Messages That Engage Customers: Insights and Best Practices

How to improve your marketing based on our original research into the messages of **600** companies.

MAP&FIRE
mapandfire.com

The Really BIG Takeaway

99%

...of the topmost companies we analyzed focused their headline around customer benefits.

What We'll Cover:

MAP&FIRE
mapandfire.com

Introduction to the Research

This report breaks down the key takeaways and insights that we developed based on analysis of website messages from 600 companies across a variety of industries.

The goal was to find relationships that exist between the format of a company's marketing messages and their success.

Through this process we aimed to create ideas around best practices that can be applied to improve any company's marketing efforts.

Distribution of companies in our study across industries

MAP&FIRE
mapandfire.com
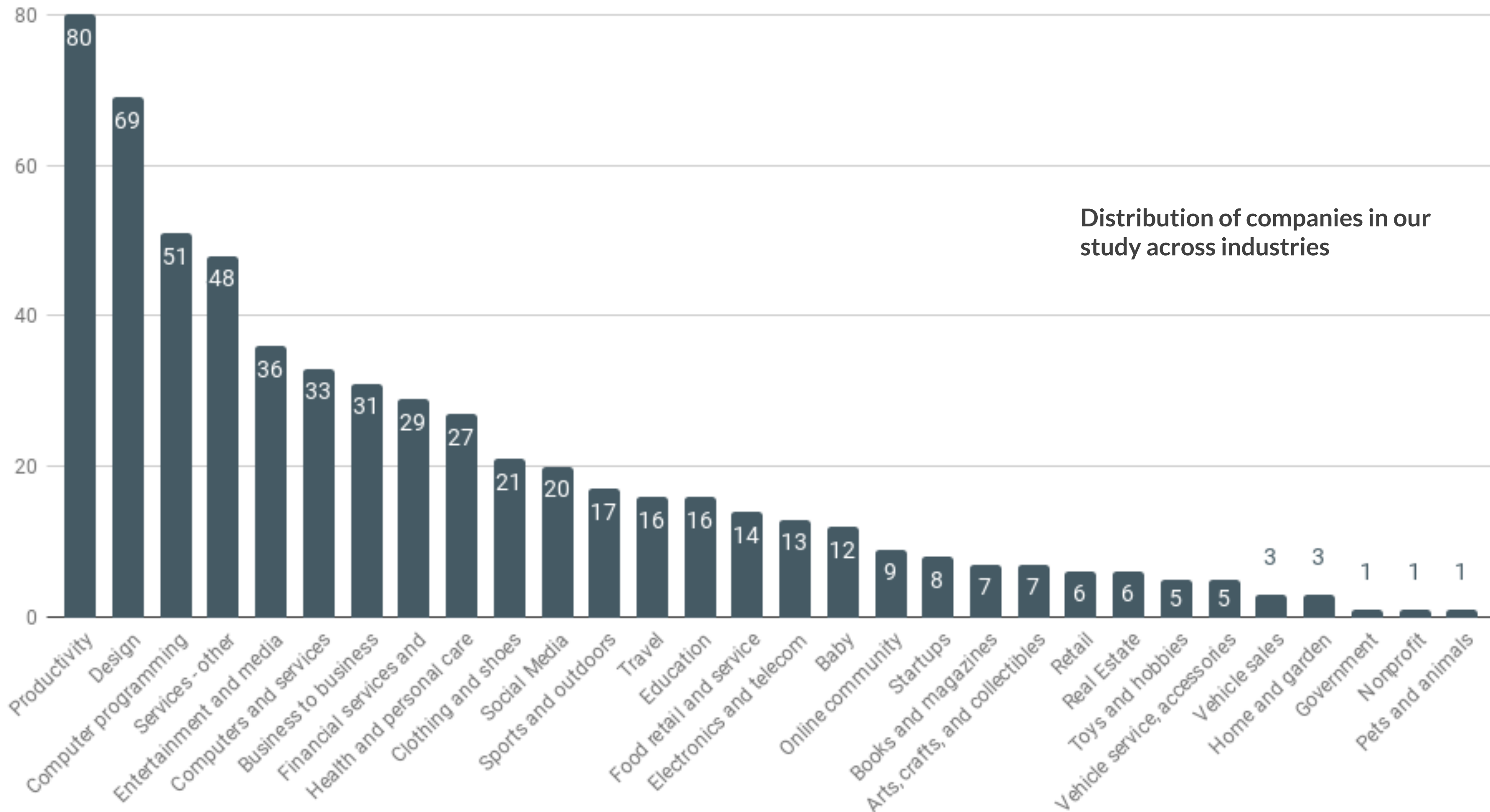
How We Measured Success

As we said, part of the purpose of this research was to look for correlations between a company's messaging and their success.

This is a tricky element as there are lots of potential measurements of success. You could look at revenue, growth, user base, or many other metrics.

The problem is, that data isn't available for every business. In addition, when you look across industries, business types, and company maturity, those factors are tough to equalize.

Instead we looked to the people.

The website Product Hunt (producthunt.com) is an awesome online resource for discovering new businesses. On the site, the community is presented with new products and services every day. The users can then "upvote" a company whose offering they like.

There's no strict definition of what an upvote means, but it's an indication that the person likes the offering in some way.

So, while we can't claim an upvote means the user specifically liked the company's messaging, we can say there's some correlation between upvotes and the success of the company.

