# EFFECTIVE
# Web Site Marketing

**Belz Consulting Group**

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## Executive Summary

This report makes recommendations in creating effective web sites based on current research in usability. The critical recommendations include:

- **Create unique, evenly distributed pages of no more than 100k:** Design lean pages with modern HTML code.
- **Ignore the "three-click" rule:** Pay careful attention to a site's design and usability but remember that the number of mouse clicks is less important than the success of the clicks.
- **Create intelligent keyword combinations:** Rather than focus your Google search strategy on only one word at a time, remember that most users search on multiple words at once.
- **Accelerate performance:** Make sure your site is fast enough — a slow page guarantees slow traffic and it's difficult to regain users once they've experience delays.
- **Maximize the left side of the screen:** Use layouts that naturally align with the way users view pages and showcase the most important content on the left-hand side of the page.
- **Ignore the fold:** Don't over-populate the area above the fold; instead, give users clean content and the proper cues for exploration with no design hurdles in their path.
- **Use fewer words:** Assume that customers will read 18% or less of the words on a webpage.
- **Control link and search functions:** Create and maintain a consistent search or link strategy, which will in turn influence user preference.
- **Report customer recommendations:** Foster user interest and loyalty by sharing customer recommendations; reports show customers trust each other more than any other source
- **Minimize customer registration:** Give customers the option to checkout without site registration; mandatory registration creates customer confusion, wreaks havoc on internal databases, and kills sales.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, web site design has become the domain (so to speak) of either visionary graphic designers or functional blogging wordsmiths who occasionally post photographs. In addition, while extensive data is available describing the performance of various techniques, it is usually synthesized only in heavy tomes. While interesting, these books take time to digest, much less implement. This complexity has led many successful businesses to be starved for straightforward guidelines relevant to today's marketplace.

This booklet presents simple guidelines that are easy to follow and offer a substantial payoff. Each point is defended with data and explained clearly.

Good luck!

## 2. Site architecture

In September 2010, Google accounted for 66% of U.S. search queries[1], making Google rankings a key element of any broad marketing strategy. Appearing in one of the top three positions is critical to generating traffic to your site[2], as shown in Table 1. Appearing as the top Google search result isn't essential to a site's success — but being ranked in one of the *top four* search results is key for significant (85% or greater) likelihood of being reached.

| Organic result rank | % of people who looked at site |
|---|---|
| 1 | 100 |
| 2 | 100 |
| 3 | 100 |
| 4 | 85 |
| 5 | 60 |
| 6 | 50 |
| 7 | 50 |
| 8 | 30 |
| 9 | 30 |
| 10 | 20 |

*Table 1: Result of two Google functions. Organic ranking in the top three produces 100% click-through rates in the top three positions, and falls off sharply thereafter. (Data from Ref. 2.)*

Success in search performance is even more critical considering that Google users prefer organic listings to paid sponsorship by 72% to 28%[3].

| | Organic search | Sponsored listing |
|---|---|---|
| Customer preference | 72% | 28% |

*Table 2: Customer preference for Google organic search. As a result, it is more effective to generate high results through organic search rather than sponsored listing. (Data from Ref. 3.)*

This is echoed by results for sponsored links; even appearing in the top sponsored link position yields only a 50% success rate. Table 3 shows the click-through results for sponsored links; anything under the fourth position is effectively ignored (10% success or less).

| Sponsored link rank | % of people who looked at site |
|---|---|
| 1 | 50 |
| 2 | 40 |
| 3 | 30 |
| 4 | 20 |
| 5 | 10 |
| 6 | 10 |
| 7 | 10 |
| 8 | 10 |
| 9 | N/A |
| 10 | N/A |

*Table 3: Sponsored links produce 50% click-through for the top position and decreases linearly for each position thereafter. (Data from Ref. 2.)*

The suggestions that follow are based on the assumption that it is important to appear high in Google organic listings.

***Create unique, evenly distributed pages of 100 k size***

Google maintains two indexes: a main index and a supplemental index. The second index was added to mange the vast explosion of data; its contents may not appear in search results unless absolutely necessary[4]. Thus the Google algorithm searches for web sites that are modern and appear to be recently updated, relatively easy to store, and appear to have high quality. Good placement in the main index is achieved by several simple guidelines[5,6]:

- Use modern code to build the HTML pages.
- Create site navigation that is even; i.e., each “branch” should have approximately equal numbers of “twigs”.
- Avoid high duplication of site content on multiple pages.
- Restrict the size of each page to 100 k.
- Update your site frequently with high quality content.

