nobody
reads anymore

by John Miller
study, 78% of adults read the daily paper in 1970. By 1999 that number had fallen to 57%.)

What’s going on? Doesn’t anybody read anymore? The answer, in a word, is, well, no. Readers have changed. They have less time, less inclination, less patience than ever before.

What does this mean for businesses today? When I help companies develop corporate Websites, much of my time is spent simply training people how to present their messages effectively. When e-commerce companies like Amazon surround their offerings with effective content (customer reviews, links to similar products), they sell
frenzied readers. _Nobody Reads Anymore_ examines how to do this. In the following pages, we look at many of the newspapers, magazines, networks, Websites, and plain old regular companies who are getting this right.

The first step is to understand how people read, or more accurately, how they scan. Chapter one looks at the controversial CNN Headline News redesign — a harbinger of things to come. The television screen may now look like hurricane wreckage to some, but CNN has figured out that their audience is busy and wants information quickly and efficiently.


The bottom line is that whether you’re creating a corporate brochure, promotional material, a magazine or newspaper, you need to rethink your content to stand a chance of keeping the attention of today’s more. When I worked with Roger Black, redesigning how MSNBC delivered news, hits jumped from 100,000 to 1 million a day, making it the number one news site in the country. While marketing and advertising certainly helped, the importance of presenting content effectively cannot be overstated.
In other words, if you want to attract customers, you should think like them. AOL, ESPN, and The Smart Yellow Pages are companies who have thought long and hard about who their readers are and created content geared to their needs. The most colorful example is Paul Mijksenaar, the information designer who reworked all of the signage from New York’s airports. What was once mayhem is now useful, thanks to thinking like a user.

We also look at why the simple, very usable design of Sunset, TV Guide, Google and Southwest Airlines has improved customer loyalty. Finally, we know that the Web and print are very different mediums; we examine what kind of content readers expect in both,

So has Web usability guru Jakob Nielsen. In a fascinating study, he shows how today’s readers are attracted by clear, scannable, objective copy. In case studies of The Wall Street Journal, The Red Herring Magazine and Gensler Architects, we see organizations that have given up trying to sell their readers and have chosen to simply give them what they want, right up front. We see why magazines like The Economist, who has stripped its story presentation to the essentials, are the most successful with today’s harried reader.

But if you want to snag today’s reader, it will take more than scannable copy. In the second chapter, we examine how important it is to put yourself in the reader’s shoes.
including a profile of the Computerworld redesign.

So how do you create clear, objective, easily scannable content geared toward your reader? Chapter three presents some concrete examples. We look at Web storytelling at MSNBC, with their groundbreaking “wheel” metaphor. In print, we look at USA Today, Red Herring, The Rocky Mountain News and other publications which have introduced the concept of “multiple points of entry.” And we discuss infographics, one of the most underused, most effective methods of displaying content.

But news organizations aren’t the only ones to implement effective content presentation. We also see how companies like Amazon, Harley Davidson and Chanel, are benefiting by wrapping content around product.

Chapter four looks to the future. How do you get readers to pay attention on cell phone/PDAs, ebooks or television interfaces? Soothsayers like Jay Gissen of News Corporation, Paul Saffo of Institute for the Future, and Ed Chi of Xerox Park give us a glimpse of what the future holds.

For those of you who couldn’t make it through the first four chapters, chapter five is the Cliffs Notes version: Ten Ways to Get People to Read Your Stuff.
Many of the examples illustrating these pages include my own work, as well as work done with Roger Black and talented designers at Danilo Black, The Interactive Bureau, Roger Black Consulting, Big Fish Books, and Workbox. Thus the use of ‘we’ in the case studies. There are also tons of examples of work by other firms; we don’t have an exclusive on good thinking.

Finally, I hope you find this volume itself an example of accessible, valuable content and that you are neither too frenzied nor too impatient to read.

JOHN MILLER
The first sentence of a story is the most important.

F. Scott Fitzgerald
The recent redesign of CNN’s Headline News has prompted howls of outrage, frenzied enthusiasm, and utter bafflement. Now your television screen features a flurry of information: a central panel where an anchor reads the news, surrounded by three or four pulsating story “boxes,” each of which runs a slideshow of headlines and story capsules. Also present are flashing sports scores, an entire U.S. weather map and, in the corner, a humming stock ticker. All of this, mind you, simultaneously.

CNN explains the maelstrom thusly: “We’re bringing you a newscast that’s faster, with more news, and focused on what you need to know. We’ve rebuilt Headline News from the ground up, with a new set and a new state-of-the-art look. Our goal: giving you the latest just as soon as we know it, keeping you informed.”

“What are they thinking?!” wail the critics. T.L. Stanley at Inside.com suggests that once the people don’t have time
Comedian Jon Stewart suggested it should be renamed “Dude, Where’s My News?” and bemoaned audiences with “with short attention spans and zero tolerance for complexity or nuance.”

Stewart may not like it, but he’s right. This is today’s reader. And despite a flurry of negative press, Headline News is doing well, especially with a coveted audience: Yahoo News reports viewership up 24% from last year, especially in the “key ad-friendly news demographic of 25-54.”

Headline News may not be perfect, but what they understand is that people are astoundingly busy and that, in our internet-wizened world, they can handle a lot of information at once.

Gone are the leisurely days of “top-down” news, where people sat around and waited for Dan Rather to saunter down from the mountain and proclaim the events of the day.

Now people want what they want, when they want it. They’re deluged by information and don’t have the time or patience to sift through it all. So they do everything at once: Scarborough Research recently reported that 91% of internet users with a TV and a computer in the same room surfed and watched television simultaneously.

What does this mean? It means that whether you’re publishing a newspaper, magazine, corporate brochure, or sales material, you are competing against all of this, all at once. The VC, CEO or potential client who takes your material home is surrounded by demands on his attention. After he checks his email and orders a book on Amazon, he sits down in front
of Headline News with his regular mail, Newsweek and whatever it is you want him to read.

So will your material hold its own? Is your information clear, concise and effectively presented? Is it simple, clean, engaging? And if you're presenting something online, what if he's at his weekend home with a dial-up connection? Will he wait for your site to download? (Uh...no.)

So how do you compete? What guidelines do you follow to design something that appeals to today's frenzied reader?