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Tips for avoiding ad network exploitation



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No large brand in the world wants its ad next to an offensive video. Jumpstart Automotive Media's CEO offers insight to help marketers leverage new media while protecting brand integrity.

Given the massive traffic generated by social media (think: Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, bloggers, et cetera), there is a constant buzz on how to get ad messages in front of this generally youthful, highly desirable audience. Standard ad inventory is already available on most social media sites and there are lots of "experiments," from videos created to go viral to virtual games and contests shaped to try and engage users. But so far, there are some troubling signs.

In the UK, Vodafone, First Direct, Virgin Media, Halifax and Prudential are said to have stopped advertising on Facebook because their messages appeared on pages for the controversial far-right British National Party. Peugeot and Carphone Warehouse are reported to have pulled business from the online networks that allowed their ads to run on YouTube next to violent "happy slapping" clips.

No large brand in the world wants its ad next to a video of someone spewing prejudice or someone getting beaten. They wouldn't knowingly sponsor or be associated with that sort of content if it were on TV or in magazines. So, why should it be any different online? Let's first address the issue outside of social media.

There are hundreds of ad networks in the United States now. Most of them claim to be "transparent" and/or "accountable" for where client ads run. At the same time, they refuse to tell clients which sites are in their networks, and some of them go out and buy inventory from other networks in order to cover their impression guarantees (without disclosing this to the client). Some of these networks also bundle together their automotive content into an autos "channel" and try to sell automakers and dealers this audience as "in market" buyers. No matter what the contextual placement may be on a site about gruesome car accidents or junkyards, their users are still sold as "in market buyers."

Even the most sophisticated technology from the biggest company in its space can't prevent screw ups. My personal favorite was the search-based ad for luggage that appeared adjacent to a newspaper story about a body found by police cut up in pieces -- you guessed it -- in a suitcase.

Now that big brands are coming online in a significant way, it is time for internet advertising to grow up and learn how to protect and preserve brand integrity rather than exploit it for a short-term (probably one-time) gain. For their part, marketers need to do some due diligence to assure that whoever they entrust with their most treasured brands can in fact be trusted themselves. Think of the ridicule that your brand can suffer if embarrassed by careless placements. When in doubt, spend the budget with a partner you know you can trust.

Who can you trust?

Here are some things to consider when choosing your ad partners:

- What other major brands have appeared on the site or across the network?
- Which brands seem to renew time and again?
- Does your ad partner have people who understand your business, or are they focused on movies one day and banks the next?
- Which ad partners are *never* associated with questionable content or, just as bad, questionable advertisers?
- When you go to conferences and conventions which names are always mentioned as "trusted?"

Social media presents its own challenges, but shouldn't be rejected out of hand. While there are risks associated with inappropriate ad adjacencies in places that are still wild and woolly, such as YouTube, there are other social media outlets that can more safely be targeted. Even the biggest sites with the best reputations, such as the New York Times, have opened up their pages for commentary from the public at large. Increasingly, visitors are relying on what real people have said about their vacation spots or restaurant experiences. You don't have to look too deeply into most major automotive sites to find reviews from the "man of the street." In fact, a January 2007 [study from Nielsen/NetRatings](#) reveals the popularity of online reviews, saying, for example, that "frequent travelers rely most heavily on user reviews."

A number of bloggers also have emerged as reliable and trusted sources of insider news and perspective for particular industries and (if they accept it, not all do) are ripe for ad placements because they draw early adopters who can be vital for launches and ongoing brand messaging. You might run the risk of having your ad appear on a day when the blogger is less than flattering to your brand, but that will be seen by the social media crowd as a sign of maturity (as opposed to having your ad next to a video of girls gone wild).

I am certain that most ad networks and social media spaces are working hard to put in place algorithms that can assure that brands are always protected. But until they are perfected, you are better served by sites and networks that have, day in and day out, already earned *your* trust.

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