**Key point: Use modern code to create unique pages of 100 k in size, distributed evenly throughout the site, and update them frequently with high quality content.**

***Ignore the "three-click rule"***

The "three-click rule" is an apocryphal design guideline suggesting that users become dissatisfied and exit a site when they cannot locate information in three mouse clicks or less. Recent data[7] suggest that this is merely urban legend. Figure 1 illustrates the myth of the "three-click rule" with a study of 44 users attempting 620 tasks (over 8000 clicks total); researchers counted the number of clicks, identifying the task success and user satisfaction. Figure 1 suggests that 80% of tasks require at least 15 clicks to be completed and that task length does not determine success or failure.; if the three-click rule held, then dissatisfaction does not increase with task length.

**Key point: Focus on the success of clicks instead of the number.**

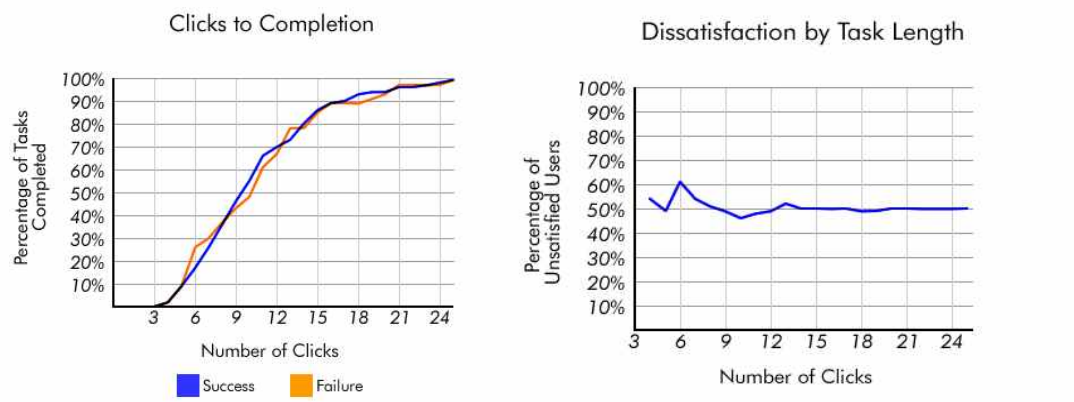


*Figure 1. Left: Number of clicks to completion. If the "three-click rule" were true, then most tasks would be completed after three clicks; instead, after 15 clicks, 80% of tasks are completed. Successful clickstreams show the same distribution as unsuccessful ones; the length of the task (in clicks) doesn't predict success or failure. Right: The dissatisfaction by task length does not increase as tasks get longer (Data from Ref. 7.)*

***Create intelligent keyword combinations***

This is even more critical given that the average cost-per-click climbed 55%, while orders grew 38%; sales volume grew 28%; ROI grew only 16%[8]. Therefore, cost-per-click effectiveness is not as effective.

| Metric | Increase as of 2009 |
|---|---|
| Cost-per-click | 55% |
| Order growth | 38% |
| Sales volume | 28% |
| ROI | -16% |

*Table 4: Recent click-price inflation. Sponsored links have gotten more expensive and are paying lower returns. (Data from Ref. 8.)*

Rather than focus your Google search strategy on only one word at a time, remember that most users search on multiple words at once.

| Number of words in search | % of searches |
|---|---|
| 1 | 20 |
| 2 | 33 |
| 3 | 26 |
| 4 | 21 |

*Table 5. Searching for combinations of words. 80% of searches are conducted for more than one word, motivating analysis of multiple keywords. (Data from Ref. 9.)*

Most people conduct keyword analysis on only one word, although 80% of searches are conducted on multiple words.[9]

**Key point: Create keyword analysis with multiple words to generate high organic rankings.**

***Accelerate performance***

Speeding up websites is crucial because internal studies by Google[10] show that when a site responds slowly, visitors spend less time there; slowing the search results page by even less than half a second impacts the number of searches dramatically, as

shown in Table 6. If the site is delayed for an extended period, users are even more likely to exist with fewer searches.