In particular, because Product Hunt focuses on new offerings from companies, their ability to market themselves effectively is critical to their success within the community.

Upvotes provide a consistent measure to compare businesses regardless of industry, size, or revenue.

The ability to get upvotes is largely dependent on whether the company is able to engage an audience with what they created.

That's what marketing is all about.
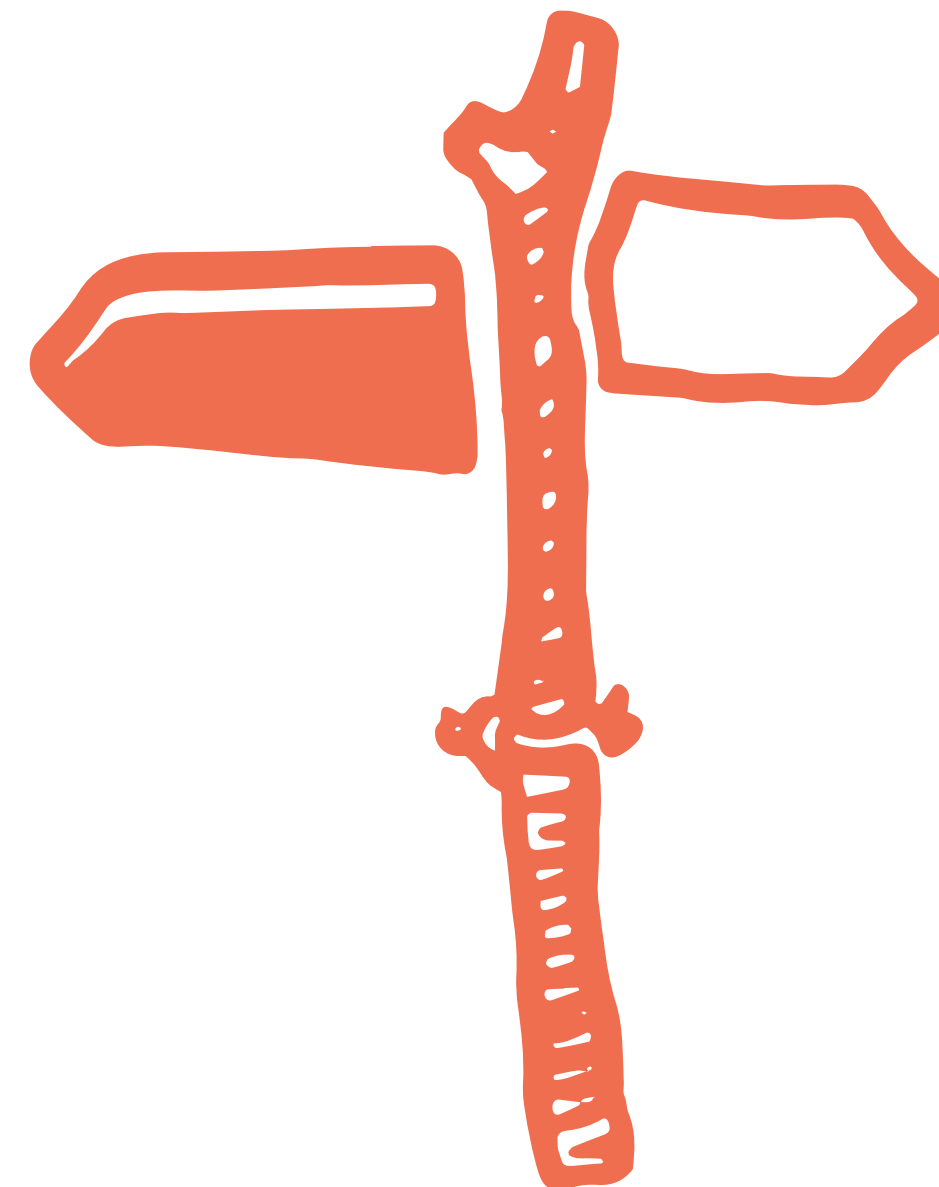
How We Measured Success (cont.)

