

# Solving the mystery of effective online banner advertising

Sherlock Holmes might have excelled at evaluating internet advertising. The observant sleuth knew that people typically overlook anything that's too obvious.

That might help to explain "banner blindness." It's a phenomenon where people searching for information on web pages tend to ignore flashy items clearly distinguishable from other items on the page. In other words, they miss the very thing the advertiser wants them to see.<sup>1</sup>

What the phenomenon means to advertisers remains a divisive topic among experts and researchers.

**M**arketing  
Insights  
from 5MetaCom

## Banner blindness



*Banner blindness refers to the phenomenon of overlooking content meant to capture a viewer's attention. The researchers who coined the term found that the phenomenon can apply to text as well as to advertisements.*

## Did you know?

- The first internet ad ran in October 1994, when AT&T advertised on HotWired.com<sup>4</sup>
- Internet advertising revenue has increased about 84% in 4 years—from \$12.5 billion in 2004 to an expected \$23 billion in 2008.<sup>6</sup>
- Before 1995, domain names were free—they were subsidized by the National Science Foundation.<sup>7</sup>
- The average click-through rate for standard banner ads across the entire web is about 0.2%.<sup>8</sup>

Jakob Nielsen, author of *Prioritizing Web Usability*, is so convinced of banner blindness that he thinks it's not worth researching further. "Users almost never look at anything that looks like an advertisement, whether or not it's actually an ad," Nielsen wrote in August 2007. He stated his latest eye-tracking studies confirmed "that banner blindness is real."<sup>2</sup>

Other research, however, indicates banner advertising can work, depending upon your goals.

- A 2007 study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* found that even if web page visitors could not recall the content of an ad, repeated exposure led to familiarity, which led to positive feelings.<sup>3</sup>
- A separate study concluded that banner ads significantly contribute to brand enhancement—even without being clicked.<sup>4</sup>
- The *Journal of Digital Information* reported that brand names were rated more positively after users had looked at banner ads.<sup>5</sup>

So the debate continues. In the meantime, turn to the back for tips to get the most out of your banner advertising.

## Executive Summary

- "Banner blindness" is a phenomenon where people searching for information on web pages tend to ignore ads and text clearly designed to capture attention.<sup>1</sup>
- Some researchers say that even if web page visitors don't click your ad, it may have value in terms of brand enhancement.<sup>4</sup>
- Banner ads generate a better response when they're located near the center of the web page or at the end of editorial content.<sup>9</sup>
- Banner ads also perform better when they blend in with the web page content rather than standing out from it.<sup>10</sup>

# Tips for building better banner ads

## Place your ad near the center of the page

Certain locations tend to draw more viewers, as illustrated by Google's AdSense Heat Map<sup>9</sup> (see right). Google has also found that ads at the end of editorial content do well—as if web page visitors ask themselves, "What can I do next?"

## Target people familiar with your product

A University of Florida study found that consumers who are highly involved with a product tend to be receptive to product information and are more likely to click on a banner ad.<sup>4</sup> So for advertisers, a little research may help you find sites which attract audiences with a pre-existing interest in your subject.

## Use rich media/video formats

DoubleClick Inc. reports that rich media ads are at least 50% more effective than GIF/JPG image ads at improving purchase intent.<sup>11</sup> (Ads called "rich media" are typically formatted in Adobe® Flash®. Such ads expand, float on the page, create motion, play video clips, etc.)

## Fit in

The University of Florida study found that a banner ad with high congruency between the advertised product category and web page content will generate more clicks than an ad with low congruency<sup>4</sup> (see right).

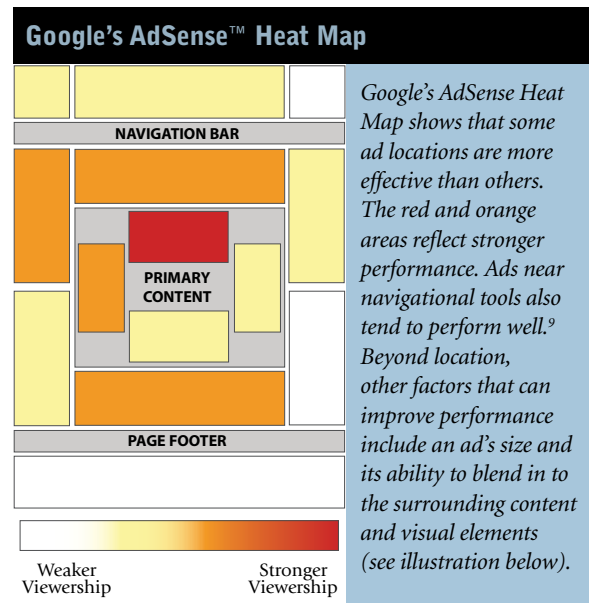
## Blend in

*Marketing Experiments Journal* notes that, "Advertising that blended in and looked like native site content performed significantly better than ads that stood out from the rest of the page"<sup>10</sup> (see right).