| Delay (ms) | User response (%) | Period (weeks) |
|---|---|---|
| 200 | -0.22 | 1-3 |
| 400 | -0.44 | 1-3 |
| 400 | -0.7 | 3-6 |

*Table 6: Site delays and user response over time. Users are lost when delays get longer; they also are lost when the delays go on for an extended period of time. (Data from Ref. 10.)*

Furthermore, Google's findings indicate that even when a page returns to its faster state, users who experienced delays take time to return to their previous usage level. Users exposed to the 400 ms delay for six weeks did 0.21% fewer searches on average during the five week period after speeds returned to their previous level.

On the flip side, Phil Dixon from Shopzilla.com shared information at the 2009 Velocity conference about the impact of a year long performance redesign[11]. The redesign resulted in a 5-second increase, which showed a 25% increase in page views, a 7-12% increase in revenue, and a 50% reduction in hardware costs.

**Key point: Accelerate downloads to generate more activity on your site.**

## 3. Graphical elements

***Maximize the left side of the screen.***

Visitors spend more than twice the time looking at the left side of the page as they do the on right[12], as shown in Table 2, Figure 2, and Figure 3[13]. The most viewed area is about one quarter across the screen from the left hand side.

| Side of screen | Left | Right |
|---|---|---|
| **Percentage of user viewing time** | 69% | 30% |

*Table 7: The percentage of time users spend viewing each side of the computer screen. The left side is clearly favored. (Data from Ref. 12.)*

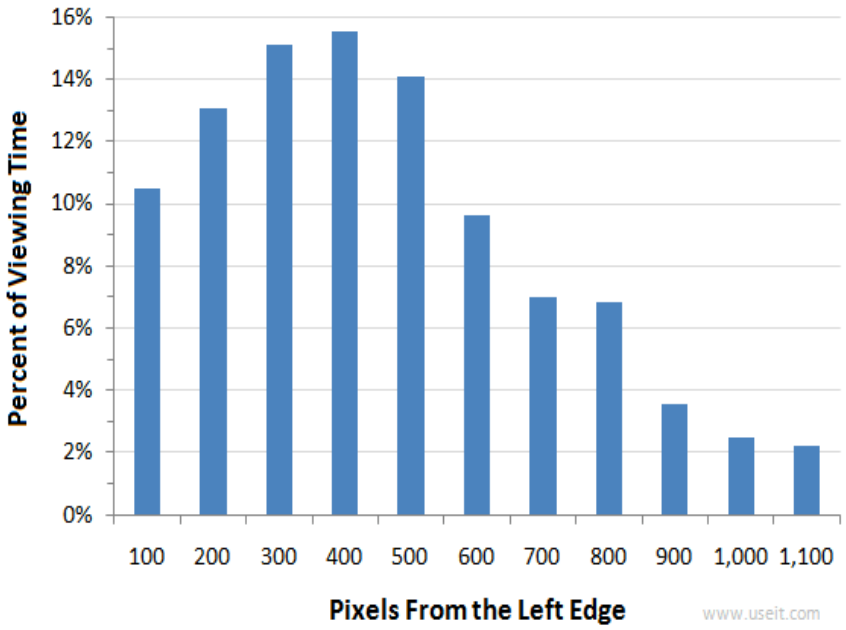


*Figure 2: Percent viewing time by screen pixel location. Most of the time is spent on the left hand side, with highest viewing about 1/4 of the way across the screen. (Data from Ref. 12.)*