In the context of this analysis, we selected 500 upvotes as the cutoff between top companies and bottom companies. This is based on a very rough approximation for the threshold a company needs to meet in order to contend for "Product of the Day" (aka. The company that receives the most upvotes each day) on Product Hunt.
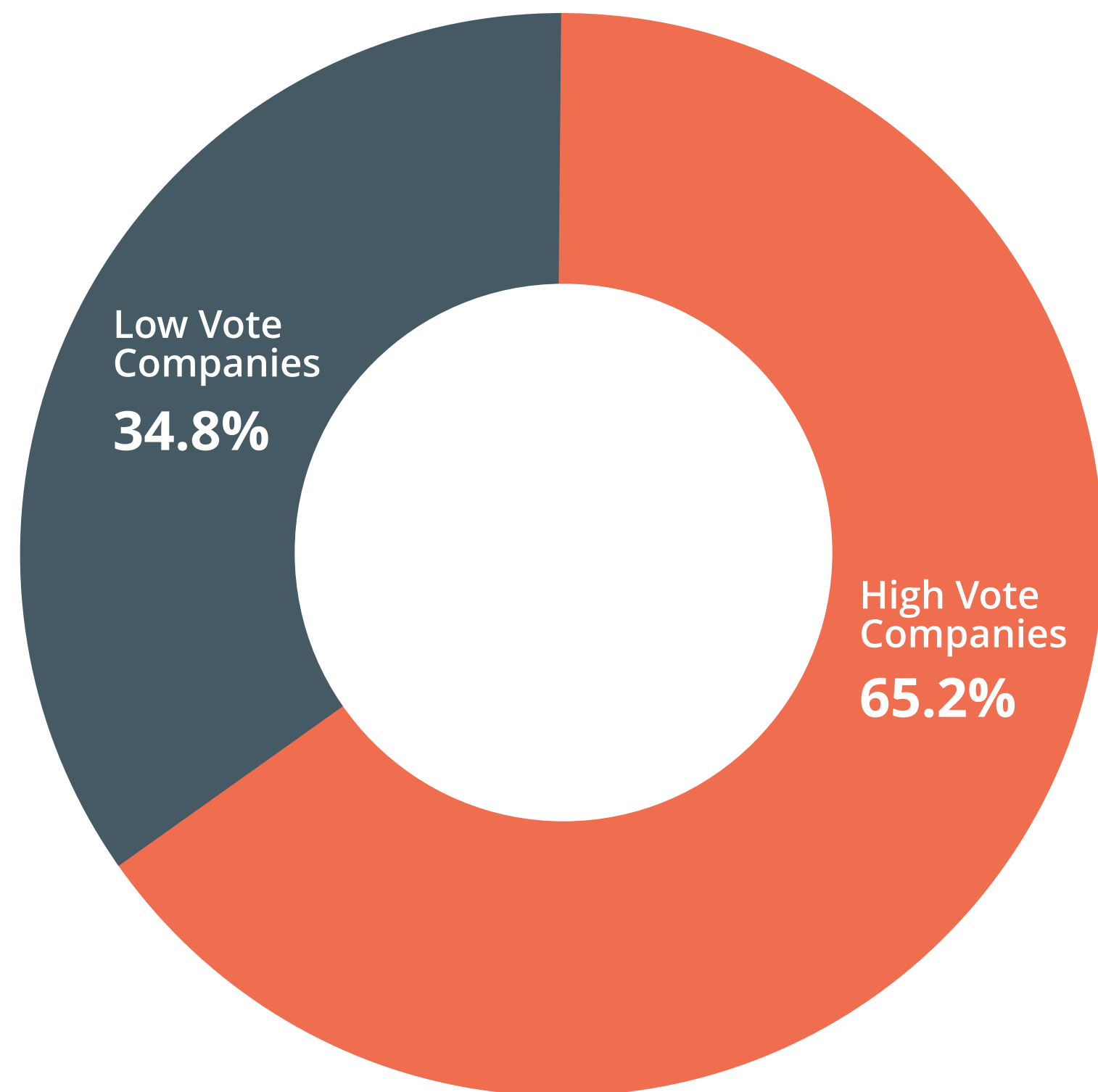
A few more notes on the analysis:

- Not all the companies in the study included all the various messageing elements on their website. Totals for each section are based on what elements were present.

- In all groups, we focused on core trends and behaviors. To avoid impact from extreme outliers, we tested both the complete dataset as well as results that removed the longest and shortest 2.5% for each individual group.

- Because our goal was to find best practices, we did a further breakdown to isolate the top 33% of our High Vote companies to determine our Highest Vote, or best-of-the-best practice recommendations.

- And then we conversely looked at the bottom 33% of the Low Vote companies to contrast against.

- **Final Note:** we're not affiliated with Product Hunt in any way, we're just big fans of the site and found their rating system a useful gauge for this research study.

Low Vote Companies
34.8%

High Vote Companies
65.2%

MAP&FIRE
mapandfire.com

The Message Elements We Examined

We looked at 3 core components of each company's messages:

1. Headline

This is the biggest, boldest statement at the top of the page. In general, this is meant to capture the core benefit or value proposition for the customer

2. Subheadline

This is the statement below the headline. It's typically a little bit longer and provides additional supporting details on the features and benefits the business offers

3. Call To Action (CTA)

This is the primary action the business wants customers to take. On websites, it's often in the form of a button or link to be clicked on.

(A fake example, but it does sound pretty awesome!)

MAP&FIRE
mapandfire.com

Too Long; Didn't Read

Some quick, high level takeaways if you don't have time to read everything right now...

(but seriously come back later and finish it, because there's lots more good stuff here!)

1. Talk about the benefits you provide, not just features

This aligns with everything we preach, but it was supported by a staggering 99% result in our Highest Vote companies, where 115 out of 116 companies used benefit-focused headlines. This is compared to just 35% in the Lowest Vote group.

2. Headlines can be a bit longer than expected

Based on other studies, the prevailing belief is that optimal headline length is ~6 words. Our results for the Highest Vote companies hedged just a little more at 6.4 words, with a standard deviation of 3.1. So, you can go a little longer but not too much.

3. Subheadlines are longer but still, keep them succinct

The Highest Vote companies kept subheadlines to a short average of 16.5 words. This was 2.7 words shorter than the Lowest Vote companies at 19.2 words.

4. Use all 3 messaging elements to engage customers

90% of our Highest Vote companies use a headline. 78% pair a subheadline with their headline. 97% then use a CTA. Compare this to the Lowest Vote companies where 92% use a headline, but only 63% use a subheadline and 78% have a CTA.

