length of description and the size of the images, as well as a comparative analysis of the visual exploration of both types of newsletters based on eye tracking data.

Introduction

Marketers often claim that nowadays we are living in a pictorial era, especially in the area of marketing communication. Nearly every ad, regardless of its type (printed, television, or Internet), consists of huge, colorful images whose aim is to convince us on the emotional level about the benefits of a certain product or service.

The message is usually pretty simple, often limited to a recommendation given by a physically attractive and well-dressed person. But is this really all we need to make up our mind and buy the product? To some extent, in the case of advertisements, it might be enough only to catch one's attention and present a certain product in order to make people aware of its existence and build positive associations. However, in the case of shop newsletters, their aim is rather to deliver more detailed information about the current offer, so customers can make sure it meets their expectations. Especially regarding the electronic devices, their specification is crucial and, for the majority of customers, more important than its appearance.

In this experimental study, two versions of promotional materials were compared, both of them related to technological products. One of them contained large images of the products and short descriptions, and the other one contained relatively small images and extended descriptions. The visual exploration path was recorded for every participant using eye tracking mobile device. It seems that there are minor differences in the field exploration depending on the configuration of elements on promotional materials, but there are also some patterns of exploration that emerge and are quite consistent regardless of the type of visual stimulus.

Theoretical background

Relatively little is known about the perception of text and images in marketing materials. Although a lot of research is conducted in this area, often times using eye tracking devices, it is usually carried out for private companies, and the results are not available to the public. Probably, the first published study aiming at uncovering the processes accompanying the visual exploration of marketing materials was undertaken by Rayner, Rotello, Stewart, Keir, and Duffy (2001). In this study, participants were told to imagine they had just moved to England and needed to buy a car or a skin lotion, depending on the instructional condition. They were exposed to 24 different advertisements, 8 car ads, 8 lotion ads, and 8 others. What they found is that the average fixation duration and the average saccade were longer on the pictures than on the text. What is more, for the large text, fixations were shorter than for the small one, and the saccades were longer. Regarding the scan path, the participants tended to look first at the big print, then move to small print, and finally explore the pictures contained in the ad. Sometimes before moving to the small print, they made a short fixation on a picture. The participants were also asked about their preferences for the ads, and, as it turned out, they disliked ads with no picture or with too much text.

Apart from this study, there are two others, which also refer to the processes of perception of a material consisting of text and images, although they are not

embedded in the context of marketing. One of them, conducted by Carroll, Young, and Guertin (1992) applies to visual exploration of cartoons. It revealed that text and image processing are rather separated than interweaving events. Besides, the image examination usually came after the text processing, and was associated with longer average fixations. What is interesting, unlike in other experiments, the saccades tended to be shorter during image inspection than during text reading.

Another study which used text with images as a stimuli was performed by Hegarty (1992a, 1992b). The results showed that the image inspection usually came after the text reading, which is consistent with the results of Carroll et al. (1992) and Rayner et al. (2001). What is more, the final image inspection was longer and more global than the earlier ones.

The present study, as those discussed above, contained materials with text and images, but in the form of shop newsletters. What is more, the size of images and descriptions was manipulated in order to check for potential differences in the visual field exploration. Newsletters were printed and presented in the form they usually appear in the shop, which provided quite natural conditions.

Method

39 students of Poznan University of Economics participated in the study, 20 of them were female. Their age ranged from 18 to 24, with the average of 21. They were given a printed shop newsletter from an electronic store. It consisted of a big company logo at the top and four different products with a picture, logo, description, and a price. It included a game console, computer, smartphone, and tablet. Half of them received a newsletter with big pictures and short product descriptions, and the other half – a newsletter with small pictures and long descriptions. In the former condition, the area covered by pictures was about 16% of a whole newsletter and about 5% was covered by descriptions, while in the latter – 10% was covered by pictures and 10% by descriptions. Other parts of the newsletter remained the same in both conditions.

The task was to look at the newsletter and choose one product which participants would like to give as a gift to a close person. Then, they were asked to fill out a short questionnaire. It consisted of questions about the chosen product, the factors that influenced their decision (picture, description, price, the ability to purchase in installments, brand, other), and the perceived attractiveness of all the products on a 10-grade scale. While looking at the newsletter, their eye movements were recorded using a mobile eye tracking device with 60 Hz sampling frequency.

Results

Mann-Whitney test was performed in order to look for potential differences in the product attractiveness evaluation depending on the size of the images and descriptions. No differences were found between the big images condition (game console: $M = 7.00$, $SD = 1.80$; computer: $M = 6.05$, $SD = 2.10$; smartphone: $M = 5.53$, $SD = 1.78$; tablet: $M = 6.95$, $SD = 2.17$) and the small images condition (game console: $M = 7.65$, $SD = 1.14$; computer: $M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.84$; smartphone: $M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.92$; tablet: $M = 6.25$, $SD = 1.94$). Also, a chi-square analysis did not reveal any significant differences in the participants' choice. For four products (game console, computer, smartphone, and tablet) the number of participants who had chosen a particular product in the big images condition was: 7, 1, 2, and 9 respectively. In the second condition: 13, 0, 1, and 6. Similarly, there were no significant differences in declared factors that determined the participants' decision. In both groups, the participants stated that the most important factor for them was the image of a product. The multivariate ANOVA was performed in order to look for a potential impact of the image/description size and the type of stimulus (image, description, price, logo, shop logo on the top) on the eye movement characteristics. All the images formed one AOI group, as well as all the product descriptions, prices, and logos. There were no significant differences in the eye movement characteristics depending on the size of images/descriptions. There were, however, significant differences in a few eye movement characteristics depending on the AOI group. AOI groups differed in normalized dwell time (which is dwell time in milliseconds divided by the area of coverage) [$F(4) = 7.26$, $p < 0.05$]. Post hoc Turkey HSD test revealed that normalized dwell time was significantly longer (more than twice) for the product descriptions than for the images. Next highest value, just after the descriptions, was reached by the prices followed by the logos. The lowest value of normalized dwell time was achieved by the shop logo placed on the top of the ad. There was also an effect of AOI group on the sequence (the order in which a particular area was noticed) [$F(4) = 6.69$, $p < 0.05$]. For the pictures, it was smaller (they were noticed earlier) than for the product descriptions with a difference of 1.3. The average sequence was as follows: picture, logo, price, shop logo, and description. The number of revisits differed as well, depending on AOI group [$F(4) = 7.61$, $p < 0.05$], and was significantly lower for the shop logo than all the other groups. There was, however, no significant difference between the descriptions and pictures in the number of revisits. The number of fixations was AOI group dependent [$F(4) = 3.24$, $p < 0.05$], and was significantly lower for the shop logo than for the prices and descriptions, although there were no differences between the descriptions and pictures. The last variable which differed between various AOI groups was the average fixation duration [$F(4) = 4.44$, $p < 0.05$], which was significantly lower for the shop logo than for the descriptions,

