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USING LINKS TO KEEP READERS ON NEWS SITES

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SUMMARY

The Center for Media Engagement tested several factors to determine best practices for using links on news websites. The results of the study suggest that newsrooms should consider doing the following to increase link clicks on their site:

- Use images in links and place links at the end of the page
- Offer related content over popular content, although popular content got more clicks when Facebook was the referral site
- Use generic wording (e.g. Related Stories) instead of complex wording (e.g. What Else People Can Read on This Topic) to describe the links

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THE PROBLEM

Newsrooms spend time and resources attracting audiences to their websites. Once audiences get to the site, the goal is to provide content that is compelling enough to keep them there. Recirculation, or "the percentage of users who visit another page of your website after they finish reading their first article," is driven in part by links that promote other content on the site. This makes links critical components of news sites, as they allow newsrooms to serve their audience with desired content.

The purpose of this report, which was funded by The Lenfest Institute for Journalism, is to explore best practices in using links on news sites. We partnered with seven local broadcast newsrooms owned by the Graham Media Group and evaluated four factors:

- Whether the links were text-only or a combination of text and images
- The placement of the links on the page
- The type of content, related or popular, included in the links
    - Related content was generated from site articles related to the story
    - Popular content was generated from articles trending on the site
- The wording used to describe the links

KEY FINDINGS

- There were more clicks when links contained images and appeared at the end of an article
- Using related content instead of popular content increased clicks
    - Popular content, however, generated more clicks when the referral site was Facebook
- Generic wording (e.g. "Related Stories") generated slightly more clicks than more complex wording (e.g. "What Else People Can Read on This Topic")

IMPLICATIONS FOR NEWSROOMS

Our research aimed to identify what link characteristics are important in encouraging clicks and increasing recirculation in news websites. We found site visitors are more likely to click on links when they appear at the end of the page, reflect related content, and use images in their layouts. These findings hold true for users on smartphones, phablets, tablets, and desktop devices, which provides newsrooms with a set of best practices for using links without necessitating changes for different types of devices.

It is important to note that this research is based on the findings of seven local broadcast news organizations and it is not clear whether the same results will persist for others. The organizations were geographically diverse, although all were in large and mid-sized markets. We also note that these patterns persisted across all seven outlets.[1]

The factors we tested are not exhaustive of the characteristics that might influence link clicks, but rather provide a starting point for newsrooms. Newsrooms can use the findings of this report to refine their existing links, but should also keep testing new ways to increase the overall click-through rate. This is important not only for business purposes, but also for the purpose of providing audiences with additional information that meets their needs.

THE EXPERIMENT

Our study shows that links can be designed to generate higher click-through rates. We examined the first time each unique visitor went to the site and, in total, looked at 1.8 million observations. We found significant differences for each of the factors, but recognize that, consistent with other industry estimates, individuals rarely click on links. Among those who first visited the site during the study period, 1.42% clicked on a link. Although this appears to be a low rate of engagement, content distribution sites like Outbrain suggest that healthy click-through rates are between 0.10 and 0.25%.[2]

Using Images in Links

The news sites in this study tested two different types of links:

- Links with text only
- Links with images and text

Across all types of mobile and desktop devices, clicks were higher for pages with links including images than links consisting of only text. On average, including images and text with links generated 63% more clicks than using a text-only layout.[3]

Placement of Links

The news sites in this study tested two different locations for links:

- The middle of the article page
- The end of the article page

Across all types of devices, clicks were higher when the links appeared at the end of the article rather than when the links appeared in the middle of the article. On average, placing links at the end of an article generated 55% more clicks than placing the links in the middle of the page.[4]

Placing links at the end of the page was even more successful for mobile (61% more clicks), phablet (82%), and tablet (62%) compared to desktop (50%).[5]

Using Related Content or Popular Content

The news sites in this study tested two different types of link content:

- Popular content, which was generated from articles trending on the site at that time
- Related content, which was generated from articles related to the story on the site

Across all types of mobile and desktop devices, clicks were higher for pages with links using related content instead of popular content. On average, using related content generated a 14% increase in clicks over links containing popular content.[6]

Popular content did outperform related content in one instance: when users visiting the news site were coming from Facebook.[7] Though the difference in clicks is small, users coming from Facebook to the news site were 7% more likely to click on links containing popular content than those containing related content. Related content generated more clicks compared to popular content when users were coming from Google (39%), Outbrain (44%), and other sites such as the news homepage (16%).

This is especially important given that 416,386 users were referred to the news site from Facebook. By comparison, search sites like Google and Yahoo referred a collective 33,525 users and Outbrain referred only 24,659 users.

