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The Intelligibility of Supplier Information

ABSTRACT. This paper describes a study in which the intelligibility of supplier information was investigated from a consumer viewpoint. A sample of 123 randomly selected subjects were given eight automobile brochures and asked to rate the manufacturer information on four automobile characteristics which are highly important to consumers.

In order to measure intelligibility one subjective and one objective indicator were chosen. The subjective rating scores indicate considerable differences among the characteristics. As the ratings of a list of intelligibility items demonstrate, a negative scoring was especially due to a lack of explanation of technical terms and furthermore to the fact that in the subjects' view, much of what was said in the brochures could have been left out. The hit rate, which was taken as an objective indicator of intelligibility, shows that on average for all subjects and topics under consideration nearly half of the information actually given in the brochures was not made use of as it could not be identified as relevant.

This unduly high amount of wasted information can be reduced only when the suppliers of information become aware of — and take into account — the readers' dissatisfaction with unnecessary information.

The success of communication depends on various factors, amongst others, the content of the message as well as proper presentation. Each envisaged receiver of information can decode the message only if it is intelligible to him. This means that the sender of the information has to be concerned about the intelligibility of the message if the purpose aimed at is not to be missed.

In this paper we intend to examine consumer information for intelligibility. We will concentrate on supplier information which is given in sales brochures. It might be assumed that intelligibility is not a problem in commercial advertising, because it is prepared by professional agencies. This kind of confidence seems to influence analyses of advertising effectiveness as well, since there has been little research on the intelligibility aspect. Even in textbooks on advertising psychology the topic is either ignored or is referred to only indirectly through discussions of the adequate length of sentences (Teigeler, 1968).

Taking automobile brochures as an example, it will be shown that it does not make sense to take the intelligibility of supplier information for granted but that one should investigate it, thus providing a basis for possible improvements from a consumer perspective.
INFORMATION which should be understandable to consumers has to meet other standards than, for example, information material for teaching purposes. Retention, which can be measured by questioning, cannot be taken as a criterion for the intelligibility of consumer information. Neither suppliers nor consumer organizations should be encouraged to treat consumers as pupils. Instead, consumer information has to provide for a facilitation of the individual purchase process by enabling the consumer to survey and compare competing product alternatives.

For this purpose the individual buyer must be able to select information on special product characteristics relevant to his needs. This process of sieving the information at hand according to individual needs can be pursued by inspection and, perhaps, taking notes: The automobile buyer who is looking for a car with moderate energy consumption could for instance extract the DIN-values (German standards for gas mileage) from the sales brochures and compare the models he is interested in with the help of the list of fuel consumption data he gained. These data need not be learned and kept in mind. It will be just as useful if the consumer can have access to the information at any appropriate moment.

Accordingly, information for consumers can be defined as intelligible if it can be easily located, relates to individual information needs, and is positively evaluated by the users.

APPROACHES TO MEASURING INTELLIGIBILITY

In research, the field of intelligibility has been approached from many viewpoints and with many ingenious techniques. Principally, two different approaches of measuring the intelligibility can be pinpointed: The message-oriented measurement techniques which apply the method of content analysis and the receiver-oriented approaches which rely on techniques of effectiveness analyses.

One of the main procedures belonging to the first group is indicated by the readability formula of Flesch (1951). Flesch suggests that readability – which for our purpose can be treated as synonymous to intelligibility – depends on two factors:
- the average sentence length;
- the average syllable density given as the number of syllables per 100 words.

Complex writing styles, it is argued, employ long sentences with many multi-syllable words, which are said to be difficult to read and