prices, and logos. All the eye movement characteristics which differed significantly depending on the AOI group are presented in Table 1, with their mean and standard deviation values. Figure 1 presents the visual stimuli used in this study – an example of a shop newsletter in two research conditions with obtained heat maps superimposed.

Table 1

Eye movement characteristics for each AOI group

AOI group	Normalized dwell time [ms/coverage]		Sequence		Revisits		Fixation count		Average fixation duration [ms]	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Descriptions	84 855	87.1	3.6	1.2	8.14	6.3	24.8	22	215.9	61.1
Pictures	40 143	32.7	2.3	1.2	11.4	8.2	21.5	16.8	205.2	47
Prices	69 656	98.4	2.6	1.4	9.62	9.1	28.2	35.9	220.3	54.8
Product logos and names	47 129	39	2.6	1	9.61	5.7	20.3	14.1	229.1	64.6
Shop logo	7 208	8.66	3.4	1.8	2.81	2.9	9.87	11	177.9	44.2



Figure 1. Shop newsletter in two research conditions with heat maps revealing the concentration of fixations on the product descriptions

Source: own elaboration.

Discussion

Summing up, it appears that the shop newsletter visual exploration pattern remains quite stable irrespective of the size of the images and descriptions included. Moreover, the configuration of its elements does not influence the final product choice and the evaluation of the products attractiveness. Independently from the size of the newsletter elements, people tended to spend most of the time reading the descriptions of the products. Those descriptions, however, were usually studied carefully at the very end, preceded by a quick gaze on the picture, price, and logo. Those results are contrary to the previous findings (Carroll et al., 1992; Hegarty, 1992a, 1992b; Rayner et al., 2001), where text reading preceded image exploration. Another discrepancy is the duration of average fixation, which in this study was slightly, although insignificantly, longer for the text than for the images. The participants tended to fixate shortly, but repeatedly, on the images (as the number of revisits for the images was highest). It might mean that although the information contained in the product image is simple and does not involve much processing, it is quite important for the customer.

The pattern that reappeared in this study is the big print exploration preceding the small print exploration. People usually read the big shop logo, product logos, and prices before moving on to the small print descriptions.

In general, those findings seem to support the hypothesis stating that as far as electronic devices are concerned, the technical specification is very important, and there is no need to worry that customers will not read it. Precise descriptions will surely deliver the information that customers need, which might fasten their decision-making process, and instead of searching for the information on the Internet, they may go directly to the shop to make a purchase. Consequently, replacing the parts of descriptions with bigger and bigger pictures, a trend which has been evident lately in promotional materials, seems to be unjustified, as it does not entail greater involvement (longer fixations) or better product evaluation. There is, however, a certain amount of time that people are ready to spend on reading product descriptions. In the study performed by Rayner et al. (2001), the participants read the same amount of text, regardless of its length. What is more, when it came to ad evaluation, they reported feeling overwhelmed by too much text in the ads. In general, people report a bigger preference for images, they also claim that images have more impact on their decision than a description has. It is questionable, however, to what extent their statements correspond to their behavior. Future market research embedded in natural shop conditions may reveal whether the configuration of elements in promotional materials influence real purchase decisions.

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Tekst i obraz w materiałach promocyjnych – jaki typ informacji jest ważny dla klienta?

Słowa kluczowe: materiały promocyjne, badania okulograficzne, percepcja oferty produktowej

Streszczenie. W materiałach promocyjnych, takich jak np. gazetki sklepowe, coraz częściej korzysta się z przekazu wizualnego, minimalizując jednocześnie liczbę informacji o produktach. Choć obraz często przykuwa uwagę w pierwszej kolejności, niekoniecznie może ją utrzymać i co ważne, nie zawsze umożliwia dokonanie oceny jakości produktu. W przypadku urządzeń technologicznych specyfikacja techniczna zdaje się być szczególnie istotna w procesie podejmowania decyzji o zakupie. Jednocześnie ich wygląd wydaje się być cechą o mniejszym znaczeniu. W przedstawionym badaniu eksploracji poddano dwa rodzaje gazetek promocyjnych: zawierające duże obrazki i niewiele treści oraz zawierające małe obrazki i dużo treści. Uczestnicy mieli za zadanie zapoznać się z ofertą sklepu i dokonać oceny atrakcyjności produktów. Celem badania było dokonanie porównania w ocenie atrakcyjności zależnie od ilości treści oraz wielkości obrazków, a także analiza porównawcza sposobu eksploracji wzrokowej obu typów gazetek promocyjnych na podstawie danych okulograficznych.

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