

Chapter 10



GLANCEABLE CONTENT



What's the Trend?

Our shrinking attention spans and the explosion of all forms of content online lead creators to optimize content for rapid consumption at a glance.

When Johannes Gutenberg produced the first fonts for his printing press in the early 15th century, they were modeled in a black-letter style to mimic the handwriting of the time. Over the hundreds of years since, designers and printers have experimented with creating fonts based on the human form, geometry and even trends in art and literature.

In 2012, noted font design group Monotype worked with a team of researchers at MIT's AgeLab to study the impact of type design on what the study called "glance behavior," the type of quick display reading most often utilized by drivers when interacting with a car's dashboard. The study found that using "humanist" typefaces with open shapes, wider inter-character spacing and varying proportions could produce a 13% increase in overall response time among males taking the study.

Clearly, reducing glance time is potentially lifesaving in a high-risk activity such as driving. It turns out the same feature may also be critical for any content creator trying to contend with one of the most profound consequences of our information-filled world: the shrinking human attention span.

According to the National Center for Biotechnology Information, the human race crossed a significant milestone in 2013 when our average attention spans moved to only 8 seconds, from 12 seconds in 2000. By comparison (for dramatic effect), the report also noted that the average attention span of a goldfish was 9 seconds.

The effects of this short attention span can be seen in almost every corner of the media industry. Popular reality television programs use faster edits and shorter scenes to tell their stories. Sensationalized headlines on media sites across the web, inspired by sites like Upworthy and BuzzFeed, create irresistible click-baiting temptations like “you won’t believe what happens next.”

In a low-attention-span world, the media that wins is the one that can capture attention in a moment—no matter how fleeting that moment happens to be.

Snackable Content

Nobel Prize–winning economist Herbert Simon famously wrote back in 1977 that “a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.”

To solve this attention crisis, one technique innovative marketers have increasingly turned to is the idea of creating “snackable content.” Content marketing expert Jay Baer describes this quest to create useful bite-sized content in terms of “giving away information snacks in order to sell knowledge meals.”

Judging by the results of some of the most successful content marketing brands, the snack might actually be tempting enough *without* the meal.

Oreos is a perfect brand to illustrate. The brand captured kudos from the entire marketing industry for its perfectly timed tweet during the 2013 Super Bowl blackout: “You can still dunk in the dark.”

Since that day, the brand has continually moved from one real-time campaign to another.

The “Daily Twist” campaign featured unusual daily animated images of Oreos to share online. The “Cookie vs. Crème” campaign pitted Oreo lovers against one another based on their favorite part of the cookie. A

Halloween campaign invited consumers to create their own “nomsters” that would be created through stop-motion animated Instagram videos.

As a brand, Oreos offers the perfect case study for the upside of creating snackable content that can be consumed in a glance and disappears within several weeks after the campaign is complete. After all, when you are solely focused on creating *Glanceable Content*, who cares about creating something permanent?

Your Response Is Predictable

Of course, all of this focus on disappearing content is a side effect of the algorithm-driven way that most of us consume content today. We see the latest blog posts, recent tweets and frequently liked Facebook status updates based on our preferences that are built over time.

As we consume newsfeeds instead of homepages, we invite a curated bubble of content that *New York Times* writer Natasha Singer dubbed the “online echo chamber” to describe a myopic Internet where every piece of content we each see is personalized to us based on our likes, views and interests.

It is easy for an algorithm to predict an emotional response if it already knows what you tend to get emotional about.

You may be wondering how important the idea of creating glanceable media is when you consider how often we search for the information we want rather than passively sitting back and letting algorithms serve it to us.

Sometimes we seek out information that goes just a little deeper than all this snackable content.

How to Do Anything—In 3 Minutes or Less

If you ask a company named Demand Media, deeper content is where the real money is.

For more than five years, the online media company has been focused on soliciting freelancers to create specific content based on what people are actually looking for online.

To make its formula work, Demand Media runs Google searches through its own algorithms to determine what people really want, and what doesn't yet exist online. Then they commission freelance creators to film videos and create other content to post online.

The resulting content features advice on everything from learning to ride a bike to removing undesirable bugs from a home swimming pool. No matter what the content, it tends to be indexed highly on search engines and therefore generates traffic.

