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Why Most Digital Ads Still Fail to Work

Creative Efforts Often Don't Suit Digital, Neglect Research

Posted by Philip W. Sawyer on [01.27.10](#) @ 12:33 PM



Philip W. Sawyer

In 2005, CNET undertook a series of landmark online-advertising-effectiveness studies with Starch Communications to identify the best approaches to online advertising. CNET made the research public, offering presentations throughout the country and on its website.

How effective is digital advertising today? As lead analyst for those studies, I'll be blunt: Many digital advertisers make the same mistakes that the least effective advertisers made five years ago. The medium isn't to blame. The problems are due to creative efforts that do not suit the medium and the refusal to employ research tools that can identify creative problems and how to fix them.

Here are seven mistakes that, research tells us, afflict so many digital ads today.

1. They are too complex.

To digital advertisers: Most people aren't as interested in your products and services as you are; avoid the details. To interest them, attract their eye with uncluttered visual displays and concise, to-the-point headlines and body copy. In short: Keep it simple.

2. They take too long to get to the point.

Yes, the viewer is watching a screen. But they're not at the movies -- they're not waiting for the credits to roll and the good stuff to start. Effective internet advertisers register their brands, post their messages quickly and avoid the long build-up with teaser words and images, which irritate and, worse, alienate the audience.

3. They are ambiguous.

Americans don't go to advertising to raise questions. They want answers. When internet ads generate thoughts that begin, "I wonder what..." or "Why are they..." or "What the hell..." they've missed their opportunity. Some digital advertisers believe that ambiguity arouses curiosity and product interest, but the research indicates that advertising effectiveness and uncertainty are usually mutually exclusive.

4. They are visually bland -- or, worse, ugly.

The research demonstrates that the eye is drawn to sharp, clear, colorful pictures; yet many digital advertisers offer muted, abstract photography or a visual cacophony of verbiage and



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SPECIAL REPORT

Digital A-List 2010



Ad Age's Digital A-List is not a top-10 list, a merit badge or an award for selling a lot of digital advertising. It's about the brands, media and technologies that have shown us how powerful digital can be for business.

DATACENTER

Digital Family Trees 2010

Interactive ventures of media and agency

images. With photographs, present one clear focal-point to entice the eye; employ strong, primary colors; and, if possible, heighten contrast by using black for the background.

5. They use Flash for the sake of Flash -- not for a clear purpose.

Static ads often perform better than flash ads. Why? The online world is divided into two kinds of advertisers: the quick and the dead. Effective static ads don't have the luxury to distract the visitor with Flash; rather, they're forced to rely on simple images to attract the eye and on simply-stated messages for the mind, exactly what most online travelers are looking for.

6. They are often difficult, if not impossible, to read.

Some digital advertisers unwisely borrow from some of the most egregious print ads, which were created by people who are not aware that uniformity of font size and style, not VaRIaBIlITY, is the key to legibility. The most effective digital ads use one font style, in one size, well spaced and in lower case. (All-caps copy demands too much effort.)

7. They are bereft of benefit statements.

The vast majority of advertisers in all media are more comfortable listing features not benefits. The importance of this point cannot be overstated: There is one primary question that drives purchase interest in any product in any medium, and it is, "What's in it for me?" Clearly and concisely answer that question, and you'll win their hearts and minds.

One last point: The internet traveler usually has a clear purpose: to read e-mail, to get medical information, to book a flight to Bermuda ... Time moves quickly for people on a mission. Distract them without a quick payoff, and you're likely to irritate them -- rarely a goal of any advertising campaign.

Digital advertising isn't working very well, but don't blame the medium. The fault lies in the creative. Exploit the research possibilities available to you -- especially web analytics -- and you can create powerful advertising that can turn your business around.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philip W. Sawyer is an advertising effectiveness consultant for Conversion Associates, a digital analytics company located in Allston, Mass. The company's goal is to lead in the innovation, development and production of software applications to make digital analytics easier and have more of an impact on business decision-making.

28 Comments

Sort by **Date** | Popularity



By gunther | Los Angeles, CA [January 27, 2010 12:39:08 pm](#):

Digital ads most often fail to work because, like many advertising assets, they are not RELEVANT.