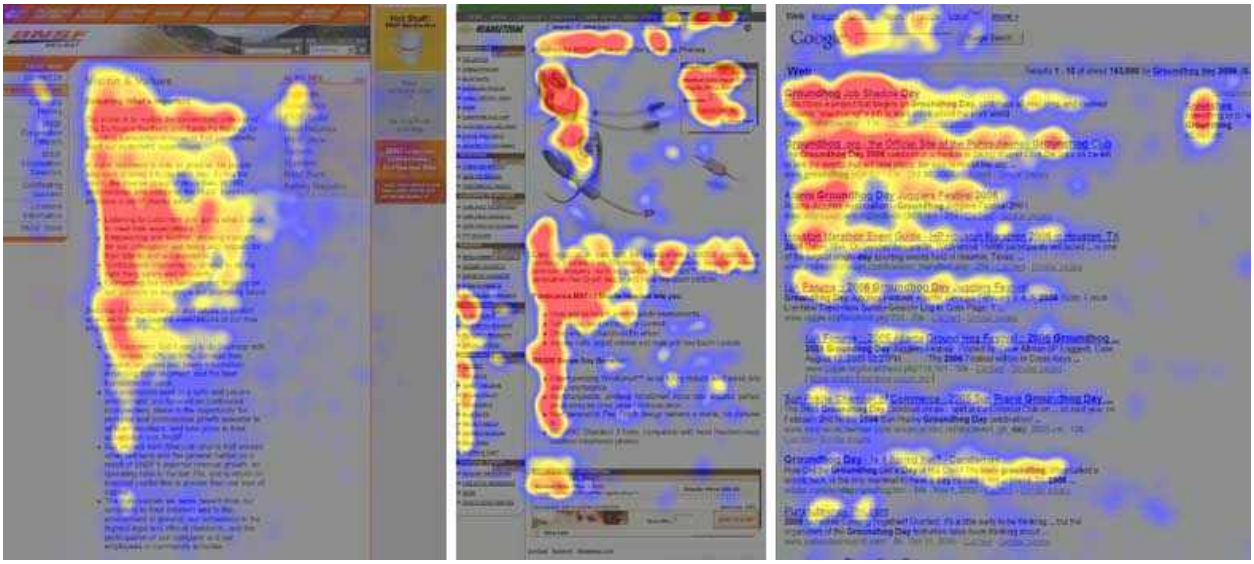

*Figure 3: Heat maps from eye-tracking studies of three different websites reveal the areas of greatest user attention, illustrated by color. Most viewed: red; moderate viewing: yellow; least-viewed: blue. Gray areas indicate an absence of attention. (Data from Ref. 13.)*

Use conventional layouts that naturally align with the way users view pages:

- Arrange navigation all the way to the left hand side or on the top.
- Display content a little to the right of the navigation.
- The most important content should be featured between one-third and half across the page, where users focus most of their attention.
- Place secondary, less important content to the right hand side, removing visual competition and adding clarity to the page.

**Key point: Put critical content on the left side of the page.**

***Ignore the fold***

Many designers worry about making a page too long. However, data suggests that users will scroll all the way to the bottom[14], no matter how long the page is, as shown in Figure 4; this figure shows data taken with a browser size of 1024 X 740 px and an average page "fold" at around 700 px, so the longest page contains many screens of content. It appears that if the content is sufficiently interesting and there are no design obstacles, users will scroll all the way down.