MAP&FIRE
mapandfire.com

Benefit Headlines
vs.
Feature Headlines

Benefit vs. Feature Headlines

One of the most important and powerful aspects of your messaging revolves around not just what you're saying about your business but how you position it to the reader.

The main distinction we examined was whether companies presented their headline, aka. Their core value proposition, as a benefit statement or a description/feature focused statement.

Benefit statements focus on how the customer's life is improved as a result of the product:

- Turn Ideas into Products Faster
- Shopping for your home just got easier
- Get the right music, right now

Description or feature statements only tell you what the offering is:

- Mobile Attribution Analytics
- The professional publishing platform
- A High Stakes Fantasy Football Club

The reason benefit statements are powerful is that they immediately put customers in the mindset of the value they'll receive. It helps them to envision a better life. It's designed to create an emotional connection.

When you focus on basic descriptions and features, you rely on the customer to do the heavy lifting. They have to first understand what you're offering and then also imagine how it benefits them.

That's not to say that a descriptive headline can't work. There may be certain products or certain audiences who respond better to that style. There are no absolutes.

But if you haven't experimented benefit-focused messaging, now's the time.

MAP&FIRE
mapandfire.com

Benefit vs. Feature Headlines (cont.)

Here's what we saw from our segments in terms of Benefit headline use:

	Benefit Focused Headline	Feature Focused Headline	
Highest Vote Companies	**99%**	**1%**	(n=116)
High Votes	46%	54%	(n=352)
All companies	39%	61%	(n=547)
Low Votes	26%	74%	(n=195)
Lowest Vote Companies	**35%**	**65%**	(n=64)

We should note that with all the subtleties of language, there's a level of subjectivity with determining whether a statement is a benefit or a description. Our assessment was based on our interpretation using the criteria outlined above.

MAP&FIRE
mapandfire.com

Headline Insights

Headline Length

There's been quite a bit of research done on optimal headline lengths over the years, but most of it centers around blog articles and social content. Our focus is on website messaging, but the principles are largely the same.

The bottom line is that you need to convey the value proposition of whatever you're offering in a clear, engaging way.

On initial visits, customers don't like to spend much time reading, and tend to make quick emotional judgements on what they see.

As a result, the prevailing ideal length for headlines is quite short. Around 6 words.

Our research aligned with this as well.

	Avg. # of Headline Words	Standard Deviation	
Highest Vote Companies	**6.4**	**2.7**	(n=116)
High Votes	6.6	3.1	(n=352)
All companies	6.3	3.0	(n=547)
Low Votes	5.9	2.7	(n=195)
Lowest Vote Companies	**5.8**	**2.3**	(n=64)

MAP&FIRE
mapandfire.com

Headline Length (cont.)

We also looked at the average number of headline characters and saw consistent values across the board.

|	Avg. # of Headline Chars	Standard Deviation	
Highest Vote Companies	**38.5**	**16.1**	(n=116)
High Votes	40.1	19.4	(n=352)
All companies	39.7	19.4	(n=547)
Low Votes	37.9	18.1	(n=195)
Lowest Vote Companies	38.4	16.1	(n=64)

MAP&FIRE
mapandfire.com

Headline Length (cont.)

On the surface, the groups aren't drastically different. When we look at the distribution of headlines across all the lengths, the shapes for High Votes and Low Votes are very similar

But we do see different peaks; **High Vote Companies (dark blue) peak at 6 words**, Low Vote Companies (orange) peak at 4 words.
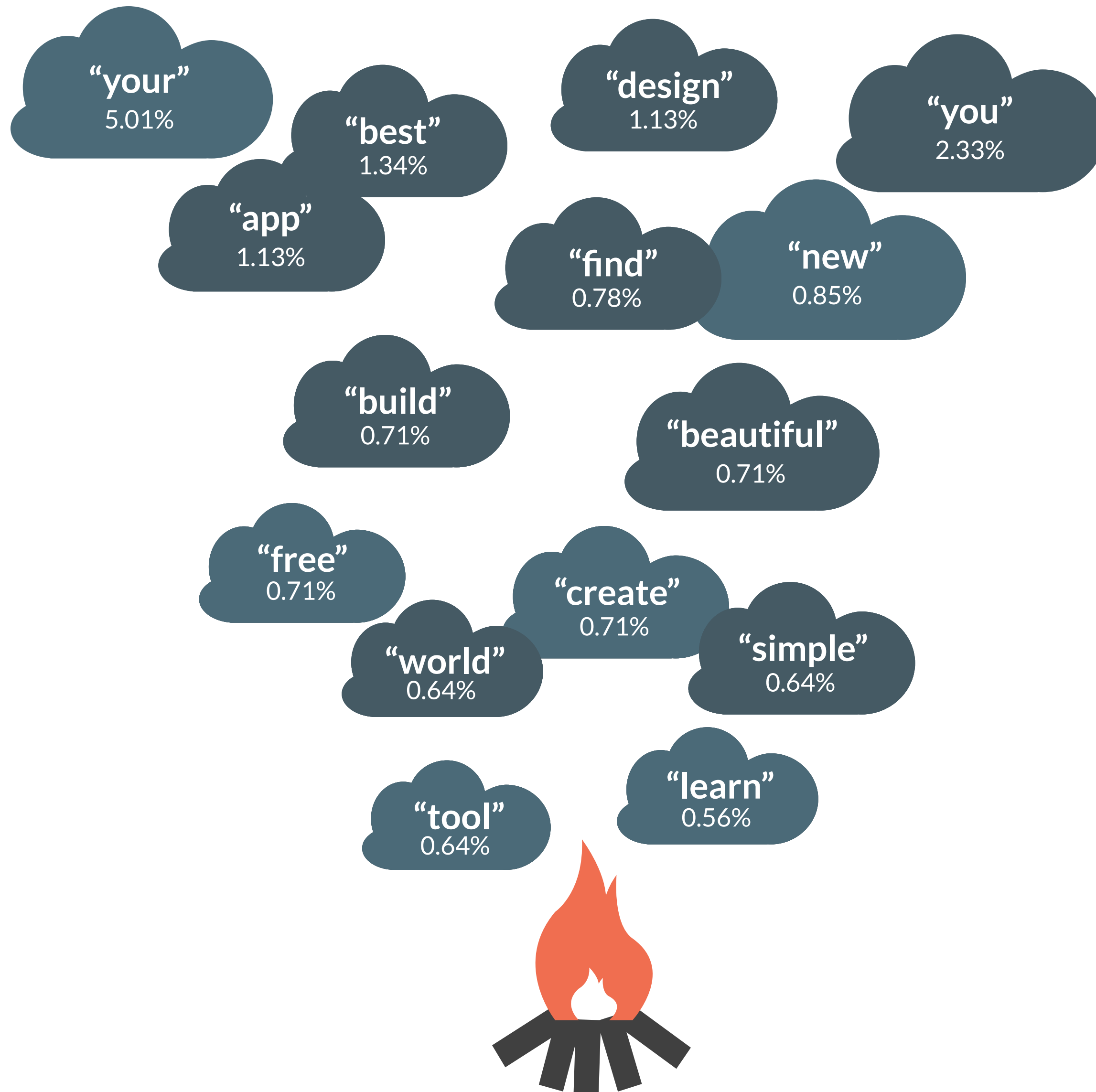
If you go too short, your headline could end up being too broad or vague. This may be an issue with the Low Vote group. An extra descriptor word here or there can help clarify and cement your value with a customer.

