Rich future for oft-maligned mobile banner

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One of the oft-cited elements in mobile advertising presentations and beyond is the obligatory bar graph showing how consumer "time spent" is growing on mobile and mobile advertising spend is slow to catch up.

The gap between consumer attention and mobile ad spend is often pointed to with an arrow, and at the other end of the arrow is the word "Opportunity!" But the opportunity here is tricky, and that is a major reason that this gap exists.

Flying colors?
The lowest hanging fruit in mobile marketing is the mobile banner. It is relatively cheap to make and the inventory is relatively cheap.

But mobile banners have a fairly awful track record of ineffectiveness.

Meanwhile, new ad formats on mobile are emerging, particularly native ads that embed themselves within the content of popular applications.

The challenge with native advertising is that it is hard to scale economically.

Companies such as Namo Media recently bought by Twitter aim to make the process more turnkey, but it still cannot quite match the reach and inexpensiveness of standard-sized units that can be deployed across ad networks.

Moreover, banners lend themselves more easily to the burgeoning programmatic buying space. If only mobile banners were more effective, the ROI would be where we would all like it to be.

Advertising on mobile devices, in general, is a much more delicate proposition than on practically any other medium. And it is not just because the screen is small. It is because the device is personal and utilitarian.

A user's actions are more deliberate. More often than not, a user is trying to accomplish something with her phone. As an object, its context is unique in that it is sometimes a tool and sometimes entertainment.

Because of this gray area, users tend to focus on what they are doing and resist tapping on banners. They know a banner will whisk them away from the Webpage or app that they are using into a whole other experience, and they will have to employ a tap or two or more to get back to what they were doing.

Imagine if, at the end of a television spot, the TV automatically changed the channel to another network, or maybe just shut itself off. It is the sort of thing that makes people mad and they would just as soon avoid it.

Call to arms
For mobile banner ads to turn the corner, newer formats need to be embraced that clearly will not take the user away from their current experience.

Rich media units aimed at desktop browsers have long offered users the ability to interact with a brand without leaving the page they are on unless they deliberately click a call-to-action (CTA) within the experience. These ads often expand on top of a page when a user hovers over them, and can contain anything from video to mini-games to practical app-like functionality.

And now, we have begun to see rich media units emerge in the mobile banner space.

The Interactive Advertising Bureau has launched and steadily promoted its MRAID standard, which stands for Mobile Rich Media Ad Interface Definition. In short, it is meant to create standards that will allow mobile rich media ads to scale across vast mobile ad networks.

Moreover, these ads have the potential to adapt to contextual clues provided by the device itself, including location.

From a lead-generation perspective, they can be used to collect email addresses, in effect allowing the user to bookmark the brand's message and get back to it when they feel like doing so.

AS WITH THE desktop environment though, the move towards mobile rich media presents its own set of creative challenges.

A good deal of user experience design needs to go into them to ensure that the interaction is low-friction and the user is allowed to engage but easily return to what she was doing.

This is no small design task, and agencies producing these types of units need to line up the right talent to ensure that the units are successful.

But if the right brand, the right creative and the right technology talent come together, there may be a bright future for mobile banners after all.

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