

## Taming Online Ad Chaos

### New services monitor exactly where ads appear

Brian Morrissey April 19, 2010 Adweek

For years, Web media planners have lived in fear of The Screenshot. That's the e-mailed evidence from a client that shows its ads running where they shouldn't, such as a pornographic Web site.

More brand advertisers than ever are turning to the Web and they are now seeking to solve this problem by engaging verification tools and services to alert them when their ads run on sites they deem unacceptable.

Misplaced ads aren't a problem unique to the Internet, but the digital medium makes the problem even more acute. A client and agency can easily pick up a magazine and see their ad ran as agreed to on the insertion order. Yet the Web is incredibly fragmented, with attention spread across millions of sites. That's led to an automated system of ad placement that is far from transparent, with many ad networks not even showing clients where their ads ran.

"There's more opacity in the system than there's ever been before," said Joe Mele, managing director of media and marketing at Razorfish. "There's less visibility into what's going on. For some clients, that's just not OK."

Service providers in the ad-verification space, including DoubleVerify, AdSafe and AdXpose, use tracking pixels and human analysis to identify misplaced ads and give advertisers the ability to get them taken down -- not to mention refunds from publishers and networks.

The scope of the problem is a matter of some debate. Verification companies, with a clear bias toward seeing a big problem, throw around big numbers. Oren Netzer, CEO of DoubleVerify, said the service can find campaigns in which 80 percent of the ad impressions are in violation of the terms of the insertion order. AdSafe estimates up to 15 percent of campaign impressions are non-compliant. It sponsored a study completed by the Winterberry Group that estimates brand safety concerns cost the display advertising industry \$2 billion in spending from wary brands that choose not to advertise online.

The Internet has historically appealed more to direct-response advertisers that frequently chalk up the risks as a cost of doing business. As branding efforts move online, the need to keep tabs on ads could become even more acute.

"The use of verification is growing exponentially," said Kent Wakeford, chief revenue officer of AdSafe. "It'll become standard in online media buying."

Ad verification does more than look for ads on porn sites. An advertiser running a campaign only on U.S. sites can have its ads shown to visitors from abroad.

Ads that are only to run above the fold can appear on the bottom of the page, outside the initial view of visitors. In some instances, a publisher runs stacked ads, hiding an ad behind another placement, again unseen by users. Ads may also end up next to user-generated content, outside the control of even the publisher.

All this has been further exacerbated with the rise of data-fueled ad exchanges that identify discrete audiences for ad placements. In theory, this cuts out wasted impressions by only showing messages to those fitting targeting criteria. It also adds another layer of opacity to the system.

Some ad networks themselves have signed up for verification services as a way of allaying advertisers' fears. But Michael Cassidy, CEO of Undertone Networks, which does offer ad verification, said ideally the services shouldn't be needed as a check on ad networks.

"Verification is effective when you don't trust your ad network partner," he said. "At some point you have to rely on

your partner."

The question remains, however, just how effective ad-verification techniques are. Many are unable to do what agencies most want: prevent the ads from showing up in the first place, according to Marta Martinez, svp of operations at MediaMath and a former digital media executive with Havas.

"The reporting approach is exposing the problem, but making it difficult to provide the solution," she said. "The future is in the prevention technologies."

DoubleVerify and AdSafe both claim to have prevention services. The problem, according to Kurt Unkel, director at Publicis Groupe's VivaKi Nerve Center, is the prevention technologies fall short when advertisers buy from exchanges. While the verification services might prevent an ad from showing, it still leaves the buyer with the inventory to fill.

There's also the problem of false positives. Like many filtering technologies, ad verification tools can have an itchy trigger finger. In one instance, Unkel said a campaign was flagged for "suggestive content" for running on a Miami Dolphins Web site, presumably because there were photos of the cheerleaders. "It can create more problems than it solves," he said.

Finally, ad verification presents another tax on running a Web ad campaign. Fees run from 3 to 6 cents per thousand impressions. While not a large amount, advertisers are already paying fees to a variety of players for rich media, outside data and ad serving.

"Exactly how many more taxes does the marketer or the supplier need to pay to consider a campaign delivered fairly and accurately?" asked Eric Porres, CMO at Lotame, a social-ad targeting company. "A lot of this goes away if there are transparent platforms that allow marketers to see what's going on in their campaigns."