Again 6 words is about right. But if you want to hedge slightly shorter or longer (5-8 words) you would still be in good company.

MAP&FIRE
mapandfire.com
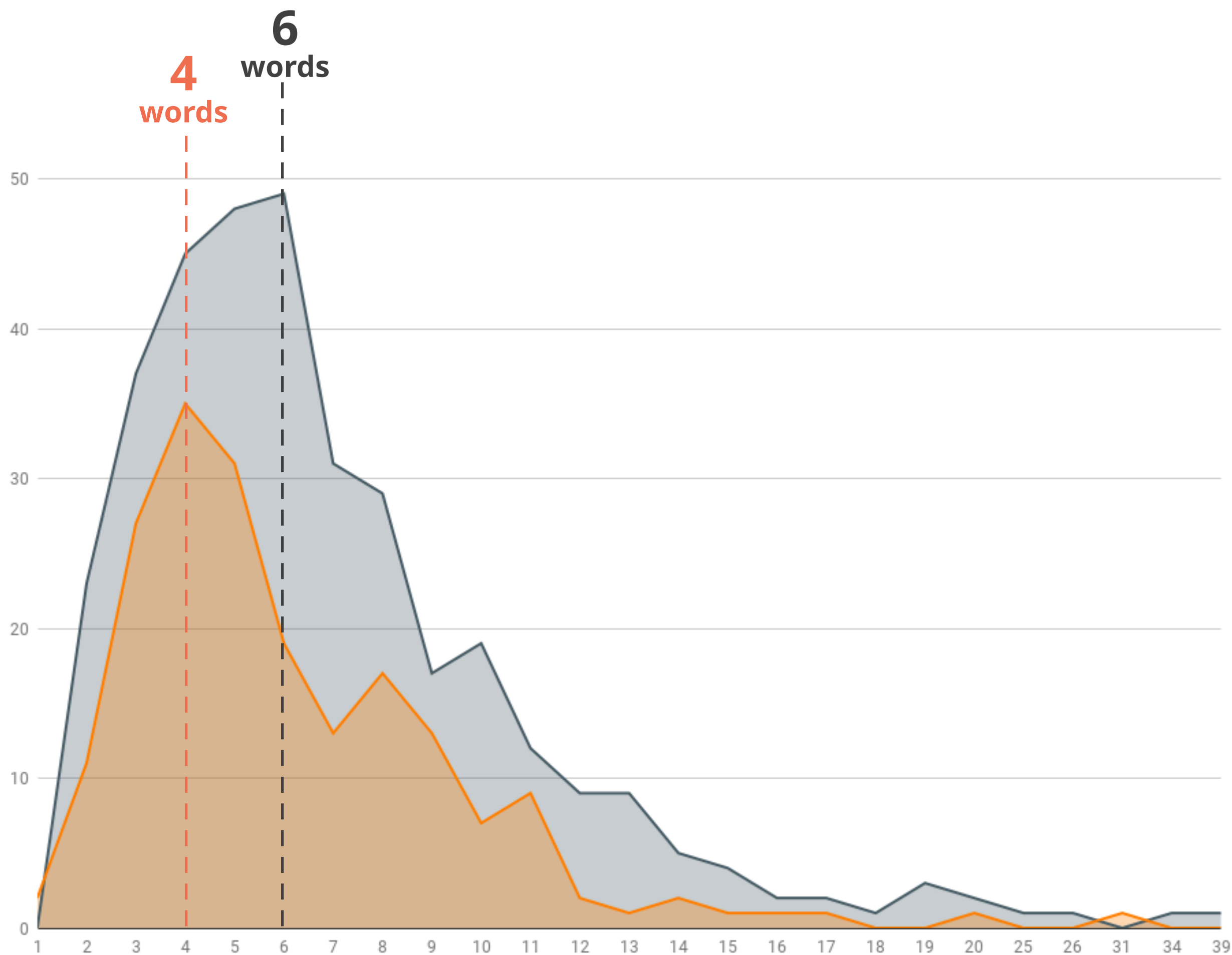
Headline Popular Keywords