People crave useful information, and the various forms that it engages by way of utility. Aside from 'benefit statements', people want solutions that are informed by conversations by peers, social graphs and/or likenesses to them... Social display is one example of this.

Creative is only part to blame; the other constituent parts fall under the fallacy that people are loyal to places (inventory) rather than information. This is precisely why the network model must change (and is), and why web analytics is seeing a profound shift through things like social search. This is also why practices around segmentation are being upended -- because behavioral and attitudinal attribution require a strong and focused effort around building a bridge between structured and unstructured data.

Ultimately, this isn't about 'advertising' as we know it, it's about creating a publishing environment where relevant content can reach the right audiences at the right times, whether that content resides in a display unit or not.

Gunther Sonnenfeld
@goonth

By srpatterson | Columbus, OH [January 27, 2010 09:22:27 pm](#):

I am surprised with the long page sales pitch that is used so often to sell instructional packages online. I see them all the time in search results and never spend more than a

companies. Data on digital marketing. Includes links to **Digital Family Trees 2010** and **Digital Market Facts 2010** posters.

LENORE SKENAZY

Why Is It So Hard for a Blogger to Find Advertisers on Her Own?

Lenore Skenazy of Free-Range Kids Laments Upon Her Quest to Find Sponsors

DANIELLE WILEY

Networks May Be the Easiest Solution for Bloggers, Marketers

Why Going It Alone Limits Income-Generating Ad Solutions

WHITE PAPER

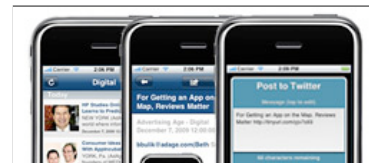
The Economics of Online Video



How should web video be valued and measured? Who are the most successful companies in this space? Who can you work with? This white paper answers those questions and more.

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couple of minutes searching for the real benefit that I am going to get and how much it is going to cost me.

Steve

<http://2009Taxes.org>

By contrarian2 | Los Angeles, CA [January 27, 2010 11:08:56 pm](#):

The main reason the creative is mostly ineffective is that the decades-old creative model has been rendered obsolete by not being adjusted to account for the 21st century's explosion in media and technology.

By contrarian2 | Los Angeles, CA [January 27, 2010 11:11:20 pm](#):

The main reason for digital ads being ineffective is they are developed under a decades-old creative model ended obsolete by not being adjusted to account for the 21st century's explosion in media and technology.

By PETER | BROOKLYN, NY [January 27, 2010 11:48:22 pm](#):

This is a beautifully concise piece - just like the online ad approach it advocates. Thank you for writing it, Mr. Sawyer.

By rahulsabnis | New York, NY [January 28, 2010 08:39:29 am](#):

They fail because they don't enhance the experience. Consider fashion magazines where the ads actually "make" the book, vs. the written articles. Banners rarely enhance a site experience, and when they do, it's through the old "interrupt and entertain" model.

By John | ATLANTA, GA [January 28, 2010 11:49:55 am](#):

I think an important aspect is being overlooked. The ad creative is directly impacted by the sales effort. If your online sales team has no idea how to pitch online advertising, they will usually let the client dictate the content and appearance of the ad. As those of us in the creative agency world know, some clients are receptive to new ideas, but some are adamant about mirroring a print campaign, publishing entire disclaimers, etc.

By no means am I laying all the blame on sales, but our experience has been that the savviest Account Execs are directly tied to the most effective ad units. They understand creative, they contain and guide the client, and they help eliminate one source for ineffective online ads.

By crispy1546 | New York, NY [January 28, 2010 11:56:40 am](#):

Well put, Philip. All of the points made are relevant and unfortunately, pitfalls committed are still all too prominent in the industry. One thing I'd like to add to #5; effectiveness of static ads vs. flash vs. rich media vs. video can greatly vary depending many factors not directly tied to the creative such as the site context, product category, industry, etc. There will be instances where static works better than others, and vice versa.

