Blind ad networks: now you see!

By Michael de Souza   14 Feb 2011

Blind ad networks do not allow advertisers to select where their ads appear and are mistakenly equated with uncertainty. The following, which also describes the tools that improve campaigns, should help to dispel fears and misunderstandings.

Blind ad networks are often misunderstood despite the huge traffic they serve. With blind networks, you can't specify the individual mobile Internet sites (mobisites) on which your ads will appear. Instead, you select a channel, such as 'Entertainment & Lifestyle' or 'Premium Portals' (there are nine to choose from altogether), and your ads are displayed across the hundreds or thousands of mobisites within that category.

This kind of selection is a necessity, as it is in any long-tail network. Asking brand managers or media planners to work through a list of thousands of individual sites to evaluate their content and context for a good match to the brand that they're promoting, and then make a selection, would be time-consuming and counterproductive.

Detailed planning impossible

The sheer volume and variety of sites in the mobile web makes detailed planning (of the kind seen in traditional ad schedules for print or television) impossible. And this apparent loss of control makes some brands and agencies very nervous indeed.

It's an understandable quandary. Media planners and marketing managers have a responsibility to protect brand reputations. If you don't trust your ad network to deliver the right quality of traffic, it can feel a bit like passing your baby to a stranger.

Mostly, though, these fears are unfounded. The legacy of mistrust among some agencies and brands is a hangover from a time before many blind networks developed their sophisticated targeting and analytic capabilities, which give you the ability to engage the right users. These capabilities, used in conjunction with real-time reports and active campaign management, can ensure that your campaigns are performing in line with expectations, and reaching the right audience.

The points below provide some practical tips on mitigating risk to your brand, and ensuring that you are always displaying your ads in an appropriate context.

1. Trust in your ad network's classification of sites

Blind ad networks put a great deal of time and effort into ensuring that the sites listed in a particular channel are

classified accurately. For example, the BuzzCity publisher team frequently audits the content appearing on our partner sites for appropriateness to the channel in which it's categorised, reclassifying partner sites whenever necessary.

In the case of large partners with a variety of content on their site or portal, we split their inventory across multiple channels, as needed. So, in a typical news portal, movie, music and fashion content goes into the 'Entertainment & Lifestyle' category; weather, news and traffic information would be listed in the 'Information' category, and so on. In this way, we ensure that the traffic that you select is always appropriate, and the sites that the ads appear on are representative of their channel description.

2. Planning tools and surveys

The first step in planning any campaign is to view detailed information, on who's engaging with your ad network, by using campaign planning tools. These provide detailed user data including age, gender, and location of users, as well as the devices being used to connect to the mobile Internet.

In addition, user surveys provide further insight into interests, usage and behaviour of mobile internet users. [Look out for BuzzCity's latest survey, released today, Monday, 14 February 2011, at the GSMA in Barcelona.]

Armed with this information, and an idea of which channel is most appropriate to your campaign, you can go ahead and set appropriate targeting for your campaign.

3. Price, targeting and the importance of campaign monitoring

Placing advertising directly on specific niche sites to target a specific demographic can cost a lot, per user. The holy grail of planning is to find a media channel that reaches as much of your target demographic as possible, at a reasonable cost per user, to ensure that there is no 'wastage'.

That makes targeting a trade-off (of cost and reach) that media planners are constantly engaged in. You don't want to spend too much per user, but you also don't want to reach too many users outside your target market.

Blind networks offer a number of targeting options to start zoning in on your target market, usually at no cost, including:

- Channel targeting (eg 'Entertainment & Lifestyle' or 'Premium Portals')
- Time targeting (time of day, date ranges)
- Context tags (eg games, information, movies, photos, videos)
- County targeting
- Carrier/telco targeting
- Device targeting (including the ability to specify the brand, operating system, model and feature capabilities of the mobile device)

This cuts out irrelevant traffic, leaving you with an appropriate context that you are comfortable for your brand to appear in.

4. CPC means you don't pay for 'wastage'

There is a further point to bear in mind. It concerns the CPC (or cost per click) model.

Unlike traditional advertising (which buys only reach or exposure), CPC advertising only charges you for actual interaction with your campaign. Your balance will not budge if no-one clicks on your ads, even if you receive

thousands of impressions. You're paying only for clicks, and that occurs only at the moment that a user displays interest in your product or service.

As long as your ad creative accurately depicts your brand offer, there's very little ad spend wastage, and any wastage would be attributed to people who are not actually interested in your offer, who nevertheless click on your ad. This highlights the importance of an accurate yet enticing call to action.