## Run a larger ad

The Google AdSense Optimization Team reports the best performing ad sizes, in order, are:

- Large rectangle, 336-by-280 pixels (Ad A, see right)
- Medium rectangle, 300-by-250 pixels (Ad B, see right)
- Skyscraper, 160-by-600 pixels (Ad C, see right)<sup>12</sup>



**Bigger—and blending—is better**

Ads that blend in with web pages (such as ads A and C) tend to generate better responses than those which stand out (such as ad B). Research by Marketing Experiments Journal found that blending in to web page content more than doubled click-through rates (from 0.015% to 0.034%).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Benway, J.P., and Lane, David M. Banner Blindness: Web Searchers Often Miss "Obvious" Links. Accessed 1/11/2008 at [http://www.internettg.org/newsletter/dec98/banner\\_blindness.html](http://www.internettg.org/newsletter/dec98/banner_blindness.html).

<sup>2</sup> Nielsen, J. Banner Blindness: Old and New Findings. Accessed 1/10/08 at [www.useit.com/alertbox/banner-blindness.html](http://www.useit.com/alertbox/banner-blindness.html).

<sup>3</sup> Fang, X., Singh, S. and Ahluwalia, R. An Examination of Different Explanations for the Mere Exposure Effect. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 2007; 34.

<sup>4</sup> Cho, C. Factors Influencing Clicking of Banner Ads on the WWW. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*. 2003; 6(2).

<sup>5</sup> Pagendam, M., and Schaumburg, H. Why are Users Banner Blind? The Impact of Navigation Style on the Perception of Web Banners. *Journal of Digital Information*. 2001; 2(1).

<sup>6</sup> IAB Internet Advertising Revenue Report. 2008 Second-Quarter and First Six-Month Results. October 2008. Accessed 10/15/2008 at [http://www.iab.net/media/file/IAB\\_PWC\\_2008\\_6m.pdf](http://www.iab.net/media/file/IAB_PWC_2008_6m.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> History of the Internet Domain Name. Accessed 10/15/2008 at [http://www.domainavenue.com/faq\\_history.htm](http://www.domainavenue.com/faq_history.htm).

<sup>8</sup> So Many Ads, So Few Clicks. *Businessweek*. November 2007. Accessed 10/15/2008 at [http://www.businessweek.com/print/magazine/content/07\\_46/b4058053.htm?chan=gl](http://www.businessweek.com/print/magazine/content/07_46/b4058053.htm?chan=gl).

<sup>9</sup> Where should I place Google ads on my pages? Google AdSense Help Center. Accessed 1/25/2008 at <https://www.google.com/adsense/support/bin/answer.py?answer=17954>.

<sup>10</sup> Online Ads Tested. *Marketing Experiments Journal*. Accessed 1/23/2008 at [www.marketingexperiments.com/improving-website-conversion/online-ads.html](http://www.marketingexperiments.com/improving-website-conversion/online-ads.html).

<sup>11</sup> Bruner, R., and Gluck, M. Best practices for optimizing web advertising effectiveness. DoubleClick Inc. Accessed 1/25/2008 at [www.doubleclick.com/insight/pdfs/dc\\_bpwp\\_0605.pdf](http://www.doubleclick.com/insight/pdfs/dc_bpwp_0605.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Which ad format should I use? Google AdSense Help Center. Accessed 4/16/2008 at <https://www.google.com/adsense/support/bin/answer.py?answer=17955>.

AdSense is a trademark of Google, Inc. Adobe® and Flash® are trademarks of Adobe Systems, Inc.

Yahoo!® is a trademark of Yahoo! Inc.

AT&T is a trademark of AT&T Intellectual Property and/or AT&T affiliated companies.

All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners.