

Websites: You've Only Got 3 Seconds



By [Joseph Carrabis](#)

NextStage lets you peek inside the visitor's mind in the first three seconds on your website.

I was having dinner with IMedia's Editor in Chief Brad Berens last week. The pleasure of Brad's company would have been reward enough, but Brad asked me what research NextStage had been up to. We talked over several things, and one topic that caught his attention involved what happens non-consciously when someone visits a webpage.

Specifically, what happens that makes the person decide to navigate the page or not, when does someone decide that they'll like the page or not, or that they'll believe the page or not?

His interest took me by surprise. Answering those questions is what NextStage's [TargetTrack tool](#) is all about. Given a webpage or some other marketing material, what happens in someone's mind in the first three seconds that they look at the webpage or whatever? What happens between 4-7 seconds and what happens between 7-10 seconds?

I'll provide links at the end of this article for readers interested in the research aspect of these concepts. Here I'll explain the different interaction periods and focus on the first three seconds. I'll leave seconds 4-10 for future columns (contact me [<http://www.imediaconnection.com/bios/contact.aspx?id=3490>] for more information).

These time periods can overlap. Studies conducted by NextStage and others have demonstrated that (in general) people respond to daily, non-critical information within 10-15 seconds of first receiving that information. Fifteen seconds is a long stretch of time, and most people don't realize just how long it is. I invite you to clock yourself talking for 15 seconds. You might need to take a breath.

Attraction

The first 3-5 seconds of interaction are used by individuals to decide if the information is interesting and/or "catches their eye." Some studies indicate this interval is actually at the millisecond level. In any case, this is the *attraction* phase of information interaction. People are not evaluating the usefulness of the information, only if they want to explore that information further in order to learn whether or not the material affects them. In other words, they're deciding how much of a time investment is warranted.

When you scan this article quickly before slowing down to read it, you're in the Attraction phase.

Engagement

Past that initial 3-5 seconds is a 4-7 second period of time which people use to determine if they can understand the material well enough to continue the effort of internalizing the information. This is the *engagement* phase of interaction.

It's at this point that information has to go from "being pretty" to "being useful".

If you've stopped scanning this article and have slowed down enough to read sections, possibly checking to see if Joseph has used big words or is making any sense, you're in the engagement phase. Literally, this material has *engaged* your attention.

Actionability

The third time investment occurs at 6-8 seconds, and this is when people are deciding how to respond to the information being presented. This is the *actionability* phase of interaction. Material containing distinct action items actually can stretch this time period out to 10 or even 15 seconds of engagement before the decision centers of the brain inform consciousness of what action to take (save the material for later, reread immediately to clarify, et cetera).

At this point you've slowed down enough actually to read sections, looking for key concepts and ideas, perhaps something useful for you to use. You may also decide that this article is worth a read, but not now, so remember it for later. In either case, you are *acting on* or *taking action on* the information in this article.

Thus material must attract, engage and cause the individual to take action all within a 3-10 second time span because most people, in our time-crunched world, will barely give you those 10 seconds unless they know they're going to find some value in the information presented.

Subjective and objective experience

These time periods, and especially the first three to five seconds, deal with subjective experience. Most people are more familiar with objective experience, so we'll start there.

Objective experience is experience everyone can agree to. We all saw something happen, we all agree on what we saw. Objective experience is what trial law is concerned with; We all saw the car go through the red light, we all saw this person take something from that person.

In science, objective experience is what rules and something isn't considered true until the statement "We duplicated it therefore it must be true" is made. Objective experience is good in groups but rotten for individuals because people live in subjective experience.

Subjective experience is our own, private, internal understandings of things. We eat in subjective experience, we sleep in subjective experience, we think and love, laugh, cry, and grow old in subjective experience. It doesn't rely on the beliefs and ideas of others. Whether we like it or not, the majority of our daily decisions are based on subjective experience (the cars we drive, the people we associate with, our tastes in food and clothing, mates and partners, et cetera).

This difference is important because humans respond to information subjectively and non-consciously before the conscious mind responds to that same information. Such non-conscious behaviors can be mathematized via "a computational theory of near optimal performance" and that gets us back to NextStage's TargetTrack tool.

The first three seconds

Most of these responses come and go within the first three seconds of an individual encountering information. It is highly unlikely these responses will be captured using traditional methods and using synthetic methods (strapping focus group participants to EEGs, MEGs, fMIRs, PETs, et cetera) invalidates the testers' ability to gather genuine information unless and until the intrusiveness of the experimental paradigm can be ameliorated.

What all this means to people making a living from websites is that you have at most three seconds to get and keep your visitor's interest and attention, and you have to figure out how to do this without the visitor knowing you're doing it.

As soon as they know you're watching, their experience goes from totally subjective to mostly objective, and they're no longer engaged in what you want them to do (probably make a purchase or otherwise convert while they're on your website).

These 1-3 second, 4-7 second and 7-10 second intervals, action, engagement and actionability, are the science behind building super-sticky webpages and marketing material, something I've covered in previous iMedia columns.

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