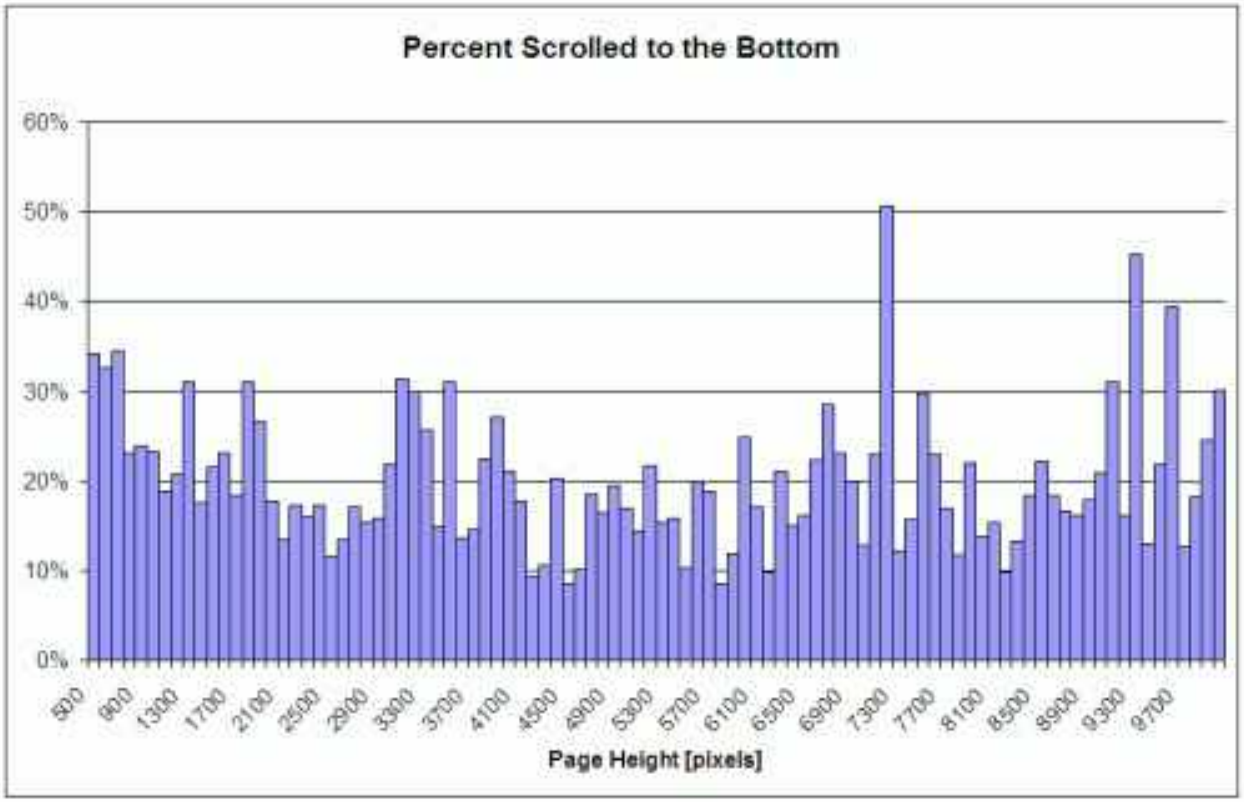


*Figure 4: Scrolling usage. Most people will scroll to the bottom if the page is interesting. (Data from Ref. 14.)*

**Key point: Don't worry about the fold.**

***Use fewer words***

Users spend more time on pages with more information, but less time comprehending the content because the time spent reading each word decreases as the number of words increases, as shown in Figure 3[15]. Visitors understand less because:

- If users are highly literate, they can read 250 words per minute, or 18 words in 4.4 seconds.
- However, people are actually viewing 100 words in that 4.4 seconds.
- Therefore, people understand only 18 out of 100 words, or 18% of the content.

**Key point: Say your point clearly and concisely; don't add words just to make your readers linger.**

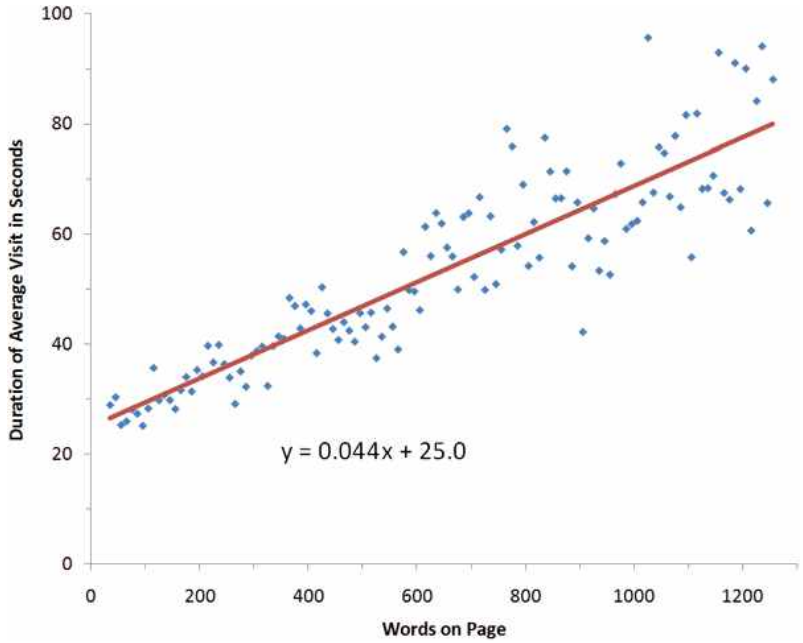


*Figure 5: The duration users spend on pages with various word counts. Each 100 words adds 4.4 seconds, but even highly literate readers can only comprehend 18 words in that time. Assume your readers fully digest only 18% of your content. (Data from Ref. 15.)*

## 4. Customer interactions

We will now discuss the interactions your customer have with the site. Implementing intelligent site design is critical because after fifteen years of web usage, customers have clear expectations.

