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Inventory Management, In Advance



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Jumpstart Automotive Media outlines a plan for streamlining the complex and struggling in-market upfront process, and lists ways that agencies, publishers and OEMs can all benefit from this sea change.

Each year, sales reps from online automotive publishers and search engines scurry across the country to Detroit; Chicago; Los Angeles; Irvine, California; and New York to take part in what has become known as the "Automotive In-Market Upfront." This process should not be confused with the well-established broadcast TV Upfront-- the broadcast TV Upfront starts and ends in the spring of each year, while the Auto In-Market Upfront ... well, let's just say it never seems to end.

The Autos Upfront phenomenon was born out of simple supply and demand concern: Automotive manufacturers and their agencies recognized that in-market advertising on search engines and automotive research websites was highly effective, yet prime placements -- such as "conquest" or "retention" -- were only available in finite quantities. As a result, early adopter OEMs and their agencies began setting up annual Media Days, sending out year-long inventory requests to search engines and auto sites. This ensured that OEMs could lock up highly desirable ad space on automotive publisher sites in advance. Today, just about every OEM and their agency has instituted such an upfront system.

Obviously there's a level of competitive advantage for those OEMs who begin early in the year and finalize their upfront budget and media plans months before their competitors. However, as we see online budgets grow, this somewhat random process is having adverse effects on both advertisers and publishers. For example:

- Publishers are never given much warning for when or which OEM is about to start their upfront planning process. Take the planning/buying process for 2006. With '06 Upfronts being finalized in late Q4 of 2005, Jumpstart Automotive Media had already begun receiving '07 Upfront RFPs as soon as Q1'06, and we continued to receive RFPs and invitations to attend auto in-market upfront media days throughout the year.
- Agencies and publishers spend too much time administering the campaigns. From re-proposing and revising plans to forecasting and managing delivery, maintaining this scattered approach keeps all parties "in the weeds." For example, many times OEM X

will buy OEM Y's model-page inventory during their upfront, only to have OEM Y ask to buy these spaces back during *their* upfront. Not to mention that different publishers have different "buy-back" policies.

The current splintered upfront process is definitely bogging down publishers, and I am willing to bet most agencies feel the same pain. But I have a solution: a once-a-year upfront opportunity. Here are a few reasons why it would be advantageous for auto agencies and clients to buy into a one-time-per-year upfront:

- One of the biggest beefs from media planners on beginning the upfront process early in the year is that clients have not provided applicable budgets. To move budget approvals earlier in the year, it will take a paradigm shift at the client level. Yet, if the client has a firm understanding that, as an industry, planning will be completed by a specific time, it will be much easier to secure budgets and clients' buy-in.
- It will encourage publishers to be much more creative about their product offerings, given the grander stage of an upfront presentation. Publishers will be more able to maintain focus throughout the year, with a clearer understanding of what the auto advertisers, as a whole, are seeking from them.
- A formal upfront would allow publishers to gain the attention of, and present opportunities to, potentially higher level clients and agency execs, who are typically out of touch with digital upfront planning because of its current lack-luster form. Furthermore, it might help these senior-level agency and client-side personnel to become more familiar and comfortable with vital in-market ad programs and products such as unique integrated sponsorships, behavioral targeting or rich media applications.
- For OEMs that are consistently late to the upfront game or have yet to develop a formalized upfront process, a designated time per year would help the agency move their client more quickly to action. Planning/buying groups will also have inherent deadlines in place for their planning processes. As a result, neither party would miss out on vital in-market ad inventory (including whether or not the automaker is going to secure its make/model retention inventory).

The digital automotive in-market upfront is too important to not put a more formal structure and process in place that benefits everyone. A formal upfront process would create efficiencies for publishers which would in turn result in better customer service, streamlined inventory management and forecasting and a larger, uncontested menu of *all* of the ad opportunities available to automotive marketers.

It's time for the auto publisher community to step forward and determine a specific time period every year that we provide the upfront "dog and pony show" to our clients and deliver new opportunities for the coming year.

Although I'll probably catch some flack from at least one OEM for proposing this concept, a fixed annual upfront would help get the attention of all parties concerned and legitimize the most important element of any automaker's digital media plan-- securing in-market placements. In this scenario, everyone would be a winner.

Let's collectively move on this in 2007 to make for a better and more secure automotive industry now and beyond.

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