FINDING BRAND SAFETY IN TODAY'S DIGITAL ADVERTISING ECOSYSTEM

A MULTIVIEW Whitepaper

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As long as there have been brands, there has been the proclivity to protect and maintain that brand. Coinciding with the development and proliferation of brands was the idea of promoting the brand. Though intangible, the brand can be a company’s most valuable asset.

Today, we think most readily of that promotion in the form of advertising and marketing. Advertising has always inherently carried the potential of unintentionally tarnishing or damaging a brand, be that through misguided creative approaches or what was commonly known as “adjacency” in traditional media.

Adjacency in this marketing context – making sure an advertisement doesn’t reside next to content that might cast it in a negative light – wasn’t such a difficult undertaking when print ruled the day. The hands of a human manually laying out pages could sensibly not place an airline’s fare sale promotion adjacent to a story about an airplane crash.

But as advertising moved more digital and technology aimed to make buying and placing that advertising more tactful, economical and automated, marketers were forced to give up some control over knowing exactly where that advertising might be placed. As far back as 2011, Digiday reported in an article titled, “Rolling the Dice with YouTube Ads,” that, among other instances, Microsoft MSN ads were showing up next to animated domestic violence.

This unfortunate aspect of new media was, if unpleasantly, generally tolerated until the Times of London dropped a bombshell in February 2017. With a headline stating, “Big brands fund terror through online adverts,” and an opening paragraph declaring, “Some of the world’s biggest brands are unwittingly funding Islamic extremists, white supremacists and pornographers by advertising on their websites,” the expose sent shockwaves through the advertising industry.

If it wasn’t a common-use term before, “brand safety” was suddenly on the lips of every CMO from global corporate giants to small business owners dabbling with Facebook ads. Brand safety was almost instantly forged into the permanent vernacular of new media.
THE PROBLEM OF BRAND SAFETY

Given that a McCann Truth Central study in April 2017 noted 42 percent of Americans believed brands to be less trustworthy today than 20 years ago, it came as little surprise when, a few months later, the World Federation of Advertisers found more than 70 percent of brands believed the importance of brand safety had escalated in the year prior. It was clear to companies that action was needed to shelter their brands from unintended juxtapositions.

Highlighting the severity of the issue, a Chief Marketing Officer Council study revealed that almost half of consumers would rethink purchasing certain brands or boycott their products if they encountered that brand’s ads on or next to digital content that offends them.

Even worse news for brands was that 75 percent of them reported at least one instance of unsafe exposure in the preceding 12 months, with 10 percent claiming “regular” unsafe exposure, according to a GumGum survey. The same study noted that merely 26 percent of those companies had implemented solutions to reduce or eliminate the negative exposures.

THE DAMAGE TO BRANDS

In the month following the Times of London report, hundreds of major brands scrambled to take action. AT&T, Verizon and Johnson & Johnson were among those to completely pull advertising from YouTube (though they later returned).

“We are deeply concerned that our ads may have appeared alongside YouTube content promoting terrorism and hate,” an AT&T spokeswoman said in a statement.

The BBC, Toyota, Volkswagen, HP and Diageo, maker of Smirnoff vodka and Johnnie Walker whiskey – all worldwide mainstay brands – were among those to halt YouTube media buys as the platform promised to do more to protect the reputations these companies had spent decades fostering.

Still, in late March 2017, the Wall Street Journal ran an article reporting ads were continuing to crop up next to racist and objectionable videos. Automated buys for Wal-Mart, Coca-Cola, Proctor & Gamble and Amazon placed their adverts alongside racist and anti-Semitic content.
“The content with which we are being associated is appalling and completely against our company values,” Wal-Mart said.

Ads from the likes of Starbucks, Dish Network and Geico appeared on a video with “the N-word” in the title, according to WSJ. At the time the article was written, that video had more than 425,000 views.

Eight months later, as companies seemed to assume it was again safe to loosen the reins, they were proven wrong when another British newspaper published a report about food giants Mondelez’ and Mars’ brands appearing next to clips of scantily-clad children, accompanied by hundreds of pedophilic comments. One such video had been viewed in excess of 6.5 million times.

