Moderate Copy Complexity Enhances the Persuasiveness of Direct Marketing

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The relation between copy complexity and direct marketing persuasiveness was examined. Complexity of the direct marketing stimuli was assessed using the Gunning Fog Index (1968). In Study 1, multivariate analyses revealed that moderately complex copy contributes positively to order intentions, as does level of involvement, although intentions were quite low overall. In Study 2, a more favorable product category was used, and results replicated Study 1’s two main effects of complexity and involvement on order intentions. In Study 3, the medium that carries a message was manipulated to see if print vs. radio might also affect order intentions.

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Copywriters increase readability by eliminating complicated words and reducing sentence length, hoping that more individuals will read the piece, resulting in increased response rates. Whether this yields the desired results has not been fully addressed. In exploratory research, we obtained samples from two direct mail houses that had conducted split-copy tests on simple vs. complex versions of their direct marketing. In all cases, simplification involved shortening the copy, so the effects of complexity were confounded with length. Research on complexity in advertising has been done on magazine copy—much briefer than the average direct marketing piece. Moderate complexity seems to enhance memory and persuasiveness, but no research has been conducted on longer texts such as direct marketing. We present two laboratory experiments that isolated complexity from length as the independent variables that could impact order intentions, and a third experiment which tested whether the medium carrying the message also influences persuasiveness.

Experiment 1
In Experiment 1, we expected that:

H1: Moderate complexity offers will be associated with greater intention to order than simple offers.
H2: Those higher in involvement will be associated with greater intention to order than those low in involvement.
H3: Order intentions will be greatest for those high in involvement exposed to moderately complex versions.

Method
Participants and Procedure. Eighty-five college students participated in for course credit, ran in groups of 12 seated at cubicles in a laboratory. Participants were asked to read at their own pace the material on the desk in front of them, which was the direct marketing offer. When finished reading, participants were instructed to raise their hands to receive the next phase. The researcher collected the offer and provided the participants with the measurement booklet, which they were instructed to complete at their own pace. Upon completion, the participants were free to leave the laboratory.

Stimuli. The direct marketing pieces for a collectible were written after extensive pre-testing. The four versions created were: short/simple; short/moderate; long/simple; long/moderate. Simple versions had high school level Fog indices of 10.75 (long) and 11.45 (short), whereas the moderate versions had college level Fog indices of 14.60 (long) and 13.70 (short). The short versions had 600-650 words, and the long versions had 850-900 words.

Dependent Variables. Intention to order was measured on a nine-point scale with a higher number indicating a greater intention to order, and a thought-listing task was included.

Results and Discussion
H1, H2 and H3 were supported. Those who received the moderate versions had higher intentions to order (Mean=2.98) than those who received the simple versions (Mean=2.05; F(1, 83)=3.78; p<.05). Those who reported high levels of involvement had greater order intentions (2.96 vs. 2.04; F(1, 83)=3.78; p<.05) than those at low levels of involvement.

High involvement participants who received the moderate offer had higher order intentions than all other participants (F(1, 81)=9.24; p<.005), and had a marginally higher mean number of positive thoughts (1.91 vs. 1.43; F(1, 51)=3.53; p=.07).

In Experiment 1, the expected results were obtained but the order intensions were quite low on a nine-point scale. Experiment 2 was designed to provide an offer that might be of more overall interest to all participants. The same hypotheses were tested.

Experiment 2
Method
Participants and Procedure. One hundred three college students participated for course credit, with an identical procedure to that of Experiment 1.

Stimuli. The offer was re-written for a different collectible selected after additional pre-testing.

Dependent Variables. An intention to order scale and a thought-listing task were included.

Results and Discussion
Complexity exerted a main effect on order intentions (5.00 vs. 3.77; F(1, 101)=6.23; p<.05). Involvement exerted a main effect, with high involvement participants having higher order intentions (5.57 vs. 3.36; F(1, 101)=23.48; p<.001). Involvement did not moderate the impact of complexity on order intentions, as in Experiment 1, but t-tests showed partial support for the relation.

Experiment 3
Experiment 3 involved a 3 (simple vs. moderate vs. complex copy) X 2 (short vs. long) X 2 (print vs. broadcast) manipulation of direct marketing for the same item used in Experiment 2. The addition of a radio commercial was intended to test the hypothesis that the persuasiveness of copy in radio commercials will decrease as the complexity of copy gets beyond moderate complexity. However, the persuasiveness of copy in the print offer is not expected to decrease as the copy gets more complex.

Method
Participants and Procedure. Two hundred forty-one college students participated for credit in 16 sessions run in the same laboratory. However, a computer-mediated experiment was utilized. Each of the participants was randomly assigned to a cubicle with a computer monitor, which showed a randomly pre-selected condition. The participants in the print conditions read the direct marketing offer on the screen at their own pace and then responded to the questionnaire. The participants in the radio conditions listened to the commercial on headsets and then responded to the questionnaire.