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Lamenting the lack of mobile advertising standards

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By Carnet Williams

The mobile advertising landscape has been building incredible momentum in the last several months with help from iAds buzz and new ad creation tools that are coming to market.

However, the mobile advertising ecosystem is still in a formative stage. In the long run, there will be significant parity between mobile and traditional display when it comes to data exchanges, media exchanges and demand-side platforms (DSPs), but for the time being, mobile advertising must work its way through some barriers.

For example, mobile ad standards have not been established, though there are recommendations coming from several places such as the Mobile Marketing Association (MMA) and from companies including Adobe.

OK with SDKs?

Perhaps an even more significant issue is that of the software development kits (SDKs) that allow creative to run on mobile devices.

SDKs are important because they allow developers to place advertising in their applications on mobile devices.

The catch is that the SDK that a developer integrates into its application limits from whom it can receive ad units.

In other words, ads that are created for the SDK that one mobile ad network uses may not work properly on another.

This in turn limits the reach of an advertiser's creative and has the effect of slowing the growth of mobile advertising, in general.

One consequence of this is that advertisers must either build their creative in multiple formats to serve across networks and extend reach, or they must integrate multiple SDKs into their creative.

The former is obviously expensive because it duplicates work. The latter typically requires significant development resources.

And this is on top of the fact that designers already have to design to multiple handsets and screen sizes.

The combination of these challenges tends to increase the amount of back and forth required between designers and developers, increasing cost and production time.

Standardization is key

There are two potential solutions to this problem, the first of which is to standardize ad network SDKs.

Of course, this is easier said than done, considering that these SDKs may be a competitive advantage for some networks.

networks.

Also, an organization would have to own the process of standardization.

The Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) is just starting to discuss this challenge with its mobile committee. Its approach is to explore a set of minimum requirements for a mobile SDK guideline.

The MMA is also starting such conversations as well.

According to Michael Becker, managing director for North America at the MMA, "the MMA, with its mobile advertising committee, has been exploring the latest innovations in rich media advertising, including API-driven rich media advertising."

Both these organizations have worked together on their joint IAB-MMA Mobile Web Ad Measurement Guidelines which were released a few weeks back. We will see if either organization can move quickly enough to take the lead.

What is more likely to happen in the short term is that some of the larger ad networks and rich media ad platforms will lead the charge to standardize SDKs at least across key partners so that more advertisers will be able to leverage their networks.

"Mobile enables unprecedented creative innovation, but standards are necessary as a foundation for its growth," said Elena Perez, director of marketing at Medialets, New York.

"As the demand increases, the ability to deliver high-impact rich media across more devices, platforms, apps and networks becomes critical," she said.

Medialets and other such companies have the influence to begin the process of driving standardization today.

Mediators already do this to some degree to aggregate ad networks, though the features of these ads are less impressive.

Bridge to everywhere

It is also important to note that even if SDKs could be standardized, there will be a delayed impact due to the fact that changes must be pushed to developers, then into applications, and finally to end users who must update the applications on their mobile devices.

The alternative to this approach is to integrate multiple ad creative APIs, which are part of the larger SDK, into ad creative.

Agencies which build ads should be somewhat familiar with this process because it is similar to managing cross-browser compatibility, only now it is with HTML5 and it is more complicated.

The payoff is that mobile advertising offers massive reach if advertisers can just find a way to bridge their creative across networks. And the latter approach is really the only way forward in the short term.

If you can target a specific audience with a single ad network, such as Google's AdMob, then it should be possible to avoid building your creative in multiple formats.

So, think carefully about your media buy before you start building your creative.

If you absolutely have to have massive reach then you should plan on building in multiple formats so that you can run across networks, but this really only makes sense for the largest campaigns.

Or, you should find an integration technology that manages the SDKs for you, such as an ad-creation platform. Such technologies make it possible to create your ad once and serve everywhere.

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