



E-comprehension

Evaluating B2B websites using readability formulae

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Abstract

The Internet has often been referred to as an “infocentric” medium. Information abounds on topics, people, products and companies. With the multiplicity and diverse variety of web pages containing information, comprehension becomes a critical issue, and a major facet of comprehension is readability of content. The study described in this paper examines the readability of the text on business-to-business (B2B) websites. First, the paper presents an overview of readability formulae. It then applies selected readability formulae to web pages in the semiconductor industry. The study explores how readability formulae can provide quick feedback to web marketers based on key indicators such as sentence length, proportion of difficult words and frequency of polysyllabic words. It also demonstrates how the relative readability of a company’s web pages can be evaluated against those of its competitors. In closing, the paper considers the managerial implications associated with the use of readability formulae and offers directions for future study in this relatively under-researched domain. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Business-to-business (B2B) marketers communicate with their customers in a variety of different ways. Salespeople call on their clients, billboards attempt to attract the attention of the executive on journeys to and from work, and television advertisements extol the virtues of products and services using the power of visual movement and sound. However, the overwhelming majority of the B2B marketer’s communication efforts rely on written text. The customer hopefully reads trade journal advertising and brochures, probably reads sales proposals and almost certainly reads product manuals and safety instructions, or at least tries to. Here, the marketer makes a leap of faith: That the customer audience will not only read, but also comprehend the communicated message. If the customer does read and comprehend the message, this could lead to awareness, interest and sales, at a basic level, and then higher level outcomes such as customer satisfaction, retention and repur-

chase. Where comprehension is less than optimal, the outcomes for the marketer can range from indifferent to disastrous—from low awareness and poor resulting sales, to brand disdain, low product satisfaction and customer exit. Indeed, low customer comprehension of some marketing material in a B2B environment can even lead to product misuse that can be fatal.

Regardless of the medium, readability is an important issue in communication. For some time now, communicators have been concerned about the suitability of writing style and sentence structure for readers at different levels. While the concern with readability has its roots in philosophy and ancient Bible studies, it was in the domain of education that the most significant research on the subject has been conducted [1]. More recently, marketers and other professionals have become justifiably concerned with the readability of their written communication.

Advertising professionals, in particular, should be concerned with all aspects of sentence structure that may impact on effective communication. A few basic tenets of advertising copywriting are: to write in a conversational style as if talking to someone [2]; to use “the language they use every day” [3]; to rewrite copy so that it is “easier to read; i.e., using shorter sentences and replacing difficult

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words with easier-to-read synonyms” [4]. However, most of the advice is intuitive and not empirically tested. Despite the importance of copywriting in advertising, psycholinguistic research of advertising text has tended to focus on the semantics of advertising (i.e., word meanings) rather than the language itself (i.e., the syntax) [5]. Paradoxically then, the body of knowledge on advertising copy effectiveness has little to offer B2B marketers who have embraced the Internet.

In the B2B literature, readability has only been studied with regard to sales training manuals [6]. It was found, not unsurprisingly, that reading material that requires a disproportionately high level of reading effort causes readers to adopt a less positive view of the material and those who produced it. Now, B2B marketers are turning to the Internet in their efforts to communicate effectively and transact with customers. With the sharp rise in the use of electronic media, it is equally important for B2B marketers to ascertain how readable the information they communicate on the Internet is, for material that is less readable can easily be passed over at the click of a mouse. Indeed, the customer as reader does not even have to go to the trouble of forming a less positive view of the material or the provider: he or she simply clicks and passes on to a more appropriate site. Indeed, one may speculate that comprehension of text reaches a new level in the age of the Internet—to coin a cliché, we may term this “e-comprehension.” And e-comprehension is determined by readability. The study described in this paper will explore one method to assess the readability of web pages, by examining a selection of web pages for semiconductor companies.

2. Readability

As already stated, of interest to all organizations using written communications is the ease with which the receiver reads and understands the text. How the reader performs with text materials involves two entities—the “text” and

the “reader.” Klare [7] proposed a basic model summarizing the significant variables influencing reading performance. These are represented diagrammatically in Fig. 1.

Following prior research, it is necessary to distinguish between understandability (or comprehensibility) and readability [8–10]. *Understandability* is reader-centered and would include reader characteristics like *Reader competence* and *Reader motivation* as delineated in Fig. 1 below. Readability, however, is text-centered. It has to do with the way the text is written and presented to the reader. In Klare’s model, this has to do with the *Readability Level of the Material*. In simple terms, readability refers to the “ease of reading,” which may be attributable to the quality of the document in terms of structure of the words and sentences and also the legibility (including the layout) of the content [11,12]. The main aim of research into readability is to measure the level of difficulty with the text. In the present study, readability refers to the syntactic structure of text rather than the semantic (meaning) component. Syntactic structure of text comprises of identifiable aspects of the text such as vocabulary, syllables, sentence structure, use of paragraphs, length of sentences and organization of text. In this study, the components of syntactic structure examined include sentence length, word length (syllables) and vocabulary.

3. Research aims

It is important to ensure that the text in web pages is written using an effective and appropriate writing style and syntactic structure that facilitates reading. This is perhaps even more important in B2B sites where visitors are often in extreme haste to peruse the site for information of relevance to them. This study explores the use of readability formulae for providing guidelines as to the ease of reading of the text in web pages. It also considers the types of analyses that can be conducted to compare the readability of companies’ web pages against those of their competitors.

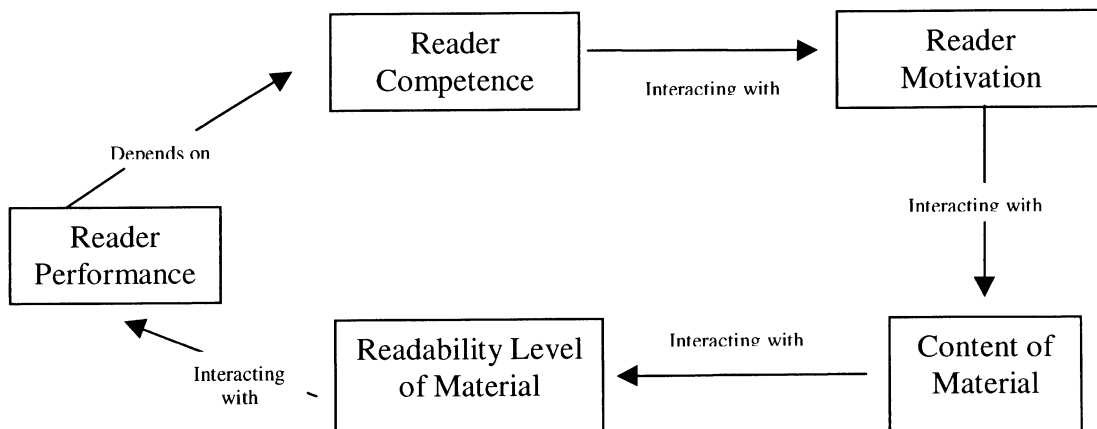


Fig. 1. A model of reader performance. Adapted from Klare (1980).

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