Why Web Design Matters to Internet Advertising

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The facts: How Web site design impacts advertising effectiveness

According to research recently released by MSN, between 7% and 12% of the total time Internet users spend on Web pages is spent viewing ads. Yet, strikingly, according to MSN's research, only two of the four factors that determine how much time users devote to looking at ads on a given page - ad format and ad creative quality - are considered by the typical advertiser in formulating their campaign strategy, and in conducting media buys. The other two determining factors, rarely considered, are Web site design factors: page layout and the placement of ads on the page.

MSN's research in this instance was powered by usability company, Eyetracking, Inc., which uses patented technology to track the movement of users' eyes as they move across the page.

In a recent interview with avant|marketer, Eyetracking Inc. Senior Usability Manager, Sylvia Knust explained that a strong correlation between the amount of time that a user spends viewing ads and the user's ability to recall the various characteristics of those ads (which is directly related to their branding impact) has been consistently observed across multiple research studies conducted by Eyetracking Inc.

In 2001, both Terra Lycos, and C|Net separately retained Eyetracking, Inc. to assist in comprehensive redesigns of their respective Web sites. The main objective of the redesigns was to improve the effectiveness of the advertising being served via these sites. In specific, Eyetracking Inc. technology was deployed to enable each publisher to ascertain precisely how to re-configure the layout of its site so as to maximize the amount of time users spend viewing the ads placed on them (thereby optimizing the branding impact of those ads).

The Eyetracking, Inc.-backed Lycos site re-design, yielded powerful results. By re-configuring the design of the site such that the top placement 468 x 60 standard banner appears below, as opposed to above the main navigation bar of the site (which runs horizontally across the top of the page), Lycos increased the number of users that viewed their 468 x 60 top placement banner by 200% (thereby, effectively *tripling* the *reach* of this placement across their site), while simultaneously increasing the amount of time users spend viewing each of these ads, by 600%.

Brian Payea, a Terra Lycos spokesperson close to the Lycos site redesign, tells avant|marketer that the redesign has created significant, tangible ad performance improvements, pushing the CTR of the top placement 468 x 60 banner to levels that match the performance of the much larger skyscraper units. These results defy conventional wisdom on the relationship between ad unit size and ad effectiveness. The implication is clear: Web site design is a critical determining factor in the effectiveness of Internet Advertising.

Payea also tells avant|marketer that the Lycos/Eyetracking, Inc. research evidences an important and little-discussed fact that sheds further light on the closeness of the relationship between Web site design and ad effectiveness: Even within the course of a *single* usage session on any given site, ad effectiveness is subject to substantial decreases. Why? Early on in their usage session on a site, users come to recognize the location of advertising on the screen, and so quickly "train" themselves to tune out anything placed in those screen locations. Thus, ad tune-out is in many cases largely a function of Web

site design.

To preempt such ad tune-out, sites in the redesigned Lycos network (as well as those in the re-designed C|Net network), utilize something Lycos refers to as "Dynamic Ad Placement", wherein the position of ads, as well as the particular ad formats that are being served (skyscrapers vs. square units vs. standard banners, etc.) change dynamically, as the user proceeds through the usage session. In this way, Dynamic Ad Placement prevents the user from forming reliable expectations as to the position of ads on the screen, thus increasing ad effectiveness.

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