

How to hold on to readers

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Let's admit it: Most readers don't really love newspapers. They are fickle, fussy and hurried — they want the news, but they want to be “done” with reading as soon as possible to move on to work, play or rest. Dan Barry, author of *The New York Times* “This Land” and “About New York” columns and a former city reporter, tells his journalism students that “readers are looking for a reason to bail.” A long and boring story, an obvious photo or a complicated graphic and they're out. What do we do to keep them? Research shows visuals are our best chance to attract readers to newspapers and hold them for longer than they expect. Consider these 11 ideas to use visual hooks effectively:

Define the story and make it relevant. It's not enough to report about important and newsworthy issues. “Why should I care?” is a legitimate question readers ask. Tell the news in a compelling and meaningful way to satisfy readers' demands for information.

Show with images and tell with words. Visual elements catch the eye and headlines announce the news. Story elements must work as a team, each in charge of an aspect of the story. Avoid redundancy and fill the gaps. Answer the reader's questions with the appropriate elements.

Photos show reality with emotion, illustrations show ideas with intelligence, and graphics show quantities, processes and sequences with detail. Sometimes you can combine them, but do it skillfully and keep a clear focus. Make sure the leading visual element relates to the main news.

Understand the information. Readers can only understand a story if you do in the first place. Learn how to compare, contrast, explain and locate. Make a point clearly with visuals.

Design effectively. Page space is costly and front-page space is very expensive real estate. All visuals must have informational value and their size, kind, mode and position must agree with their news value. Give good play to key photos, illustrations, graphics, and type, but shrink or delete oversized visuals. Offer the most information with the least ink and effort.

Build hierarchy. Place the most important information at the top or the center of the page, and then place the rest. Order the elements with creativity, but clearly.

Use color functionally. Color catches the eye, so use it for a reason. Bright and warm colors stand out, but they can tire the eye. Soft and cool colors are good for background.

Check your newspaper looks. People judge a newspaper in part on its looks. If it looks competent, readers are likely to assume that the content is competently reported and edited. Smart typography, color and grid add value to a newspaper.

Get inspiration from good ideas. Good examples of visual journalism from the past can inspire current news coverage. Honor others' good ideas but don't simply cut and paste them. Adapt those concepts to the news subject and your newspaper's style.

Do not cheat. Lies and deceptions in news cost dearly. Errors do, too. Your newspaper loses respect, readers lose trust, sales drop and sometimes, they end up folding.

Care about the news. Readers ask themselves what's in it for them. Make sure you deliver. Give them reasons to keep reading. Don't give them reasons to bail.

These ideas belong to, among others, The Poynter Institute for Media Studies, The Readership Institute, Pegie Stark Adam, Edmund C. Arnold, Susan Mango Curtis, Mario Garcia, John Grimwade, Tim Harrower, Nigel Holmes, Lucie Lacava, Daryl R. Moen, Sara Quinn, Ron Reason, Monica Moses, Michael Price, Buck Ryan, Edward Tufte, Miguel Urbayen, and SND, of course. All have studied and shared their knowledge about what draws readers to stories — and what doesn't.