I think the important thing, as you mentioned in the title, is to have a "clear purpose". "Richer" ad formats should be used when it makes sense, and only when the other principles can be incorporated. Dynamic Logic's 2009 Creative Best Practices helps to further some of the principles seen here, as well as a few more.

It can be found here: <http://www.dynamiclogic.com/na/research/CreativeBestPractices/>

By JR Howard | Boston, MA [January 28, 2010 12:02:31 pm](#):

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These are interesting points for advertisers working with a variety of mediums. You're absolutely right, many advertisers are too focused on complex and confusing details while ignoring what could make their advertisements more effective; visual appeal and a clear call to action. One of the reasons digital signage continues to drive ROI is its ability to provide quick, simple and visually engaging messages that get the point across to the consumer. One of the standards of the digital signage industry is that messages should be no longer than eight seconds. That means the consumer gets the product or service, a call to action and a meaningful image in a quick, engaging package. If more advertising sectors took note of the method, they might be able to ensure more success. We discuss this subject and other advertising topics on our blog here: www.a2amedia.com

By hueyd | Sausalito, CA [January 28, 2010 12:45:10 pm](#):

And they fail because, in general, people simply don't like advertising...on the web they accept it as a trade-off for free content and access. Sorry, but the 10-step program outlined above won't change the effectiveness of banner advertising.

By Truth | Staten Island, NY [January 28, 2010 12:55:52 pm](#):

Yesterday I went by the School of Visual Arts. There used to be an art supply store in the front of the school. That store no longer sells art supplies, it is now called the 'SVA Computer Store'... what does that tell you? The Digital world sucks.. you can't even talk to anyone anymore... email or voice mail. Oy, Oy, Oy!

By eric.williamson | RICHMOND, VA [January 28, 2010 01:08:46 pm](#):

Great list, and very nice article. You forgot one for your list ...

Why it fails -- because half the time the digital creative was created as an afterthought effort once the TV and Print has been put to bed by creatives who may not really get digital so they just patch it together hastily using bits & pieces from the print work and some flash to make it "interactive".

By Jonathan Levin | chicago, IL [January 28, 2010 01:12:26 pm](#):

Flash does seem self serving and narcissistic in my opinion. Like some of the above, I want to know certain information quickly and how much I have to pay. 100% of the time I quickly click "Skip Intro"

Videos posted on websites do more harm than good if they are 1) Poorly conceived. 2) Too long 3) Poorly color balanced/produced 4) Edited thoughtless. 5) Most importantly- ENTERTAINING. Just because there is no budget to produce that video or ad, doesn't mean you should go ahead and produce it. The intern with the MBA and video or still camera is not going to do any good for you (the experts) or your client.

By danpoynor | Palo Alto, CA [January 28, 2010 01:35:57 pm](#):

"Static ads often perform better than flash ads."

Any stats on that?

By toddlaroc | SaratogaSprings, NY [January 28, 2010 02:36:11 pm](#):

Good article. This is also about the fact that ad agencies aren't really using the digital medium in a way other than as an interruptive based approach. See this follow up: <http://www.palioblog.com/?p=858>

By katiesmillie | San Francisco, CA [January 28, 2010 02:41:11 pm](#):

Great list! I agree 100% with gunther, that the content must be relevant too. This is hugely important. As people come to expect a social experience online, ads should reflect this as well. Users should be able to interact with friends and create their own content in ads, just as they do on the pages they visit.

I also agree with heuyd that people don't like advertising, but it's not because advertising is inherently evil. Going back to gunther's comment - people don't like advertising because it's not relevant to them, or it's trying to just make the sale.

But by mirroring the social experience and letting users share their own opinions on brands and products in ads, advertising can be likable, and much more effective.

Katie
Socialmedia.com

By psawyer | Allston, MA [January 28, 2010 03:38:40 pm](#):

Many thanks for all of your comments on my article. Each one is insightful and very helpful.

A few points: It's absolutely true that large numbers of people don't like advertising -- particularly in this most "teleological" of media. Our research showed that when you interrupt people when they're purposefully engaged, they get very irritated -- hence the call to get to the point quickly and answer the "what's in it for me question?" They'll get over their anger if you give them something useful.