Each day, like a factory, the company publishes thousands of pieces of content to answer every question someone is thinking or may have typed into Google at some point. It is perhaps the most intensely algorithmic approach to creating content *anyone* has ever tried—and it has been working.

Why It Matters

The combination of our shrinking attention spans and the ready availability of social media content means that it is harder to capture anyone's attention than ever before. In response, content producers are getting smarter about using headlines, content formats and techniques designed to capture interest and incite emotional responses.

Together, this focus on *Glanceable Content* means that anyone with a message to share cannot afford to ignore aspects of content creation that once were considered optional, such as metadata or powerful headlines. In the media world of 2015, building content from the beginning to capture immediate attention and deliver value quickly will be key—and the brands or content creators who fail to realize this will fade into the rapid obscurity of algorithms and newsfeeds adept at burying content almost as quickly as it is released.

Who Should Use This Trend?

The industries most readily affected by this trend are media and entertainment brands that rely on capturing our attention to offer knowledge or pleasure. This trend also expands widely beyond the media industries

to any brand trying use content to gain visibility or sell a product. As content marketing continues to become a key tactic for all types of brands, the challenge to create *Glanceable Content* should be one that is used by all types of marketing and communications teams who are actively using content as a part of their sales process. In particular, it has implications for more complex or B2B brands who are used to creating in-depth content that may not be as easily consumed in a glance or be optimized enough to connect with this new consumer mentality.

How to Use This Trend:

- ✓ **Create valuable curation** – In a little over two and a half years, an email summarizing the day's news for professional women called theSkimm has quietly gained more than half a million subscribers. Founded by two 28-year-old entrepreneurs, the daily email offers a fresh take on the news with irreverent views, and boasts an impressive average open rate of 47% (compared with the industry average of 18%). It is a powerful example of how curating content can add big value.
- ✓ **Focus on headlines** – The trick that many of the more popular and sensationalized media sources today have mastered is the art of writing compelling headlines. While I rarely advocate following the same “you won’t believe what happened next” style of *Curated Sensationalism* (one of my 2014 trends), it is critical to spend enough time to craft interesting headlines in order to entice people to engage further.
- ✓ **Reverse engineer content topics** – A key component of creating *Glanceable Content* is knowing what your audience cares about most. Using Google’s keyword analysis tools or “most popular article” lists are great ways to uncover content ideas that may be valuable for your audience. Once you know that, you can create the most valuable content possible.

Chapter 25



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The 2016 Perspective

In the past year, online video ruled the Internet, got even more viral, and even got shorter. One of the most popular new social networks of the year was called BeMe and allowed users to record and share videos in four second bursts. The annual celebration of online video creators and fans took place once again in the sixth annual VidCon event in Anaheim. The three day gathering brought together some of the most well known online video personalities and inspired wide ranging discussions on the astronomical rise and popularity of short form content.

Panels and presentations at the event spanned from discussing vertical ads for vertical screens, to new “glanceable” platforms like BeMe, to the evolution of YouTube itself. In total the event attracted more than 20,000 attendees and described itself with this telling vision statement:

One year's VidCon attendee is the next year's superstar. Entire genres are created in the time it takes a full season of TV to meander its way to conclusion ... we believe that online video is the most important cultural force since the motion picture.

Seeing the central role video online has taken in the entertainment of the future, how we learn to do anything and the new gatekeeper-free path to celebrity it is offering to just about anyone ... it is hard to disagree with that vision.

Beyond online video, Glanceable Content was a force that also affected design of the world around us in intricate and unexpected ways offline. Last year, for example, Los Angeles councilman Paul Krekorian piloted a program to install over 100 new parking signs inspired by an easier-to-read grid style sign design created by interactive designer (and frustrated parker) Nikki Sylianteng. The idea, playfully called “To Park Or Not To Park,” inspired inquiries from other regions around the world to explore using the idea in their own municipalities as well.

This intersection of design, content creation, and human desire for faster and easier consumption of all types of content (from entertainment to parking signs) is likely keep driving this trend of Glanceable Content to affect content, design and communications in multiple forms in 2016.

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