Here's a selection of the most frequently used words from our Top Vote group.
(% is of all words used in the headlines):

"your" 5.01%

"best" 1.34%

"design" 1.13%

"you" 2.33%

"app" 1.13%

"find" 0.78%

"new" 0.85%

"build" 0.71%

"beautiful" 0.71%

"free" 0.71%

"create" 0.71%

"world" 0.64%

"simple" 0.64%

"tool" 0.64%

"learn" 0.56%

Subheadline Insights

Subheadline Length

Subheadlines work as a complement to your headline. They can help fill in some of the details of your offering and provide supporting info on the features your customers will most care about.

If you've written a benefit-focused headline, The subheadline can be your opportunity to describe what your offering does.

Visually, your subheadline will typically be written in a smaller font to allow for those extra words without taking over the entire page.

With that being said, here's what we found in terms of optimal subheadline length:

	Avg. # of Subheadline Words	Standard Deviation	
Highest Vote Companies	**16.5**	**8.9**	(n=90)
High Votes	16.7	9.6	(n=230)
All companies	17.0	10.6	(n=350)
Low Votes	17.2	11.3	(n=120)
Lowest Vote Companies	19.2	11.5	(n=40)

MAP&FIRE
mapandfire.com

Subheadline Length (cont.)

With the subheadlines we see a consistent trend towards longer messages as we move from the highest vote group down to the lowest.

The standard deviations are also fairly high across the board, so we know that these values are much more spread out than with the headlines.

Given that these messages are longer and there may be less common knowledge of best practices, it makes sense that it would be a little more of the wild west out there.

	Avg. # of Headline Chars	Standard Deviation	
Highest Vote Companies	**103.6**	**58.2**	(n=90)
High Votes	103.9	61.8	(n=230)
All companies	106.6	67.0	(n=350)
Low Votes	110.2	73.2	(n=195)
Lowest Vote Companies	122.2	72.7	(n=40)

MAP&FIRE
mapandfire.com

Subheadline Length (cont.)

The **High Vote Companies (dark blue)** have a more condensed grouping (57% coeff of variation) around word count compared to the **Low Vote Companies (orange)** (66% coeff of variation).

Both groups peak around the 10-11 word range, but the High Vote group is more densely contained under the 20 word mark.

MAP&FIRE
mapandfire.com
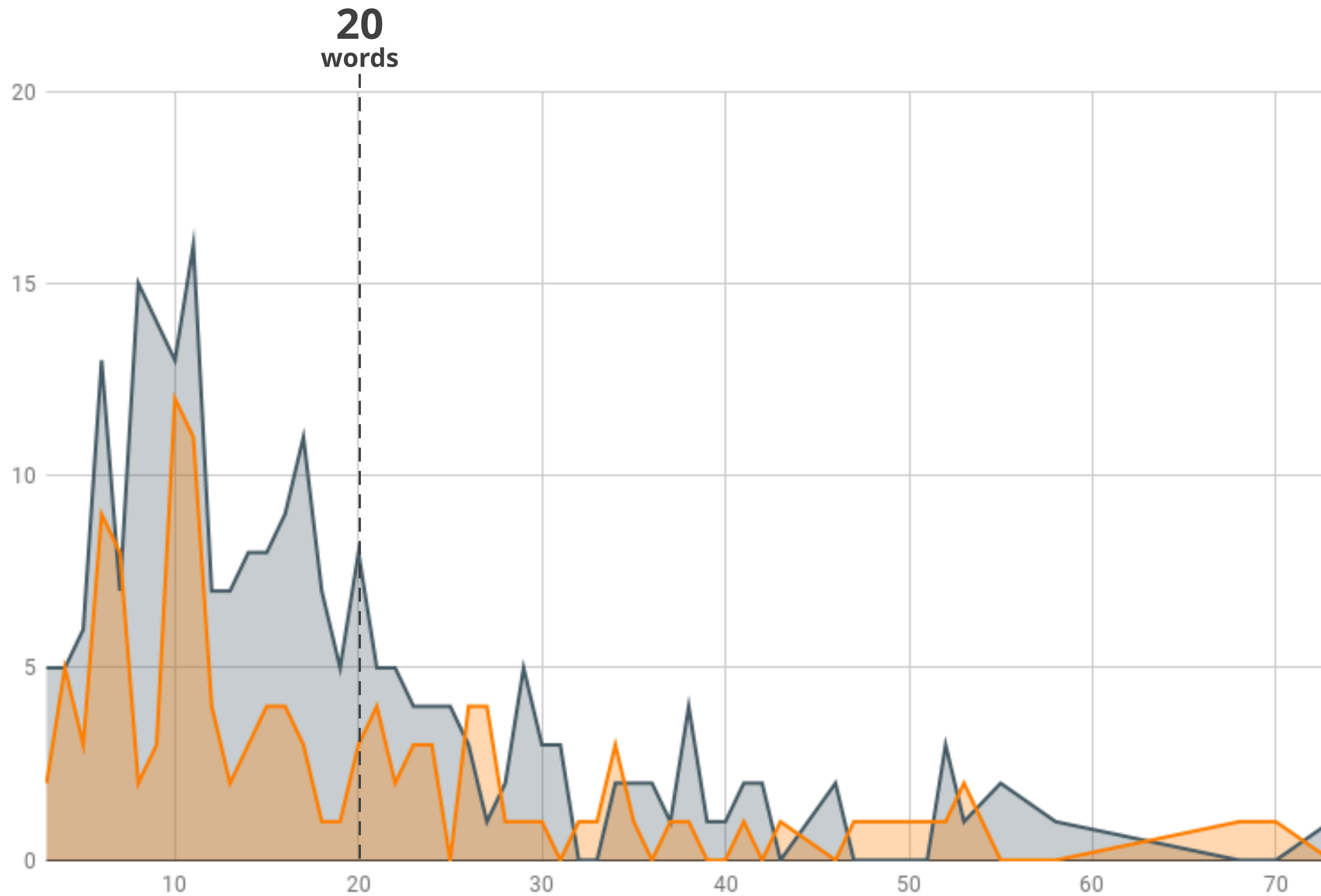
Subheadline Length (cont.)

