

Online advertising works best when you persuade, not push



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Providing a great online experience is vital for any website to achieve its commercial objectives. Why am I stating the obvious? Because it continues to amaze me that brands, agencies and websites still overlook this golden rule.

It's an age-old argument that inappropriate ads and pop-ups can prevent a brand from offering a positive online experience. In fact, in a recent poll that Webcredible conducted among internet users, 41% stated that ads were the single

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most annoying thing about visiting a website. One respondent even stated that he has a blacklist of sites that he'll never visit again because the ads interfere.

Online advertising, however, governs the survival and profitability of many sites, and brands recognise the power of the internet in reaching millions of people globally. According to the Internet Advertising Bureau, by the end of 2006 internet advertising will overtake national press advertising for the first time and the online ad market will be worth a massive £2bn. While we do need to take the complaints of web users seriously, it would be ridiculous to suggest that we should ignore this booming market.

What we do need to do is become more aware of what users want

before planning the next campaign. When we asked more specifically about what makes ads annoying, 23% told us that online advertising is okay if the ads are relevant to the site they're visiting, and 26% said that they don't really mind online ads as long as they don't interfere with what they're trying to do.

But planners and brands have already taken this on board and are becoming savvier about removing pop-ups and placing ads in the context of the website. The real challenge is the way in which we use ads.

Many brands spend thousands developing all-singing, all-dancing, Flash-enabled ads to grab the attention of web users. It may come as a surprise that it's actually text-based online advertising that receives more click-throughs. Why? Because internet users think that text-based ads contain information that will actually be of use to them.

The other golden rule is not to try to hide or disguise your ads as part of a website. Clearly label them as ads. Users don't like to be tricked – if they mistakenly click through to another site or offer, they'll be far less likely to trust what you're saying on your site, or even visit it again.

However, while text ads can prove to be the more effective option, can we still deliver quality click-throughs when these ads are clearly distinguished from editorial on the page? Quite simply, yes, but only if we become more clever and target our campaigns towards the independently derived content. While context-based advertising is an age-old process in traditional print media, the challenge for online is to map out and deliver an ad campaign that follows the internet user's own journey through the pages of a site.

The bottom line is that online advertising can be a great way of providing your site visitors with useful details about products and companies that they may find of interest. Shy away from showy, animated ads that rely on pictures and not words. Make them informative, obvious and relevant, but not intrusive. Done well, ads can become a welcome and useful distraction for visitors, and serve to enhance their online experience. Done badly, online advertising will turn people away for good.