




TEENS KNOW WHAT THEY WANT FROM ONLINE NEWS:

DO YOU?

A 2009 research study from the NAA Foundation and the Media Management Center at Northwestern University looks at how newspapers can engage with young people.



The Newspaper Association of America Foundation and the Media Management Center (MMC) at Northwestern University have teamed up in 2009 to explore and put to the test better ways to match the online news preferences of teens.

In previous MMC studies (see “Methodology” on back cover), young people clearly told researchers how current online news offerings don’t connect with them. What’s being offered, teens said, simply doesn’t fit their needs, interests and current capabilities. Moreover, there’s a mismatch between what’s offered, what they can process and absorb, and the amount of time they’re willing to give to it. If news organizations are going to engage them, they need to offer something different.

So earlier this year, the Foundation and MMC joined forces to find out what would appeal to young people. They developed prototypes of home pages and story-level pages to address the problems uncovered in previous studies, then tested them in focus groups across the United States. The teens’ responses were remarkably and overwhelmingly consistent, no matter the market size or location.

Researchers found there are better ways to serve teens with online news. The answer isn’t to dilute the news, but to be bolder. Teens want three basic things in a news site:

- ★ The site should help them become interested in news by focusing their attention on a few items, illustrated with photos, explaining what is going on and why it matters.
- ★ The home page should provide a general sense of the news and a seductive pitch for each story in as simple and visually enticing a manner as possible.
- ★ Story-level pages should richly supplement the news with basic information, background material and other insights, all displayed in manageable chunks with multiple entry points and plenty of visuals.

This doesn’t mean that news organizations should necessarily create sites just for teens. The term “youth news Web site” conjures up visions of a site heavy with lifestyle and entertainment content, with a little news on the side. But what these teens said they want are news sites that do news well – not dumb it down or pose as experts in teen culture.

Thus, a broader and bolder approach is in order. Given that teen responses were very similar to those of adults who are light readers, the Foundation and MMC recommend creating a new type of site – not just for teens, but for all people who lack experience with news and have a limited amount of time to get engaged in it. This approach not only would serve teens better, but also would attract a much larger underserved adult audience.

TEN KEY LESSONS about serving young audiences:

1. Don't overload them.

The surest way to turn teens away is to leave them feeling overwhelmed. Reduce the volume of information on the page by featuring fewer stories, words and photos. Spend more space on highlighting and explaining those stories.

2. Create home pages that satisfy.

Teens want a home page that gives them an adequate sense of the news without having to do any further clicking. The home page should provide a brief but understandable overview that quickly conveys what's going on, like television and radio news reports do. Teens don't want to keep clicking unless they get interested in the story and decide to learn more about it.

3. Entice them to keep reading.

While teens want home pages to be sufficient unto themselves, they also like it when something "catches my eye" and draws them in. But they don't want just a tease; they want to know why they should care about a particular story. They want a photo, too, to help draw their attention. It's almost as if they are saying, "Interest me, please!"

4. Summarize stories on the home page.

Summaries solve the two major problems teens have on news home pages: getting the gist of stories without clicking on them and knowing what to expect if they do. For most, one sentence per story is just about enough. On unfamiliar topics, a slightly longer approach sometimes works. But if summaries get too long, they tune out.

5. Include visuals with anything that matters.

To get teens to notice something and engage with it, use photos or graphics. Both home and story-level pages with multiple photos rate far and above pages without art. Visuals provide key information and make the pages more compelling. But avoid too much of a good thing: Include too many photos and risk turning them off with clutter.

6. Convey what's important with a clear visual hierarchy.

The most disliked prototypes combined a lack of hierarchy with a good dose of general overload. Teens need help understanding what's important. They don't have the time or knowledge to sift through endless items that all look the same to them. Pages with too many stories or design elements competing for their attention turn them off.

7. Beware of too much scrolling and clicking.

Teens want to click on stories only when they get thoroughly engaged in a topic. Although the effort involved in clicking might seem inconsequential to adults, the potential for wasted effort weighs heavily on the minds of many teens, who express an intense feeling of being time-starved. They complain vigorously about being duped into clicking by a misleading headline.

8. Provide background, explanation and context.

When teens decide they are interested enough in a story to click, they want it to be worthwhile. They don't like story pages that just give them one short or long article. They need additional information. As in previous research (see "Methodology" on back cover), teens in this survey were delighted with story pages that assembled a mix of current and background information all in one place.

9. Break up information into manageable chunks.

Almost universally, teens reject pages with uninterrupted text in favor of those that offer information in smaller, bite-sized chunks with multiple entry points. They love pages that break a story up into several pieces, each with its own clear headline, subhead and photo. Teens like story pages that offer different ways to get into a story: graphics, photo galleries, videos, pulled quotes and other methods.

10. Get rid of clutter.

Filling open spaces with top searches, "Did You Know?" boxes, video clips, small ads, tabs, pictures and other things to add variety or visual energy isn't a good idea. The clutter this causes doesn't add value and makes it harder for teens to see and absorb the main features of the page.





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METHODOLOGY

This report from the Newspaper Association of America Foundation and the Media Management Center (MMC) at Northwestern University is based on research conducted in early 2009 with a total of 96 young people, ages 13-18, in six U.S. cities: Denver; Fresno, Calif.; Springfield, Ill.; Philadelphia; Fort Lauderdale; and Orangeburg, S.C. In online pre-work and in 90-minute focus groups, teens were shown and asked to comment on a series of prototype Web pages that had been developed to address key problems identified in two 2008 MMC studies of young people: "If It Catches My Eye: An Exploration of Online News Experiences of Teenagers" and "From 'Too Much' to 'Just Right': Engaging Millennials in Election News on the Web."

For more details on this study and on previous related work by the Foundation and MMC, visit www.naafoundation.org and www.mediamanagementcenter.org.

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