There may be a correlation where lower vote companies have fewer resources available and in turn fewer folks available to help craft their messaging.

But small and large companies are both prone to ramble in subheadlines at time, like these **two examples**:

Smaller Company:
Tapiriik synchronizes your fitness activities between Garmin Connect, Runkeeper, Strava, TrainingPeaks, SportTracks.mobi, Endomondo, RideWithGPS, TrainAsONE, TrainerRoad, Motivato, Velo Hero, Epson RUNSENSE, Dropbox, Smashrun, BeginnerTriathlete, Pulsstory, Singletracker, Aerobia, and SETIO (your heart rate, cadence, power, and temperature data syncs too).

Massive Corporation:
Inspired by the evolving composition of breast milk, the BabyNes Nutrition System is designed to be in sync with your baby's changing nutritional needs. With month based precise formula capsules tailored to your baby's development from 0-36 months, it's our closest formula to breast milk. The formula capsules work exclusively with the BabyNes machine to deliver hygienic, lump free formula, and a happy bottle feeding experience for babies and parents.

The more effective approach, is a short, focused statement that's easy to digest quickly, like these **two examples**:

Tetra uses AI to take notes on phone calls, to help you focus, remember the details, and keep your team in sync.

For years, your team has been split across spreadsheets, docs, and apps. It's time to bring us back together.

MAP&FIRE
mapandfire.com

Subheadline Popular Keywords

Here's a sampling of high frequency words from the Top Vote group's subheadlines
(% is of all words used in the subheadlines):

"your"
4.09%

"free"
1.00%

"can"
0.91%

"you"
3.31%

"more"
0.87%

"app"
0.78%

"new"
0.83%

"help"
0.70%

"we"
0.70%

"design"
0.65%

"time"
0.52%

"create"
0.65%

"best"
0.48%

"build"
0.44%

"easy"
0.44%

Call To Action Insights

Call To Action Length

A Call To Action is more straightforward than a headline or subheadline. Companies of all shapes and sizes stick to a pretty consistent formula of around 3 words with a focus on strong action verbs.

As consumers we've all been sold a million products in our lives, so we've had plenty of opportunities to absorb this structure.

With that in mind, let's look at the numbers:

	Avg. # of Call To Action Words	Standard Deviation	
Highest Vote Companies	3.4	1.6	(n=113)
High Votes	3.4	1.7	(n=323)
All companies	3.3	1.7	(n=485)
Low Votes	3.3	1.7	(n=162)
Lowest Vote Companies	2.9	1.6	(n=50)

MAP&FIRE
mapandfire.com

Call To Action Length (cont.)

The character counts follow the same trend decreasing slightly with the Lowest Vote companies.

	Avg. # of Call To Action Chars	Standard Deviation	
	17.9	**8.6**	(n=113)
High Votes	18.4	8.9	(n=323)
All companies	17.8	9.1	(n=485)
Low Votes	16.9	9.5	(n=162)
Lowest Vote Companies	15.5	8.9	(n=50)

MAP&FIRE
mapandfire.com

Call To Action Length (cont.)

One interesting note is that we see the **Top Vote group (dark blue)** with a peak word count of 3 as we'd expect, but the **Low Vote group (orange)** actually peaks at 2.

