

And the Banner Man Held His Banner High

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By Martin Avis

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We hear it all the time: "Banners don't work anymore!"
But did 'banners' ever really work in the first place?

The latest published figures seem to suggest that the average click-through-rate (CTR) for a banner ad on the Internet is between 0.15% and 0.3%. That is 1.5 to 3 per thousand.

Why is that such a surprise? Can you remember the last time you clicked on a banner ad? I certainly can't.

Yet businesses are still putting banners up. Are they just kidding themselves?

In the same way that big businesses will buy endless TV spots or radio ads to get their name better known, so too are banner ads used as a branding medium. These campaigns, where response is only a secondary aim, bring the average CTRs down considerably.

In the offline advertising world, Direct Response advertising is thriving. Ads that solicit a measurable action – call this number, fill this coupon, visit this web site – are growing as a percentage of the total. The reason is simple. Every measurable response lets the advertiser learn more about the mix of media on his schedule. Newspaper A pulls more calls than newspaper B – then lets drop 'A' from the plan and try out 'C'.

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This constant learning and refining should be practiced online as well, but how many do it? The overall CTR is further damaged by too many banners being bought on the wrong sites, and staying there too long.

An advantage that offline media planners have is the sheer volume of research into the audiences of every advertising medium you can think of. So before a single dollar is spent, they know that their ads will be seen by the most appropriate people.

Not so online. Yet. In a large number of cases, banner

ads are bought and sold in bulk. For every perfect site you buy, several others may be included in 'the package'. This arbitrary approach will decline if sites are forced to audit both the size and composition of their audiences before advertisers will buy from them.

Making a successful banner campaign depends on four factors:

1. Ensuring that the audience of the site you advertise on is as closely matched as possible to your own. Not just in terms of age and socio-demographics, but also in attitude. Wastage is useless, and expensive.
2. Advertising on popular sites that people are likely to have bookmarked. One of the reasons many people resist clicking on banners is because they know they will be taken away from the site they are viewing to someplace they may not want to be. Highly bookmarked sites are easy to find again.
3. Getting the right price. Until recently, most sites selling banners insisted on a cost-per-thousand impressions policy. The advertiser pays every time a viewer has an opportunity to click the banner whether or not that opportunity is taken. This is becoming outdated, thankfully, as a more appropriate payment-by-results model is growing in popularity.
4. Getting the creative right. This is not easy. Having spent many years working in advertising agencies, I can tell you that the few creative people really understand

the Internet. They end up creating online versions of billboard advertising. Since the majority of billboard ads are about branding and image, not direct response, the difficulty is clear.

I recently ran a banner campaign for a web site which showed up-to-the-minute financial data on budget day. Banners were tactically placed on news and current affairs sites, using clear, unambiguous copy. No flashing lights or animations, just a simple, appealing message. The click-thru rates were between 5% and 8%. The server was overwhelmed.

Recently, I have seen reports that banners that are designed specifically for the site they appear on – so that they blend in and look like part of the site – have achieved click-thru rates of over 10%.

In summary, here is my top ten pointers for making your banners work well above the average:

Audience

1. Aim at the right people
2. Be relevant. Make sure your main offer is 'in tune' with what the site's viewers are thinking about.

Research

3. Keep testing. Instantly drop any banner that isn't pulling.
4. Know how much you can pay. If you are averaging \$2 per click and one in fifty buy from you, then you had better make more than \$100 profit on each sale, or you will go bust.
5. Before you spend any money on a site, talk to other advertisers. If they say that their response stunk, (and their ad seems reasonably okay), bear this in mind when you negotiate price.

Design

6. Make your banner intriguing. If they don't care, they won't click.

7. Tell them what's in it for them. If you show or imply a really great benefit that they will gain from your site, they are more likely to click to see more.

8. Consider disguising your banner. If you make it look like part of the site, more people may have the confidence to click it.

Price

9. Don't buy cost-per-thousand impressions unless you really have to – and the price is low enough.

10. Negotiate, negotiate, negotiate. Never take the first price offered. Always ask for (and expect) a

discount on the price, or a bonus on top of what you are buying.

Achieving valuable CTR's can be done, but not by blindly following the sheep. Successful advertisers do things a little differently.

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Ask Mr. D on Banner Exchange

By Bill Daugherty

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Dear Mr. D,

I recently joined a banner exchange. This is my first venture into banner advertising and

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I was shocked to see my banner getting a measly .3% click-through rate.

Is this a normal ratio or do I just have a lousy banner?

Signed,

Clickless In Seattle

Dear Clickless,

Back in the good old days (three or four years ago) it was easy to get surfers to click on banners. Today that has changed dramatically, banner advertising has hit hard times.

But even in today's climate, a .3% click-through rate is extremely low. I haven't seen your banner, so I don't know if it is lousy or not. But here are some tips to follow when creating your banner.

- * The text should consist of only a few words that offer a clear message.
- * Choose your color scheme with great care. Make sure your text color contrast well with your background color.
- * Animation is great, but don't make it too busy.
- * The two most important words you can put on any banner are "Click Here."

Now for a look at banner placement strategy:

Some banner exchanges allow you to target the type of sites where your banner will appear and some do not. If your exchange doesn't offer this feature, switch to one that does.

Banner advertising may never again enjoy the strength it had in the good old days, but you can get the most out of your banner advertising by following the guidelines above.

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Bill Daugherty. Do you have an advertising or marketing question you'd like to see published in this column? Send it to <mailto:MrD@epm.zzn.com> You can visit Mr. D's website at: <http://www.freeadsgalore.com>



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