

Specialization Is Their Specialty



By Tessa Wegert

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It used to be working in the interactive space was considered a specialty. Agencies, planners, and designers dedicated exclusively to online media were perceived as experts on the subject -- and got the brunt of the business as a result.

The days when knowing "interactive" was enough are long gone. We're moving toward developing a specialty that positions us as experts in a specific vertical. We've seen search adopt this approach with local, news, and shopping engines designed to simplify the lives of consumers who know precisely what they're looking for. Ad networks have also made the shift.

In the past, we did ad network targeting by category, zeroing in to find sports fanatics or working moms within a broad collection of sites. The next generation of this approach to media buying is vertical ad networks. Instead of boasting 10 or 20 categories, they specialize in one.

That's not much in the way of variety. But sometimes laser focus is exactly what you're looking for.

There are vertical networks for technology, travel, and automotive, and they're growing fast. Since its May 2006 launch, the [NetShelter Branded Network](#) (NSBN) of tech sites has increased its audience from less than 2 million monthly unique visitors to over 5 million. It counts Microsoft, HP, Sony, Verizon Wireless, and Toshiba among its advertisers.

The [Travel Ad Network](#) can deliver over 10 million unique monthly visitors -- good enough, it seems, for advertisers like American Express, Hilton Hotels, Marriott, Hertz, and Avis. All advertised with the specialty travel network in 2006.

And [Jumpstart Automotive Media](#)'s value doesn't lie in just its 6 million monthly visitors. Says CEO Mitch Lowe, the company "goes deeper than a traditional network can" to give media buyers both scale and business intelligence.

"When you're starting to understand what Jumpstart does, 'vertical ad network' may be the best description. But you almost have to tear up everything you think about an ad network," Lowe says.

You Say Network, They Say Partner

Jumpstart works both sides of the design and usability fence, providing advertisers with access to in-market automotive buyers and counseling its sites, which rely exclusively on Jumpstart to sell their ads. Like most vertical networks, its role is that of partner rather than vendor.

Clients aren't pitched; relationships are built and they last. Who better than a vertical network to provide insight into evolving industry trends, when it lives and breathes that industry every day? To put us head to head with our most formidable competition?

Limitations Can Be a Good Thing

When a buyer selects an ad network for a client, one of her first requests is for a case study. Knowing what an advertiser in a similar industry has done prior and his level of success with the initiative goes a long way to predicting the outcome of one's own campaign. By their nature, vertical networks obliterate

the need for such references. If they weren't effective at reaching and converting the travel or tech markets, they wouldn't be in business.

In a way, vertical networks have had a rough go of it. Although they strive to differentiate themselves from traditional networks, they must paint themselves with the same brush to avoid confusing and alienating media buyers. That has meant also having to overcome the stereotypes associated with network buys.

But when the dust from subpar sites, shallow inventory, and cheap pricing clears, vertical networks' specialization will be unmistakably desirable. Don't expect a down-and-dirty media buy for pennies a click. Do expect an experience that's more akin to working with a portal -- with better customer service. Content tends to be top notch. And though most vertical networks offer far fewer sites and impressions than your standard fare, their controlled subject matter eliminates waste for a more efficient ad spend.

To think we once considered ourselves to be specialists!