

Brand Safety Issue Vexes Marketers

Digital platforms fall under scrutiny as ads appear near objectionable content

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Depending on who's doing the telling, the recent kerfuffle sparked by a series of articles in *The Times* of London earlier this year is a near-apocalyptic event in the marketing world or much ado about nothing. The truth, as is usually the case in such matters, probably lies somewhere in between.

The Times of London ran articles in February and March that focused on the problem of brands finding their ads placed next to highly inappropriate content, including material posted on YouTube by rape apologists, anti-Semites, and groups linked to terrorist activities. A list of companies that pulled ads from YouTube and other Google websites reads like a "_____ " of leading brands: Coke, Pepsi, GM, Starbucks, Toyota, Walmart, Verizon, and Johnson & Johnson, to name a few.

Like a number of brands, Verizon responded to ANA's request for comment with a prepared statement: "Verizon is one of the largest advertisers in the world, and one of the most respected brands. We take careful measure to ensure our brand is not impacted negatively. Once we were notified that our ads were appearing on non-sanctioned websites, we took immediate action to suspend this type of ad placement and launched an investigation. We are working with all of our digital advertising partners to understand the weak links so we can prevent this from happening in the future."

Most other brands' prepared statements were similar in nature and expressed varying degrees of outrage. Walmart shared that the content with which it was being associated was "appalling and completely against our company values." PepsiCo was "deeply concerned and terribly disappointed that some of our brand ads have appeared alongside videos that promote hate and are offensive." A chief concern among all appears to be the apparent lack of a foolproof way to prevent their ads from appearing opposite such offensive content.

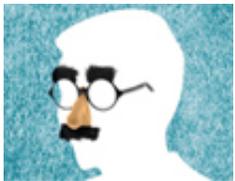
The most effective tool for blunting risk is the good judgment of "grown-up" marketers.

ANA CEO Bob Liodice spoke for the industry when explaining why advertisers were taking the steps they did. "Their concern for their brands' well-being is rational, appropriate, and warranted," Liodice said in a public statement. "The ANA strongly believes that brand safety is of paramount importance to our members. No marketer should ever place their brand at risk. All agency and media partners should recognize that — above all other objectives — protecting the brand should stand head and shoulders above everything else."

Avoiding ad positioning against inappropriate content is, of course, important, but more is required for a truly effective brand safety strategy. "This is an issue we take very seriously and will continue to do so," Keith Weed, chief marketing and communications officer at Unilever, told *ANA* in an interview. He reports that Unilever has strict controls in place to ensure its ads appear only in media — both online and offline — that are fully consistent with its brand values. He also lauds the progress Google and other industry partners are making in implementing much stronger controls and processes. "We continue to work closely with all our partners to address this issue. Partners need to have greater accountability to aim for a 100 percent brand-safe environment," he says.

Weed emphasizes that the same kind of vigilance needs to be exercised in other areas. "This is the same approach we have taken to address issues related to establishing industry viewability standards and independent verification, rather than the digital media companies grading their own homework," he points out. "By tackling it head-on and having sometimes difficult conversations, we were able to help accelerate plans and ensure that things were moving forward in this complex, ever-changing digital ecosystem."

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Unlike some other big brands, Unilever, the world's second-largest advertiser, did not withdraw all of its ads from YouTube in the wake of the *Times* articles. Unilever spends hundreds of millions of dollars on YouTube, and a review turned up just a couple instances where its brands ended up on YouTube channels it deemed objectionable. In those instances it quickly removed its ads.

Google has reported that such low frequency is the rule rather than the exception, and that for many of its top advertisers the number of ads positioned against objectionable content amounted to less than one one-thousandth of one percent of their total ad impressions. While Google executives seemed to frame the issue as questioning their company's trustworthiness, Weed says Unilever's position — and that of many other major brand marketers — on the issue of brand safety, and viewability for that matter, is that it's not about trust, but instead about not allowing a service provider to grade its own performance.

Weed believes Google would have agreed to third-party verification on its own eventually, and that the recent dust-up simply hastened the inevitable. To be sure, there's been plenty of pressure from other quarters as well, including speeches and interviews given by Procter & Gamble Chief Brand Officer and _____ . At the ANA Media Conference in March, he warned that if digital platforms could not adopt safeguards against fraudulent traffic and inappropriate content by the end of this year, P&G stands ready to cut off the flow of ad dollars.