### ***Control search and link functions***

To determine if users are more likely to use search or link functions, User Interface Engineering monitored 30 individuals while they performed 121 different shopping tasks.[16] Each user visited 3-6 web sites, shopping for items they expressed interest in purchasing. No two users searched for exactly the same products.

Researchers measured whether users showed preference in navigating by using either site links or an internal search engine and found that on 53% of the sites tested, each visitor stuck with a single strategy — the same strategy employed by all the other visitors to that site. This suggests that there is something innate in a site's design that causes users to choose the search engine or the links, not a hard-and-fast preference of the user. It's important to find what navigational structure is most relevant and

functional with regard to the content and business — that will dictate user preference, rather than vice versa.

**Key point: Create and maintain a consistent search or link strategy.**

***Report customer recommendations***

Reports show that customers trust each other more than any other source[17]. Table 8 shows how much customers trust various sources.

| Source of information | Trustworthiness (%) |
|---|---|
| Recommendations from consumers | 78 |
| Newspapers | 63 |
| Consumer opinions posted online | 61 |
| Brand websites | 60 |
| Television, magazines, and radio | 54-56 |
| Brand sponsorships and email | 49 |

*Table 8: Trustworthiness of various sources. Customers trust each other and newspapers more than any other sources. (Data from Ref. 17.)*

**Key point: Post customer recommendations.**

***Minimize customer registration***

Although fostering long-term relationships with repeat visitors is obviously critical, a 2009 User Interface Engineering study[18] suggests that requiring user registration is counterproductive. When prompted with a sign-in form, most shoppers couldn't remember the email address or password they used. Some would then attempt at guessing multiple times; guesses rarely succeeded. Of those, some users would eventually ask the site to send the password to their email address (presumably a questionable approach if he/she couldn't remember which email address is registered).

Along with the consumer, the retailer database was also negatively affected, with 45% of all customers holding multiple registrations in the system (some as many as ten). That confusion resulted in as many as 160,000 requests by users for lost login information each day. The most significant effect was that 75% of those customers

affected never tried to complete the purchase once the registration request process began.

Even if it is meant to facilitate easier shopping, a registration form routinely cripples usability, customer satisfaction, and sales. However, when some designers removed the *Registration* button and replaced it with a button titled *Continue* (accompanied by a simple message such as: "You do not need to create an account to make purchases on our site"), the number of purchasing customers increased by 45%.

**Key point: Minimize registration.**

If you do decide to try registration and use of a newsletter, beware that effective metrics for success are[19]:

| | **Successful response rates to newsletters or other permission-based messages** |
|---|---|
| Open rates | 20% |
| Click-through rates | 10% |
| Unsubscribe rates | 1% |

*Table 9: Successful response rates to newsletters or other permission-based messages. These numbers may vary by industry. (Data from Ref. 19)*

## 5. Conclusion

While there are no absolute rules on web design, analyzing the habits of users provides the best map for navigating the precarious internet landscape.

A recurring message in the data is that *less is more.* Consider the importance of uncluttered layout, less content, and streamlined interaction. However, more is more when it comes to site speed (no site is too fast or too powerful) and upper-tier Google search engine rankings. And you can ignore some urban legends such as the "three-click rule" and problems with long pages. Good content drives extensive usage.

By balancing clear, thoughtful, and proven design (supported by data) alongside the power to properly serve it, organizations can effectively reach and keep more users, spurring exciting growth.

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[3] Tom Funk, *Web 2.0 and Beyond*, Praeger Publishers, 2009, p. 23.

[4] D. Viney, *Get to the top on Google,* Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2008, p. 94-95.

[5] D. Viney, *Get to the top on Google,* Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2008, p.96-97.

[6] Evan Fell, The Fell Agency, private communication.

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[9] David Viney, *Get to the top on Google,* Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2008, p. 29.

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