This represents an opportunity because shorter, 2 word CTAs, tend to follow more generic patterns.
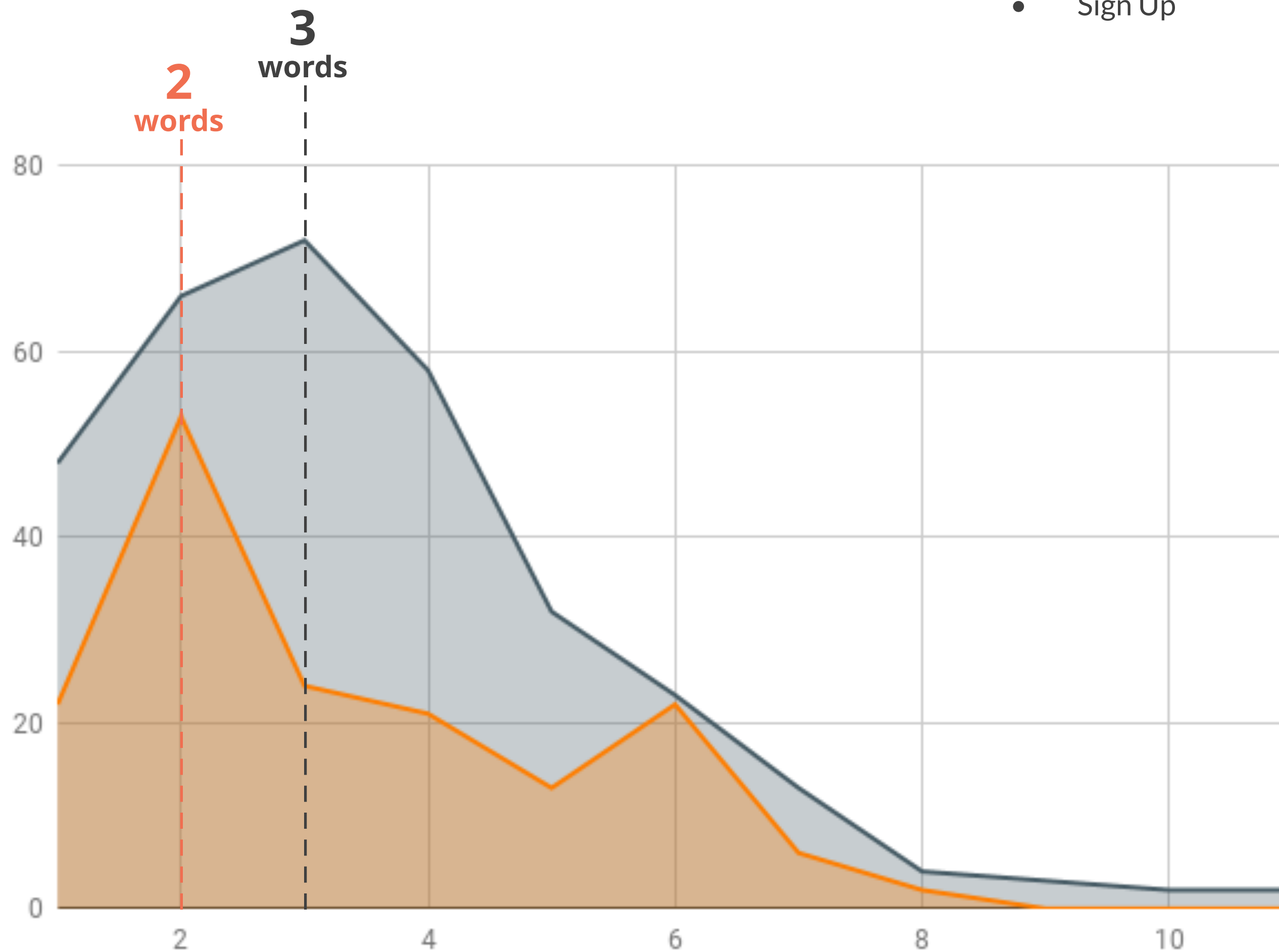
When you add an extra descriptor it allows you to encourage engagement or create specificity to your offering:

Generic 2-Word CTAs

- Learn More
- Get Started
- Sign Up

More Specific 3-Word CTAs

- Start Free Trial
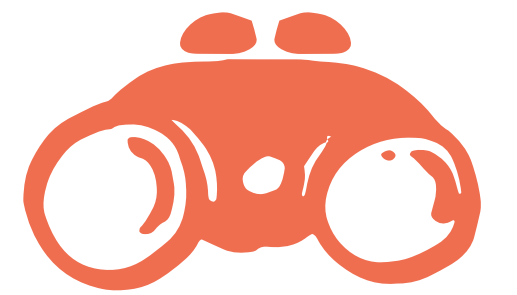- Post A Job
- Get the Cookbook

Call To Action Popular Keywords

Here's a sampling of high frequency words from the Top Vote group's calls to action (% is of all words used in the calls to action):

"download" 7.53%

"get" 4.33%

"free" 4.33%

"app" 3.51%

"sign" 3.51%

"up" 3.21%

"now" 2.79%

"search" 2.27%

"try" 2.06%

"buy" 1.86%

"play" 1.86%

"start" 1.86%

"subscribe" 1.14%

"join" 1.03%

"learn" 1.14%

MAP&FIRE
mapandfire.com

Thanks For Reading!

There you go! That's the summary of our study.

As with any research, this study isn't perfect and it's certainly not definitive. This study should simply act as another data point in your toolbox to help inform decisions about your marketing and messaging.

We hope it reinforced some of your existing best practices and helped guide you to some new ideas.

We want to help companies of all sizes and experience levels connect with the people that need their offering. Hopefully this sparked some new paths for you on that journey!

**If you'd like more help creating
effective messages, our site has a free Field Guide section of
resources as well as dozens of blog articles!**

MAP&FIRE
mapandfire.com

If you need hands-on help with your brand or marketing, reach out for a free consultation so we can help you get growing.

BOOK A FREE CONSULTATION