In many ways, it appears marketers have already won this battle, or at least are about to. In _____, Ronan Harris, managing director at Google U.K., wrote that Google "recognize(s) the need to have strict policies that define where Google ads should appear," and that those policies should "prohibit ads from appearing on pages or videos with hate speech, gory or offensive content." But with 400 hours of new video uploaded to YouTube every minute, batting a thousand just isn't a realistic expectation. Harris acknowledged this, but he also promised to continue working closely with publishers, advertisers, and agencies to "do a better job of addressing the small number of inappropriately monetized videos and content."

That's good news, of course, but it's important that marketers not lose sight of some bigger issues in the process, warns Andy Ball, who has held senior account leadership and insights positions within the Interpublic and WPP networks. In an amusing piece for _____ last month, he praised the industry for recognizing YouTube's ad placement flaws, but posited that any damage to the brands affected remained theoretical and unproven. That's because, presumably, the very small number of people viewing that content on purpose are unlikely to think badly of a brand for advertising next to it, while none of the brand's other customers or prospects would even know the ad had appeared there, inadvertently or not, barring the firestorm of news coverage.

"In simple terms, marketers are currently confronted by two broad concerns: transmission risk and reception risk," says Ball in an interview with *ANA*. Transmission risk relates primarily to digital advertising. Will the ad be seen? Will it appear in an undesirable environment? Will we get what we're paying for? And, most confounding, how will we know? Reception risk, regardless of channel, has to do with the manner in which audiences — intended or otherwise — might respond and react to a brand's marketing communications upon receiving its message. "The good news is that transmission risk will steadily recede," he continues. "Problems are now being addressed. It's a bit of forced march, with key players in the digital ecosystem already advancing at the point of advertisers' communal bayonet."

Marketers' Top Concerns

Brand safety is only one of the issues marketers have with digital media quality. According to _____ based on Integral Ad Science's Media Quality Report for the second half of 2016 (U.S. edition), viewability is the top concern for 38 percent of advertisers. Ad fraud is

Reception risk is another story. "On the one hand, advertising and other forms of brand expression are now released into the winter of history. On the other, messages and programs enjoy the flexibility and decision-making latitude afforded them by their brand's purpose," Ball says. "When social commentary is allowed to operate at the intersection of these two things, reception risk spikes."

There is a range of practical steps marketers can take to help ensure brand safety, such as employing blacklists, keywords, and page-level analysis. (See "Best Practices for Protecting Campaigns from Unsafe Environments," below.) However, Ball argues that the most effective tool for blunting reception risk is the good judgment of "grown-up" marketers. Such marketers "can sense when it's time to make a move, and when it's time for restraint. They take risks when there is a calculated probability of success," he says. In short, they make decisions that are "informed by a clear understanding of context, rooted in experience, and governed by good judgment."

When all else is said and done, that may be the single most important ingredient needed to ensure brand safety.

second at 36 percent, followed by brand safety at 19 percent. Four percent cite geo-compliance, and "other" issues top the list for 3 percent.

— *M.J.M.*

Best Practices for Protecting Campaigns from Unsafe Environments

Brand safety is not a solved problem, and new threats can pop up at any time, says Maria Pousa, CMO at Integral Ad Science (IAS), a technology company that analyzes the value of digital advertising placements. Adopting these best practices suggested by IAS can help brands protect their online campaigns.

Domain-level protection is not enough; page-level protection provides more effective coverage.

Make sure your publishers run JavaScript tags to get the highest level of page URL visibility and brand safety protection.

Deploy multiple layers of defense by using a combination of blacklists, keywords, and page-level analysis. Review all elements regularly and update as needed.

Take advantage of pre-bid targeting in DSPs (demand-side platforms) to target away from risky content. Combine pre-bid and real-time brand safety blocking for greater protection.

Manage your partnerships. Connect your publishers with your brand safety partners pre-launch to promote ongoing

cooperative optimizations. Global brands must assess brand safety partners' solutions for multiple-language capabilities.

— M.J.M.

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