COLUMNS

Striking the balance between content and ads in a mobile-first world

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By Matt Sussberg

In a decisive turning point for publishers, mobile readership has largely surpassed other traffic sources.

The new industry average denotes 55 percent of readership comes from mobile instead of print or desktop. At Salon, we sit right around that line with 54.7 percent of users visiting our news site via their smartphones.

In an ideal world, digital ad revenue would be keeping pace, but it is instead vastly underperforming.

The New York Times, for example, one of the largest newspapers in the country, saw digital ad revenue slip 5 percent last quarter even though it was the paper's strongest period for advertising this year.

This gap between traffic and revenue is concerning at a time when mobile shows no signs of slowing down.

Sizing up the problem
One of the most publicized causes of this gap is mobile ad blockers.

Ad-blockers for desktop Web browsing are nothing new global use of these tools increased more than 40 percent between 2014 and 2015. But the media industry was sent into a tailspin with Apple's addition of blocking capabilities, already available on Android devices, to the newest iteration of its mobile software, iOS 9.

According to IDC's data, Android and Apple currently represent 96.7 percent of the global operating system market, meaning the vast majority of mobile users have access to some form of blocking software.

Though ad blocking may be the most topical at the moment, it stands that there are other roadblocks preventing mobile ad revenue from performing as publishers would like.

Endless formatting and placement nightmares have haunted both publishers and ad agencies.

For example, the transition from desktop to a five-inch screen has certainly been a learning curve for those producing ad campaigns.

Content that was already re-scaled from print to desktop had to be reimagined again to meet consumer demand for on-the-go media. This diminishing screen size hindered the performance of the once-popular banner ad, which did not have a chance of translating for mobile view.

Social dilemma
Where mobile has created monetary struggles for traditional and digital publishers, social media platforms have conversely hit their stride.

Recent numbers show that popular social sites such as Facebook and Twitter are receiving the majority of mobile ad dollars.

Facebook, for instance, is seeing 76 percent of its total ad revenue come from mobile. Compare that to The New York Times' recent decline and the gap in mobile advertising between media and social platforms becomes strikingly clear.

These social companies, which have an abundance of user data, appeal to advertisers who want to take the guesswork out of mobile advertising and reach specific audiences with ease.

Publishers, which are seeing high percentages of potential dollars funnel to social sites, are striving to correct this targeting issue.

Bridging the gap with native and beyond
A big savior for publishers attempting to reconcile mobile advertising woes has been native advertising, which cannot be blocked by software.

Outlets can develop impactful campaigns for advertisers that appear among the site's existing content. These campaigns are also appealing as they are viewable cross-platform and cross-screen, essentially writing off the targeting and formatting issues associated with custom print to mobile advertisements.

At Salon, we have implemented several successful native campaigns for clients such as Comedy Central, Hulu and Amazon.

Providing real, digestible content for consumers is one of the best ways we have found to ensure visibility that satisfies advertisers.

We have also been experiencing significant mobile video traffic, largely due to the launch of original editorial video content last quarter. This has opened the door for seamless video integrations such as sponsored content and pre-roll ad units, boosting mobile revenue.

MOVING FORWARD, mobile will only become more important for publishers who want to stay relevant with their audiences.

At Salon, we are working hard to strike the right balance between content and advertising in a mobile-first world.

Other publishers are looking into providing greater transparency for advertising partners by granting access to subscriber data.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are even certain outlets that have completely barred readers using ad blockers, keeping data in-house but several eager readers out.

As it stands now, there are no simple fixes for publishers looking to improve mobile revenue. But there are definite means to improving the experience for both advertisers and audiences in the future.

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