

COLUMNS

Mobile advertising in the age of ad blockers

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By A LUXURY DAILY COLUMNIST

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What a difference a year makes. Remember when 2015 and every other year before that for the last five years was deemed the Year of Mobile?

All of the industry pundits were atwitter citing the great opportunity to accelerate marketing investment, which has lagged behind consumer time spent on the platform. There was this sharp cry for all players in the mobile ecosystem to work together to fulfill the great potential of this new consumer digital paradigm.

Loads of issues

Advertisers called out the need to enhance the overall quality of the ad experience and for formats that could provide a better canvas for brand messaging.

The lack of accurate measurement was and still is another commonly cited obstacle to getting brands more invested in the channel.

For publishers, there was the challenge of trading desktop dollars for mobile pennies. Some added more ads and more clicks to their mobile sites, sacrificing user experience in favor of short-term monetization.

From the consumer's perspective, mobile advertising was never an especially welcome intrusion.

Full-screen interstitials may have provided a better canvas for brands than mobile banners, but combining them with a raft of inline 300x250 ads has led to a regrettably poor user experience.

In a recent New York Times study, one of the most egregious perpetrators, Boston.com, averaged 30 seconds to load a mobile Web site ad, which cost the mobile subscriber roughly 30 cents of cell data each time the home page loaded.

Then ad blockers happened.

Crossed out

While long a marginal industry nuisance in its desktop form, the technology erupted into the bane of digital advertising last summer when Apple made available various ad-blocking applications on iOS operating system.

Now every iPhone user fed up with annoying banners and pop-ups could liberate themselves from the branded flotsam and jetsam that polluted their mobile experiences. And they have.

According to GlobalWebIndex in a published report, use of ad-blocking software jumped 10 percent during the fourth quarter, much of it attributed to mobile: 36.7 percent of mobile users have employed an ad blocker.

This has left many running a bit scared and on edge.

An example of the friction that has been caused is the Interactive Advertising Bureau not allowing several ad blocking tech players to attend its annual conference recently in Palm Desert, CA.

But let us face it, even if they went away tomorrow, the industry would still have the same problems that sent consumers running to ad blockers in the first place.

Yes, formats need to continue to evolve, and publishers need to think about user experience. But even more importantly, we need to fix the bigger problem.

Engagement is often an over-used word in our business and can mean different things. But within the context of this discussion, it has to do specifically with relevance.

On offer

More than any other communications medium in modern history including radio, television and, recently, the desktop Internet, the mobile platform is arguably the most personal.

Unlike these other appliances, people's smartphones have become virtual personal appendages, following us everywhere, everyday, all day, from work to play, all the way to our nightstand when we turn the lights out.

Thus, people are much less tolerant of having their personal sanctums violated by annoying, irrelevant branded interruptions.

What they rather demand are hyper-relevant, timely and useful or entertaining offers.

In essence, the value exchange needs to be richer for the consumer.

So far, brands have not taken a particularly disciplined approach to engaging their customers and prospects on mobile. Mobile campaigns are often sloppy, as they often do not deliver messaging of uncompromising relevance to the recipients.

It is clear that mobile ad budgets will continue to grow relative to desktop, but just putting more investment in mobile media will not make it more effective.

And while native advertising and content plays are certainly promising solutions, there are big questions whether these methods are ultimately scalable where they will accelerate mobile budgets to the level to which we all hope.

But before everyone gets all bent out of shape, we could all benefit from a collective exhale and a thoughtful approach to the notion of mobile relevance.

Relevance is indeed something that is fixable now. Audience targeting, geo-targeting and personalization via programmatic creative can be leveraged easily in the current programmatic environment.

EXECUTED PROPERLY, mobile advertising can leverage new data signals that will strengthen the consumer feedback loop and lead to truly personalized marketing.

And for those of you publishers uncertain about that notion, you need only look as far as Facebook and Twitter for inspiration. They are succeeding in monetizing mobile by truly leveraging their data and focusing on formats that are respectful of the user. This has made for better mobile ad experiences.

If properly employed en masse, the threat of consumer adoption of ad blockers could be mitigated to the point of harmlessness.

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