The important point to remember is that, in a CPC world, it's less important to ensure that you expose your brand only to your exact target market. Wider exposure of your campaign isn't a problem, because you aren't spending your budget on any users who don't click.

5. The value of continual monitoring and optimisation

As digital marketers (and you'll know this if you work at a digital agency or specialist mobile company), we're all constantly emphasising the benefits of digital media - it's measurable, adaptable, accountable and real-time. We criticise traditional media for not being as nimble and 'real-time'.

Be sure that you don't fall into the trap of not practising what you preach. Making ongoing changes based on real-time results can be time-consuming. It also requires analytical enquiry and a spirit of competitiveness. You may decide to hire someone new - an optimisation manager - to monitor your campaigns and get the most out of them. But the rewards are there. It's definitely worth it.

This is the crucial second part of the equation, which is where you can really start to take advantage of the lower cost of blind networks. By constantly analysing the results of the clicks that you are getting, and monitoring and tweaking to ensure that you are reaching the right audience, your campaign will remain on track.

6. It's too cheap to be valuable!

Some advertisers become suspicious of how inexpensive blind network advertising can be. They think that there has to be a connection between quality interaction, and buying expensive 'premium' media. In truth, there are some very good niche, targeted media properties where it's worthwhile paying a lot per user. Unfortunately, there also a lot of rip-offs out there, capitalising on the assumption that price equals quality.

On a bid-driven network such as BuzzCity, our advertisers determine the price that they're willing to pay per click. Our ad servers allocate traffic based on your CPC bid rate, so the rule of thumb is that the higher your bid, the more traffic your campaign will receive (until your day budget limits your campaign spending).

We're basically ruled by supply and demand. In countries where there's high advertising demand and limited inventory available (countries such as Malaysia, South Africa and the UK), you'll need to bid higher than elsewhere to get substantial traffic.

Similarly, there are bargains to be had in oversupplied markets. Countries such as India and Indonesia have loads of traffic, and relatively little ad competition for the inventory available. Here, you can get loads of value for as little as US$1c or US$2c per click. In these countries, advertisers make the mistake of thinking that this is poor quality traffic, when, in fact, it's simply traffic that's in abundant supply. Don't get trapped in this assumption. You're getting a bargain!

7. Publishers and transparency

The anonymity of a blind network suits many publishers well, and a number of publishers ask us to sign confidentiality agreements to ensure that we don't divulge their participation in our network.

The reasoning behind this is simple. These publishers run premium sites (with high ad rates relative to network advertising). They also usually have an in-house ad-sales team. They sell as much inventory as possible, usually on a CPM basis, but seldom sell their entire inventory. Once they run out of sold ads, they then back-fill with network advertising from us, to ensure a steady flow of income when they run out their own bookings.

To admit to the wider market that they're actually back-filling with network advertising (available to advertisers at a much lower cost) would harm their perception as a premium publisher, so they ask us not to reveal their names.

This is the positive side of blind networks - you often get great quality, premium traffic, at a fraction of the price that they charge directly. Of course, it's impossible to target only one publisher or site for a campaign on a blind network, but you'll almost certainly get traffic that you would ordinarily pay a lot more for, mixed in with the rest of the network of sites.

8. Publishers are also demanding transparency

Publishers of mobisites are increasingly sharing the same concerns that brand advertisers do. After all, they too are managing a brand, and they need to ensure that that advertising that appears on their site adheres to their own guidelines, and suits their target audience. They have insight into who uses their site and what these users want, and they realise that advertising from a well-respected brand reflects well on them, creating a richer, better user experience.

Blind ad networks provide publishers with a set of tools to accept and block certain campaigns. Publishers are able to moderate the advertising that's currently live and scheduled for that day. In this way, publishers are able to select campaigns which are a good fit with the users of their sites. This behaviour further reinforces the relevance of your campaigns.

The bottom line

In short, the mobile Internet ad environment is coming of age. For the brands who advertise, and the users who interact, this can only be good news. Targeting capabilities on blind networks are constantly improving. So too are the abilities of agencies and brands to tweak and optimise their campaigns. Publishers are getting pickier about the advertising that they, in turn, accept.

Do not fear the blind network! It contains a vast amount of rich interaction, and with the right approach and attention to detail, it's far from the 'wild west' of advertising that it's sometimes made out to be.

ABOUT MICHAEL DE SOUZA

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