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What Killed the Banner Ad?

By Lauri Harpf

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If you ask the Internet marketers of today, many if not most of them will tell you that banner advertising is dead. They say that it's expensive, the click-through rates are low and that unless you know exactly what you're doing, it is likely that you'll end up spending more money than you'll make.

Surprisingly, just a few years ago the same people were rushing to invest their money in banner advertising campaigns. In those happy days, the click-through rates were at least ten times as high as they are now. What has happened? Has the audience become more resistant to Internet advertising in general? Or perhaps the whole concept of banner advertising has become obsolete and we'll need to think of new ways of reaching people?

Perhaps, perhaps. There is certainly at least some truth to these claims, but they are hardly the only reasons behind the current crisis. Personally, I think that those responsible for planning the banner advertising campaigns are largely to blame for what has happened. The difference between the successful banner advertising of yesterday and the pathetic banner advertising of today is vanity.

Vanity? Sounds odd, but you'll only need to look at the banners displayed on a few popular sites to see what I mean. They have a nice-looking background, a beautiful picture or two, a professionally-designed logo, smooth animation and bright, pleasant colors. In a nutshell, those banners are works of art and that is exactly why they perform so badly.

More marketing, less graphics

Unless you are trying to brand your business, your main focus should not be on what your banners look like. Pay attention to how many sales you make and how high your ROI is, forget the aesthetics.

Some readers may be worried that such an approach might damage their reputation in the eyes of the consumers. Unless the ads look good, they might affect the company's brand negatively. Large, well-known businesses definitely should worry about that,

but if you're a small business, you shouldn't over-emphasise the importance of branding. You've probably seen hundreds or thousands banners in the past weeks, but can you remember what even twenty of them looked like and what company or product they were advertising?

Without any further ado, here are some tips on how to make your banners look worse but perform better:

Don't camouflage your banners

Many banners co-exist in harmony with the design of the site they are displayed on. While this makes the site look better, it also prevents anyone from noticing what the poor advertiser is trying to say. Instead of allowing your banners to fade into the background, do everything possible so that they will stand out. Make it clear that your banner is something that should be clicked, not merely stared at.

In practice, this goal can be achieved by utilizing Windows-style navigational elements, notes instructing users to "click here" and colors that contrast with those used on the site. The result won't look like something you'd want to frame and hang on your wall, but it will be effective.

Easy with the graphics

Pictures of attractive persons or tropical islands may be nice to look at, but they also increase the time it takes for your banner to load. If your banner is placed near the top of the page and

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doesn't appear instantly, the audience will scroll down the page and never see it. Images also take up quite a bit of space and may force you to limit the amount or the size of the text used in the banner.

A good rule of thumb is that unless the picture is somehow essential in convincing the user to click, drop it. When advertising a sweepstakes, adding a picture of a pile of cash can feel like a good idea. However, in many cases a text screaming "WIN \$10,000" would be just as effective and would load up much, much faster.

Cut to the chase

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Banners are not TV commercials. You'll have to continuously fight to get the attention of your audience and you'll also need to

fight to retain it. Long-winded advertisements that take ten seconds before even mentioning what is being advertised may work on TV, but not on the Internet.

Following these instructions, which essentially tell you to create banners that look simple and perhaps even a bit unprofessional might seem foolish. But simple, straight-forward banners that stand out get clicked on.

Banner advertising is not a beauty contest. It's a selling contest. At the end of the day, what matters is whether your banners helped you make a profit, not how cool they looked.

Lauri Harpf runs the A Promotion Guide website, where he offers free tips on how you can use banners, search engines and other methods to promote your site. His site can be found at <http://www.apromotionguide.com/>

Ask Mr. D on Banner Exchange

By Bill Daugherty

Ask Mr. D on Banner Exchange by Bill Daugherty

Dear Mr. D,

I recently joined a banner exchange. This is

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my first venture into banner advertising and 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

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your banner advertising by following the guidelines above.

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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