**TACTICS TOWARD BEING BRAND-SAFE**

Though it has been the most high-profile, YouTube isn’t the only platform or publisher to put brands at risk. A Media Quality Report by Integral Ad Science determined that 8.6 percent of digital display ads in the U.S. turned up next to content flagged as a “moderate” or “high” risk to brand reputation.

So, what can a brand do? If the power and resources of YouTube and its legion of billionaire advertisers can’t eradicate the problem, how does a marketer protect its brand while taking advantage of the benefits of programmatic advertising? How can an advertiser be brand-safe?

Following is a checklist of suggestions to help mitigate the likelihood that your brand receives unwanted negative exposure or ties to illegal or objectionable content. Each alone is a minimal step and worthwhile, and some of the recommendations cross over. But the more you can involve these options in conjunction with one another, the better you can help your brand navigate the potentially tepid waters of programmatic ad buying.
1 DEFINE YOUR BRAND-SAFE

The definition of what constitutes brand safety can vary from one company to the next. If you’re promoting a whiskey or beer, you probably don’t mind if your marketing appears next to or with, say, gambling-related content. But if you target toys to young children, your definition of brand safety likely eliminates gambling contexts.

When thinking about the parameters of your definition for brand safety, consider these commonly questionable subjects and determine if any apply to your company:

- Adult Content
- Alcohol/Drugs
- Politics
- Religion
- Violence
- Disasters/Tragedies

2 CHOOSE A REPUTABLE B2B PROVIDER

With hundreds upon hundreds of programmatic vendor options out there, it’s easy to get tempted by pricing or promises of quality inventory. But, as with most important things you buy, you want to buy from a reputable firm.

A lot goes into finding a quality vendor. The aforementioned pricing and inventory access are important, but as the cliché goes: if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Don’t get persuaded by numbers alone.

In addition, many providers partner with third-party data sources and exchanges in order to accomplish the scale and reach advertisers want. That in itself isn’t such a bad thing, but demand that your vendor is transparent about who it partners with and that those partners are held accountable for best practices when it comes to fraud and brand safety.

One of the best ways to ensure this is to stick with a private marketplace or programmatic direct deals. In 2017, three-quarters of all digital display in the U.S. ran through private marketplaces and direct deals. It’s often a more costly option than an open marketplace, but the lack of safeguards in the open market could prove far from worth the savings in the long run if your brand is damaged.
3 OPT FOR PREMIUM INVENTORY

In its infancy, programmatic ad buying matched up unsold inventory with little to no control over where (or even if) those ads got placed. But as the technology has improved, networks are becoming ever more capable of detailing the performance of certain ad placements and formats to determine which offer the best return.

Still, premium inventory can be defined differently by different providers. Have your potential vendor explain what exactly they mean when they offer premium inventory. Is it premium based on performance of that particular ad unit? Is it premium based on the host sites?

For B2B brands, few placements offer safer premium inventory than industry and industry-related association websites. A Chief Marketing Officer Council study found that consumers ranked social media last of five options for trusted content spaces — behind friends, TV, search engines and newspapers. Even though that was a consumer-based survey, the results extrapolate that businesses can increase ROI by selecting premium sites and inventory.

4 CREATE WHITELISTS AND BLACKLISTS

Though similar concepts, the whitelist — a list of sites you deem acceptable — and the blacklist — a list of sites that are to be avoided — can both be used to limit where your brand is exposed.

If the prospect of reviewing thousands of websites to determine whether they’re safe for your brand sounds overwhelming, you can obtain third-party blacklists. If you utilize a quality programmatic provider, as suggested previously, it’s likely they already maintain some form of blacklist. These lists accumulate sites that have failed some test of inventory approval. The lists can grow over time as red flags crop up during a campaign, and need to be regularly maintained.

For a niche advertiser, which is common in the B2B space, a whitelist might make sense. Instead of spreading your ads across a vastly wide net and eliminating those on the blacklist, the whitelist sets the parameters much tighter — forming a limited network of sites that have been pre-labelled as safe. However, while strictly reducing the hazards of showing up on a potentially unsafe page, whitelists can also limit your reach, and plenty of research needs to be done to ensure you haven’t ruled out valuable inventory on sites left off your whitelist.
5 UTILIZING FIRST-PARTY DATA

You’ve likely heard that “data is the new oil.” While it may not be a perfect metaphor, the point is that data has become invaluable to businesses and especially when it comes to marketing a business. But data accumulation can be a messy endeavor, which has given rise to plenty of third-party data aggregation. Cheap, third-party data is frequently available, but nothing will serve your business better than its own data.

