

COLUMNS

Most creative people in mobile advertising are spammers

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By **John Busby**

The annual advertising awards season is in full swing, and I would like to use my unofficial ballot to nominate spammers as the most creative people in mobile advertising.

We are not talking about a merry bunch of pranksters here. These undercover agents of the mobile world exploit measurement and accountability weaknesses in the most insidious of ways. And the speed at which they can mutate is breathtaking.

This is a problem. A big one. And it is only getting worse as more marketers continue to shift advertising spend to mobile, a figure which hit \$3.4 billion last year. Our data show that as many as 90 percent of all actions on a broad mobile campaign are without true commercial or purchase intent.

So who are these spammers? And how do they operate? Allow me to introduce you to spam's newest iteration, recently discovered by our spam prevention tools and coined by our product and engineering team as "chipmunks."

Nuts and bolts

Chipmunks exclusively target click-to-call campaigns, which drive consumers to call businesses directly from their mobile phones. Phone calls are considered to be the most natural outcome of a mobile search.

Phone calls also happen to be a lucrative target for spammers.

Chipmunks so named for their shrill, altered voices take advantage of basic metrics in click-to-call campaigns, most notably, the 30-second call duration mark.

In one example, a call goes like this: A business owner picks up the phone, expecting to field a question from a customer. But the caller sounds like Minnie Mouse on helium.

The high-pitched voice continues talking fast, asking redundant questions. After 30 seconds a common click-to-call benchmark of high consumer intent the caller hangs up.

This 30-second phone call may pass the "quality rules" of the advertiser, allowing the publisher to be paid for an outcome that has no hope of producing a sale. In turn, businesses get a false measurement of their advertising success and lose more mobile advertising dollars.

There are other less-evolved, but equally disturbing types of mobile campaign spam too, such as robocallers who hassle consumers on their phones to influence sales or solicit donations.

During the six months leading up to the 2012 presidential election, our data found more than 1.5 billion politically-motivated calls were placed to consumers.

Robocallers have become such a disruption that the Federal Trade Commission even sought the public's help this year to come up with a solution blocking illegal robocalls on landlines and mobile phones.

Such spam or fraud is not limited to phone calls, of course.

Social media platforms are targets for spammers too, and the "tweets", "engagements" and "buzz" from your latest display or video campaign can be generated by a similarly unscrupulous lot.

Facebook and Twitter devote millions of dollars and teams of engineers to combat spam.

Quick to call

So how can marketers protect themselves and increase their overall effectiveness in mobile? Here are some tips:

1. Ensure that people interacting with your ads have consumer intent.

For phone calls, use a phone tree to have callers choose to speak to "Customer Service" or "Sales."

For video, display or lead-form campaigns, use interesting or engaging CAPTCHAs.

2. Produce evidence that consumers purchased a product.

For phone calls, use call analytics to measure specific marketing tactics, tie data to call centers, and analyze the call conversations.

For campaigns with a goal of in-store visits or ecommerce, use coupon redemption when testing publishers.

3. For click-to-call campaigns, use technologies that block known robocallers and other unwanted call sources from connecting to your clients.

4. Verify sales and engagement at the local level by interviewing staff at your call center or bricks-and-mortar locations. The moment you stop measuring through to conversion is the moment flaws become exposed.

ULTIMATELY, IT IS all about creativity in advertising. I am not talking about the creativity that makes you stare at a beautiful banner ad and wonder "How did they come up with that?"

I am talking about the unglamorous kind, the kind of innovation needed to stay several steps ahead of those who are determined to game the system.

Now that is an advertising award worth voting for.

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