Using Simple or Complex Link Labels

The news sites in this study used three different types of wording to label the content of the links:

- A generic label ("Popular Stories" or "Related Stories")
- A label to attract users seeking information ("Learn More from Trending Stories" or "Learn More from Similar Stories")
- A label to attract users with social motivations ("What People Are Reading Now" or "What Else People Can Read on This Topic")

Across all types of mobile and desktop devices, clicks were modestly higher for links that used the generic labels of "Popular Stories" or "Related Stories." The generic wording generated only a 4% increase in clicks over both links that used wording based on social motivations and links that used wording based on seeking information.[8]

METHOD

From March 22 to 28, 2018, seven mid-sized local broadcast news sites randomly varied four characteristics of the links on their pages: (1) link placement, (2) content type, (3) link wording, and (4) link layout. The news sites collected data for all 4.5 million users visiting the sites over the course of the week. Multiple visits for the same users were omitted from the analyses so that only users' first interaction with the site was tested, resulting in 1.8 million observations.

For each user, we have data on whether the person clicked on a link, as well as the referral site and the device they used. We tested whether the results varied by station, by referral site, or by device.

The first characteristic, link placement, varied whether links appeared in the middle or at the end of an article page. We also varied whether users saw links to related content or links to content that was trending at the time. The wording used to describe the links was either generic, targeted at users' cognitive motivations, or targeted at users' social motivations. The variations of that wording differed according to the type of content displayed and are as follows:

Wording Type	Popular Content	Related Content
Generic	Popular Stories	Related Stories
Cognitive	Learn More from Trending Stories	Learn More from Similar Stories
Social	What People Are Reading Now	What Else People Can Read on This Topic

Lastly, the links varied in their layout style where half displayed images and text, and the other half displayed text only.

To analyze data, we used logistic regression models to compare differences in clicks. Only significant results are discussed in the text. The results of these tests are included in the endnotes.

ENDNOTES

[1] We ran logistic regression models with interactions between each of the characteristics tested and each of the news sites to observe whether different characteristics were better (or worse) for different sites (site 7 included as the reference group). For each of the seven outlets, links with text-only (links with images included as the reference group) were better and for one outlet, this interaction was statistically significant (site 6: B = 0.24; SE = 0.12, $p < .01$). For five of the seven outlets, related content (popular content included as the reference group) generated greater clicks and for two outlets, this interaction was statistically significant (site 3: B = 0.27; SE = 0.13, $p < .01$; site 5: B = 0.32; SE = 0.12, $p < .001$). There were two outlets where popular content performed slightly better, but these interactions were not significant. For each of the seven outlets, there were no significant interactions between placement (middle included as the reference group) and site. For each of the seven outlets, there were no significant interactions between wording (generic included as the reference group) and site.

[2] https://www.outbrain.com/help/advertisers/performance-metrics/

[3] We ran a logistic regression model to calculate differences. Compared to the layout with images (included as the reference group), the text-only layout (B = -0.49; SE = 0.01; $p < .001$) generated statistically significantly fewer clicks. There were some differences depending on the referral site, although in all instances, clicks were higher for images than text. When Google was the referral site, clicks increased by 88% when images accompanied the links compared to text-only. When the referral site was Outbrain, the percentage was 85%, 43% for Facebook, and 66% for other referral sites, such as the homepage.

[4] We ran a logistic regression model to calculate differences. Compared to placing links in the middle (included as the reference group), placing links at the end of the article (B = 0.44; SE = 0 .01; $p < .001$) generated statistically significantly more clicks.

[5] We ran a logistic regression model with interactions between link location with middle placement included as the reference group. The two-way interactions between link location and device type (desktop was included as the reference group) show that for mobile (B = 0.07; SE = 0.03; $p < .05$) and phablet (B = 0.19; SE = 0.08; $p < .05$) placing links at the end of an article on each of these devices generated statistically significantly more clicks.

[6] We ran a logistic regression model to calculate differences. Compared to the popular content (included as the reference group), related content (B = 0.13; SE = 0.01; $p < .001$) generated statistically significantly more clicks.

[7] We ran a logistic regression model with interactions between the type of content in links (popular content included as the reference group) and the referral page users were coming from prior to viewing the links ("other" pages were included as the reference group). The two-way interactions between content type and referral page show that related content generated statistically significantly fewer clicks when the referral page was Facebook (B = -0.22; SE = 0.04; $p < .001$). On the contrary, when the referral page was Google (B = 0.17; SE = 0.10; $p < .10$), Yahoo (B = 1.12; SE = 0.51, $p < .05$), and Outbrain (B = 0.21; SE = 0.07; $p < .01$), related content generated statistically significantly more clicks.

[8] We ran a logistic regression model to calculate differences. Compared to using generic text (included as the reference group), using labels to attract users seeking information (B = -0.04; SE = 0.02; $p < .05$) or using labels to attract users with social motivations (B = -0.04; SE = 0.02; $p < .05$) generated statistically significantly fewer clicks.