And speaking of new beginnings…

free-range thinking is going electronic in 2009

Beginning with the January 2009 issue, *free-range thinking* will start arriving in your email inbox as an e-newsletter. We're making this change to accommodate a steadily growing readership (now surpassing 3,500), to lower our carbon footprint (which was becoming as Earth-friendly as a fleet of Hummers), and to ensure timely delivery each month.

The newsletter will continue to be as free as its name, but if you want your subscription to continue, *we have to hear from you by December 31st.* Just send an email to lori@agoodmanonline.com with the message "Keep me on!" and let us know your preferred email address for receiving the newsletter.

Nothing else will change: we'll continue to share best practices and promote resources that can help you reach more people more effectively, but we have to hear from you first. So *send us your email address today* and keep those free-ranging cows in your pasture. ■

free-range thinking

The Science of Site-Seeing

Eye tracking studies can offer a clearer picture of what your visitors look at, what they miss, and why.

Welcome to the world of *fixations* and *saccades.* For more than forty years, researchers have been measuring with increasing accuracy what we look at when we walk down supermarket aisles, flip through magazines, or visit websites for the first time. While there are exceptions and qualifiers aplenty, definite trends have emerged that explain why the eye comes to rest in some places (fixations) or flits from point to point like a bee searching for pollen (saccades).

As we spend more hours each day staring at computer screens, eye tracking research has focused more intently on our interaction with the Internet. The results from many of these studies — by the Poynter Institute, usability guru Jakob Nielsen, and numerous universities — are available online, and they offer useful guidelines for good causes looking to design more eye-catching websites.

In October, I sifted through much of this research and interviewed Joan Treistman, an eye tracking expert with more than thirty years experience in the field. As Treistman reminded me more than once, every website is different and each visitor comes to your site for different reasons, so someone else's research may not apply to your site. Point taken, but when several eye tracking studies reach the same conclusion, those findings are, at the very least, worth looking at.

Hot Spots and the F-Shaped Pattern

The upper left-hand corner is the hottest spot on a web page, says Treistman (as well as The Poynter Institute's Eyetrack III study). We are conditioned to look there first for the organization's logo. Menu bars also tend to start in this vicinity, stretching either horizontally or vertically along the home page. There is less agreement on where eyes will go after this initial landing point, but Jakob Nielsen's research indicates a tendency to scan the page following an F-shaped pattern.

In 2006, Nielsen conducted an eye tracking study with 232 subjects. He observed that most people begin by scanning horizontally across the top of the page from left to right, drop their gaze down slightly before scanning across again, and then tend to scan vertically down the left side of the page.

"Obviously, users' scan patterns are not always comprised of exactly three parts," Nielsen concluded. "Sometimes users will read across a third part of the content, making the pattern look more like an E than an F. Other times they'll only read across once, making the pattern look like an inverted L (with the crossbar at the top). Generally, however, reading patterns roughly resemble an F, though the distance between the top and lower bar varies." (To learn more, read "F-Shaped Pattern for Reading Web Content" from Nielsen's online column, *Alertbox.*)

Text: More Eye-Catching Than You Think

To write her article, "Scientific Web Design: 23 Actionable Lessons from Eye-Tracking Studies" (posted at virtualhosting.com), Christina Laun followed a process similar to mine, scouring the web for consistent eye tracking results. Actionable lesson #1 may surprise you: people look at text before graphics. "Most casual users will be coming to your site looking for information, not images," Laun writes, "so make sure your website is designed so that the most important parts of your text are what is most prominent." To make text more attractive to the idea and readable, most studies agree:

- Short sentences and small paragraphs are easier to read.
- People tend to scan larger type but slow down to read smaller type.
- Numbered or bulleted lists — like this — attract attention and are read more easily than large blocks of text.

According to U.S. government guidelines, text on a website should never be smaller than twelve points. (See usability.gov for additional recommendations.) Sans serif typefaces are generally easier on the eyes, and in at least one study, Verdana proved to be the most readable font. (See "Keeping Your Readers' Eyes on the Screen: An Eye-Tracking Study Comparing Sans Serif and Serif Typefaces," published in *Visual Communication Quarterly,* January 2008.)

And once you've got the design right, Treistman advises, be sure the meaning of your text is as clear and direct as possible. A travel agency that she consulted used the word "budget" on its website to indicate the total cost of a trip. To site visitors, however, the word implied a low-cost (and probably less luxurious) alternative. "Why leave room for confusion?" Treistman asks.

Images: Size Matters

While site visitors tend *not* to look at images first, the Eyetrack III study concluded that the larger the image, the more time people spent looking at it. "One of our test pages had a postage-stamp sized mug shot that was viewed by ten percent of our participants," the study reports. "Compare that with an average-sized photo (about 230 pixels wide and deep) that drew gazes from about seventy percent." (To learn more about the results of this study, search the web for "The Best of Eyetrack III".)

Now See for Yourself

You can watch a fascinating two-minute video showing how an eye tracking study works at etre.com. (Etre is a London-based company specializing in web usability.) To see how eye tracking informed a complete web page redesign, search for "Eye Tools Website Redesign" and click on the link "Case Study." For a more solid foundation in effective website design, read the books *Don't Make Me Think,* by Steve Krug, *Letting Go of the Words,* by Janice Redish, and *Landing Page Optimization,* by Tim Ash.

And whenever you encounter a hard-and-fast rule, remember the words of Sean O'Dwyer, a web designer who speaks for many when he writes, "[Not] to say that typical user habits don't exist. A good web designer is aware of common user patterns and expectations. But nothing creative or new ever comes of being a slave to current trends." ■