And, yes, as my Boston neighbor JR Howard so insightfully points out, most of these principles apply to other media -- and they became known to me as I was doing research in print and television advertising. (And yet, why are so many of those ads so bad after so many years of research?)

Last, as our contrarian friend so wisely claims, the research approaches that are being used for this new medium are more suited to another age and time. We have new tools -- in the form of web analytics -- that can easily be applied to online ad testing and can quickly provide feedback to improve the ads, but very few online publishers seem to be fully taking advantage of the possibilities.

By bpare | New York, NY [January 28, 2010 03:50:12 pm](#):

Well, my old friend Phil has done it again...rarely can someone acknowledge the 'best practices' for their medium (largely due to too many variables & detail) with such clarity. Phil sees 'the big picture' of how people react to advertising from a humanistic way, not from a click-rate, or fast-forwarding metric.

Too often we get our noses too close to what we're trying to sell, or are hamstrung by the politics of client servicing - to be bold enough to challenge the standard thinking of why does/doesn't this work?...Phil is a breath of fresh air - showing us that we can indeed learn from common-sense applications and that the 'past is prologue'.

By Benghauser | Denver, CO [January 28, 2010 04:14:08 pm](#):

contrarian2

You say that "The main reason for digital ads being ineffective is they are developed under a decades-old creative model..."

The truth is precisely the opposite: The main reasons so many digital ads are ineffective is that they have NOT been developed under the decades old principles that Mr. Sawyer has been kind enough to revive for us and that is nice but hardly surprising to learn his research has once again validated.

Watch my lips: D-A-V-I-D O-G-I-L-V-Y: Like many of us, an oldie but smartie.

Tom Benghauser
benghaus@alumni.princeton.edu
303 861 4716

By GunnarLoy | Sunland, CA [January 28, 2010 06:34:02 pm](#):

The sad truth is that so much advertising today is lacking in creativity, regardless whether it is online, in print, on TV, out-of-home, direct response, etc.

The causes are manifold and the stories often legendary. Burned-out creatives, agency suits unwilling to fight for good ideas, risk-averse toadies on the client-side marketing ladder, and spouses of client CEOs who "just didn't get it" when shown the big idea. To that, and more, we have now added the "creative technologist" who, because he is good at manipulating code, has been anointed a de facto expert at communicating ideas through interactive and social media. I'm unaware of any research that can substantiate that, yet we collectively assume it to be true.

Unfortunately, research also has its own cross to bear for encouraging this poverty of creativity. Don't get me wrong, I love research — the more insights and data the better. But, the truth is that we are swimming in data and analytics, especially on the interactive side of the business. Some banner ads have 50, or more, measurable criteria embedded within them. And yet, as Mr. Sawyer effectively points out, the work is still mostly garbage.

Why? First, analytics can often give us great insights into technical performance of an ad unit, but tell us little about the creativity or impact of the underlying idea. Second, we are usually comparing the performance of one unit against another, or even the underlying content of the page or site the ad appears on. When comparing garbage to garbage, the one that smells the worst often gets the most attention. And finally, research findings invariably cause us to extrapolate and develop "best practices" based on limited observations. Unfortunately, our extrapolations often have no real basis in fact or even in the research data itself.

A perfect example is Mr. Sawyer's recommendation to always use lower-case type because "all caps copy demands too much effort." This is one of those accepted "truisms" that is actually our industry's version of an urban myth. This mistaken notion is based on research that measured the SPEED at which text was read by subjects (readability), not whether they could actually RECOGNIZE the letters (legibility). Subjects reading lower case text generally finished a phrase fractional seconds sooner than when they read all upper-case text.

But, reviewing the methodology reveals that those studies actually measured how practiced the test subjects were at reading a particular typographic style, nothing else. They certainly did not measure impact or comprehension of the text. Based on the research data, we can safely say that the speed at which someone would read a brief headline would effectively be negligible between text set in all caps or lower case.

Yet, we have created an entire "best practices" myth out of erroneous interpretation of research that has taken on a life of its own.

