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How to Fight Creative Complacency



By [Jason Scoggins](#)

Jumpstart Automotive Media's chief partnership officer shows how automotive can drive stronger third-party partnerships through a plan of transparency, innovation and creative development.

Next month will mark my tenth year in the digital automotive media business. So much has changed from the time I sold my first digital automotive ad-- especially in terms of the advertising opportunities and creative executions. I'll bet most of you who have been in the business just as long can guess exactly what ad type I sold back then-- that's right, it was a static 468x60 banner, 10K max file size and three loops max. Let's just say automotive sites were far from offering cutting edge creative executions then. My how things have changed!

However, one thing that hasn't changed is a complaint that I've been hearing from the automotive agency community for nearly a decade-- third-party automotive sites, also known as automotive "in-market" or "endemic" sites, are boring. The complaint stems from a belief that creative capabilities are limited on such sites. In other words, in-market sites don't encourage splashy and flashy ad creatives, the story goes.

Since this complaint has persisted as long as I've been around, I feel partly responsible for not doing my part to debunk this perception. Let me take another stab at it here.

I must admit, thinking of the late '90s, automotive agencies' perceptions of third-party automotive sites were reality-- in-market sites were lackluster with very few unique or cutting edge marketing opportunities. But remember, in those days automotive website publishers were little more than a new car lead generation mechanism; we were still trying to figure out the ad business, proceeding with caution on the types of creative executions allowed on site.

Early on the caution was justifiable, with uncertainty as to how ads might impact a site's user experience. Questions arose whether ads were too intrusive or perceived as biased towards a particular OEM. Concern to protect an automotive site's core business model -- lead generation -- was justifiable.

However, most automotive website publishers quickly found that their visitors actually embraced car ads on site, when executed well. User testing showed car ads actually helped legitimize a third-party site's content in the mind's eye of their visitors via an implied endorsement from the manufacturer. Moreover, automotive pubs found that car ads had little to no impact on their lead-gen model-- the important distinction they were looking for. Most automotive sites only convert less than five percent of their traffic into a new car leads, with or without advertising.

Today I believe many members of our business would agree that in-market sites have truly embraced OEM advertising and have come a long way in their acceptance of advanced creative executions. In some ways in-market sites are leading the digital media space.

Here are a few examples:

- Take a look at the recently launched cross-platform campaign by Vehix.com and Honda, combining cable and online creative executions, video-on-demand, a custom-built [Honda showroom that lives on Vehix.com](#). [Honda's messaging in Vehix's cable commercial schedule](#) running across Comcast and other MSOs drives audiences to the online and on-demand showrooms.
- Automotive sites such as KBB.com, Consumer Guide Autos powered by [How Stuff Works](#) and others have embraced expandable ad units, whereby the ad unit actually expands by temporarily pushing the original homepage content down, giving the advertiser more creative space. OEMs can leverage this space with [flash ads or even video](#).
- Automotive sites such as NADAguides have taken creative execution a step further by integrating an OEM's ad into site content. Here's an example called, the "[Homepage Flash Header](#)."
- Sites such as Autoweb.com feature [video ads on the homepage](#) in place of the standard GIF or even animated ad units.
- And although, in my opinion, still in its infancy, the proliferation of automotive video ads beyond pre-roll video, such as clickable video ads across third-party sites, is going to help OEMs engage and make an emotional connection with car-shopping web-users like never before. Look to companies such as [Avant Interactive](#) and [Vimation](#) to help lead these types of initiatives.

It's fair to say third-party automotive sites have taken a very pragmatic approach at the media business, balancing the concerns and interests of their visitors and core business with those of the OEMs and their agencies. And let's face it, what's made automotive sites such a successful advertising medium is that they've done a relatively good job keeping their advertisers' ads highly relevant and less intrusive to both the content and the audiences' mindset-- shopping for a car.

The more inherent problem and a legitimate complaint with third-party automotive sites could be complacency. Too often automotive endemic sites become anointed as "must buys" regardless of their innovation, quality of salesmanship and customer service-- or lack thereof. Automotive site publishers must maintain a balance between audience, revenue streams and cutting edge creative, but it's also incumbent upon these publishers to push the envelope with agencies-- to go from being a vendor to a partner in terms of creative and beyond.

Like other successful media companies, Jumpstart is taking this "partner" approach with agencies. We're doing this by building out our own creative development team to help bring creative ideas and resources to our agency-partners; collaborating more closely with and/or pushing third-party rich media companies to bring more to the table from a creative standpoint; focusing on client services, which encompasses account management and ad operations teams who work hand in hand with sales to implement and manage new creative technologies and, finally, by requiring more transparency from our agencies-partners to share and discuss more openly campaign reporting and success metrics.

Times have clearly changed for automotive sites, but contrary to popular belief, or unpopular in my case, automotive pubs have stepped up their game and are taking the necessary steps to change with the times and provide innovative, cutting edge opportunities for our customers.

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