Your own data is likely more reliable and accurate than anything from a second or third party. Ideally, it’s also more thorough since these are your own customers. That means you can target them at a deeper level than basic demographic details that commonly comprise third-party data. Having the ability to contextually target your audience can help you find that audience in a more narrowly defined space, reducing the likelihood your advertising ends up in the wrong context.

6 EXCLUDE RISKY AUDIENCES

Just as there are audiences you want to reach, there are segments of the general digital population you may want to avoid. Similar to setting up the parameters of the audience you want, you can utilize exclusions, sometimes known as negative targets, to identify audiences you don’t want to reach. Naturally, by eliminating an audience segment, you reduce the likelihood your advertising lands on a site where that audience might frequent.
USE REAL-TIME INSIGHTS TO MONITOR

Even as the tools for defining and refining audience targeting and programmatic placement advance, there remains the necessity of proactiveness. Few things in the rapidly changing digital realm are infallible, and marketers need to understand that consistent monitoring of campaigns isn’t optional. Even the most diligent marketers might find their ads in a place they never expected or wanted. Thus, you must be able to take action in these cases to help minimize and mitigate any further damage. “Set it and forget it” is not a brand-safe policy.

CONCLUSION

As we’ve seen numerous times over the past several years, advertising in the wrong place can lead to negative sentiment at best, and outright boycott at worst. Whether it’s innocent mistakes or result of negligence, buyers and consumers can be unforgiving.

Programmatic buying has provided marketers with simplicity and reach in the digital ad space, but with it comes new challenges to protect your company’s valuable brand reputation. The previously provided checklist isn’t a foolproof plan for brand safety, as nothing will prove 100 percent effective, but utilizing those measures in concert gives your brand the best opportunity to avoid negative, damaging contexts.

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**IS YOUR ADVERTISING BRAND-SAFE?**

NOT KNOWING WHERE YOUR ADS ARE SEEN CAN BE DETRIMENTAL TO YOUR BRAND

**Brand safety:** Best practices that ensure that an ad will not appear in a context that can damage the advertiser's brand.

78% of marketing leaders report increased concern about brand safety over the last 12 months.

67% of brand marketers put the onus on media agencies to ensure proper ad placement.

81% of marketers said having a brand-safe environment for advertising is a high priority.

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**BRAND-SAFE CHECKLIST**

1. Define what brand safety means for your company.
3. Opt for premium inventory, focused on associations and industry websites.
4. Create a list of blacklisted publishers.
5. Utilize first-party data when targeting your audience.
7. Use real-time insights to monitor campaigns.

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**WHAT’S IMPACTED MOST IN A BRAND-SAFE ENVIRONMENT?**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience Quality</th>
<th>41% IMPACT A LOT</th>
<th>42% IMPACT SOMEWHAT</th>
<th>83%</th>
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<tr>
<td>Brand Equity</td>
<td>35% IMPACT A LOT</td>
<td>47% IMPACT SOMEWHAT</td>
<td>82%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brand Lift</td>
<td>29% IMPACT A LOT</td>
<td>50% IMPACT SOMEWHAT</td>
<td>79%</td>
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<td>Ad Engagement</td>
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<td>54% IMPACT SOMEWHAT</td>
<td>78%</td>
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<tr>
<td>ROI</td>
<td>29% IMPACT A LOT</td>
<td>48% IMPACT SOMEWHAT</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**TOP BRAND-UNSAFE CONTENT**

- **Disasters/Tragedies:** 39% of marketers have been exposed.
- **Divisive Politics:** 39% of marketers have been exposed.
- **Fake News:** 39% of marketers have been exposed.

33% said their brand’s content appeared too close to that of a competitor.

91% of digital marketers are already taking steps focused on brand-safe strategies in their digital marketing plans.

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**EXAMPLES OF BRAND-SAFE MEDIA**

- Association Media
- Premium Publishers
- Whitelisted Websites
- Industry Websites
- Private Marketplaces

**Sources:** eMarketer, Ethos Marketing, Conversion Leadership, Trusted Media Brands, Marketing Week