Imagine what we would be telling ourselves about the effectiveness of online advertising if those early readability studies had tested avid comic book readers instead!

By GunnarLoy | Sunland, CA [January 28, 2010 06:38:29 pm](#):

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By craigcooper | craigcooper.com, NY [January 28, 2010 07:54:59 pm](#):

gunther up there at the top is right.

As with all communications, RELEVANCE is what matters.

Most of those working in the digital realm may know how to write code but still haven't got Clue One about how to communicate.

By dinjcons | Las Pinas [January 29, 2010 02:36:33 am](#):

Aside from many ad materials being "fugly," I think many internet users are still wary of clicking on an ad thinking that this would contain a virus or that they would just be bombarded with many offers that they are not really interested in once they click on the ad. Kinda like the people going around in malls distributing flyers.

By GBusch | Zaandam [January 29, 2010 06:51:17 am](#):

It's a shame because a digital ad can still be powerful when key message, smart concept and flawless execution come together. From 12 years of hands-on digital experience I see 4 causes for digital ads failing:

1. Clients briefing creative and media agencies separately

This happens lots of times resulting more than often in a mismatch between the creative concept and media bought. Consequence: a creative compromise and waste of budget.

2. Creative agency/client compromise

What starts with a neat and smart concept may end up to become a 'x-mas tree'. Why? Clients picking cherries from concepts presented and demanding more than one USP to be communicated. Consequence: lousy usability and disappointing CTRs.

3. Limited digital ad budgets

Sometimes available budgets just don't allow you to develop that piece of eye candy we would like for reasons of budget limitations (and the restriction it imposes on buying quality targeted media).

4. People without the required skill sets creating banners.

As mentioned by one or some of the other contributors building a successful digital ad campaign requires a specific skill set:

- understanding of the communication objectives and the ability to create an ad concept in line with the central theme: marketing communication expertise.
- knowledge of digital technology, how to make maximum use of it in the creative concept as well as usability/user-centered design expertise.
- knowledge of ad-serving platforms and technical criteria as well as understanding of media agency technical brief.

'Everybody can make a painting, but there's only a few talented enough to be granted a exposition at the Guggenheim'.

The same goes for the concept and production of digital ads. ATL and media agencies entered that arena a couple of years ago for reasons of tapping into an interesting flow of income. Off course there are positive exceptions, but the consequences often being: disappointing CTRs, disappointed clients and in the end disappointed agencies (i.a. low or negative project margins).

I think there is a solution, though, to raise the quality of digital ads through efficient use of available budgets: the client-creative agency-media agency triangle to work more as a team, meaning:

- Client briefing agencies well before digital ad campaign launch
- Client briefing creative and media agency in one single briefing meeting
- Creative and media agencies to liaise and feed each other throughout the concept and production process
- Media agency to brief creative agency at an early stage on technical specs
- And – although I realize this is not always an easy decision to make – sometimes say no to a digital ad campaign when you are certain you can deliver quality work under given circumstances.

By anastasiaf | Reading [January 29, 2010 10:56:19 am](#):

We have recently done an eyetracking study on digital ads, and in addition to the above mentioned points, there's also a very strong argument for integrated campaigns - people really relate to the graphics they'd seen before (on TV etc)

By butterflymktg | ALLEN, TX [January 29, 2010 01:28:41 pm](#):

great information. thanks!

By syanovsky | South Salem, NY [January 29, 2010 02:06:05 pm](#):

I agree with the premise of this article. Too many advertisers have forgotten the lessons we

all learned creating effective off-line ads: focus your message (minimize the number of copy points you are trying to communicate to your audience; stay on strategy (don't let the execution overwhelm the message).

We also need to remember the importance of tracking where the eye goes first, second and third and then designing the creative accordingly.

steve@stevenyanovsky.com

By Mainostoimisto | Helsinki, NA [January 31, 2010 01:49:41 pm](#):

If you are doing the work by clicking the ad the changes are that you are going to be disappointed when the price doesn't Wow! you. Simple, quiet design and not too annoying.

Tommi Heinonen












<http://www.hehkulamppu.com>

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