

Taking The "-ility" Out Of Viewability



To those watching the debate from the bleachers, the issue seems cut and dried. Some ads are viewable, and some are not viewable.

Advertisers don't want to pay for non-viewable ads, and why would they? Industry standards bodies have cracked down, and those poor advertisers, so long cowed by the smoke-and-mirrors routine of dishonest publishers, can now step forth into the light and claim what is rightfully theirs. Some agencies are boldly proclaiming that, going forward, they simply don't expect to pay for any ad impressions that aren't viewable. Reading the triumphant press releases, one thinks of factory workers on strike. Non serviam! Enough injustice.



But all this is ridiculous. The nonsense here begins with the words “viewable” and “viewability,” which are the wrong words for this situation. The suffixes “-able” and “-ility” indicate a hypothetical. To say that an ad is viewable ostensibly means that it is possible for that ad to be viewed. To say that one is concerned about viewability means that one is concerned about ads that cannot possibly be viewed. But in actuality, ads that are called viewable are ads that have already been seen. And ads that are called not-viewable are ads which, under slightly different circumstances, might have been seen, but weren’t.



Here, the mavens of digital advertising delight in analogies that are intuitive but completely backward. In a typical example, Ken Wheaton, managing editor of *Advertising Age*, says:

“Imagine taking your car to the mechanic and he gives you one low price to do something to your car—and then a premium price to actually fix the problem. Or going to a restaurant and being charged a low price for food, but then receiving the option -- at a higher price -- of food that is, you know, edible.”

But publishers have a special business model that is fundamentally different from that of auto mechanics or restaurants.

Driver/mechanic and diner/restaurant, unlike agency/publisher, are not B2B relationships. The mechanic has nothing better to do than make the driver happy. The restaurant has nothing better to do than make the diner happy.



But the publisher has to make the user happy.

In fact, making the user happy is the publisher's primary value proposition. It's the publisher's ability to draw users with the proper demographics that makes it a property worth placing ads on. The publisher does this by creating quality content. And if the advertisers could do that, they wouldn't need publishers.



It isn't that advertisers can't figure out how to create quality content. It's that they aren't in the content creation business.

And it isn't that publishers can't figure out how to display ads the user can't avoid seeing. It's that publishers aren't in the ad display business (although many pretend to be). Publishers are in the business of creating content and drawing audience.

All major disconnects between advertisers and publishers derive from this discrepancy, this orthogonal relationship between business models. No publisher will say to an advertiser: "Our mission is to please our users, not to please you." But it's true in every case. Without the users, the publisher has nothing. Certainly, without a particular advertiser, the publisher may have less revenue (although the best publishers often have more interest from media buyers than their inventory can handle). But a publisher that can consistently

attract a desirable demographic is not going to have trouble finding business partners.

Demographics most desired by premium advertisers are essentially groups of educated people with disposable income. These people do not like ads. Therefore, part of keeping them interested in an online publication is minimizing their awareness of advertising.

An important part of that minimization process pertains to the user's initial impression (so to speak) of a given page. If they see too many ads when the page loads, or if the ads that they do see are animated to the point of being intrusive, they will leave the site. In order to prevent this, premium publishers, traditionally, have done their best to sprinkle ads lightly throughout the user experience. And that means that some of them don't get viewed completely, and some of them don't get viewed at all.



It isn't fraud and it isn't incompetence. It's doing what has to be done in order to make the entire business model possible.

What many agencies, the IAB, and the MRC view as a "crackdown" on viewability is really just a trendy way for big corporations to increase their margins by paying less for services rendered them.

But this squeeze on publishers won't end with quality sites drawing quality users and showing those users lots and lots of ads that the users absolutely must view in their entirety, 100% percent of the time. The users will just spend their time doing something else. While publishers essentially get paid to lie to advertisers, users don't get paid at all.



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