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Third-Party Serving In Search: The Solution To Click Fraud And Other Dilemmas?

by Chris Copeland, Friday, Feb 16, 2007 1:00 PM ET

SEARCH IS THE ULTIMATE DATA vehicle. Every action is tracked, captured, measured, analyzed and then discussed ad nauseam. However, a funny flaw exists in this data-driven marketing vehicle. That flaw? The serving of all advertising. For online display advertising the standard serving comes from third parties. This allows both advertisers and publishers to exist in an audited environment. Since ads are paid via impressions, advertisers want to have a third party telling them what was really served versus what a publisher says. But in search marketing, it is an entirely different story.

Take our word for it

Search engines have determined that when it comes to search marketing, the only truly accurate arbiters of clicks can be themselves. The standard terms and conditions with at least one of the engines reads something like this. "We determine valid clicks, valid clicks are presented in our reports, you will pay us based on these reports, yet we make no guarantee of the accuracy of those reports."

This is like going to the doctor with a sprained ankle only to be told it is actually gangrene and your leg needs to be amputated; and then not only denied the option for a second opinion but also being handed the bill as you are going into surgery. It is about as crazy as you can imagine, yet the entire industry operates this way.

Truth in advertising?

The challenges this system creates are numerous. The biggest problems lie in the great unknown of click quality and click fraud. Third parties have begun to try and accurately evaluate

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clicks and identify how much traffic on a given campaign can be attributed to fraudulent clicks. This is one of the values in third-party tracking. However, when an industry-wide system says the engines have the final say and no established third-party system is embraced, it is simply a Band-Aid on what could be a much bigger wound.

Third-party serving of ads would benefit advertisers and consumers alike in several ways, but the single biggest impact could be in the resolution to the lingering questions about how much fraud is really going on. Likewise, these changes would allow advertisers to gain a much better view of the true ROI of their programs, from serving to conversion. (And no, I don't consider engine-owned analytic programs to be the answer.)

What's the frequency?

For years I have lobbied Google and Yahoo to give search marketers the same toolbox as online marketers when it comes to exposure. In an online display campaign, because ads are often third-party served, it is possible to cap the frequency with which the same creative is shown. That prevents audience fatigue, where someone who has been exposed to the same creative a set number of times without acting either stops seeing ads from the advertiser or sees alternative creative.

In search marketing the contention has always been that the impression is free, so why worry about your frequency. However, as we better understand consumers and the way they research and interact with search, it becomes more and more clear that the noise factor gets pretty loud. The ability to limit presentation of the same message over and over to a consumer becomes more and more valuable.

Remember, while the impression is free, we work in a system that judges us in part based on CTR/popularity, and budgets are set based on projected exposure or SOV. The control we have over getting out of potentially unproductive spaces or getting into more productive messaging is a must for future success.

The Match Game

A lot of ink is spent on the notion that search hits people throughout the purchase funnel. Search is not just an acquisition vehicle, nor is it simply for research. It targets consumers at all stages of the buying cycle. However, what search doesn't allow us to do is vary our message based on interaction taking place with our advertising. If a consumer clicks on our listing but ultimately doesn't have the desired on-site engagement, then third-party serving would allow us to change the message if that person does the same search again.

Let's say you have a "Free Shipping" offer that gets someone to click - but he doesn't buy. Because he has clicked, you now know what he was ultimately looking at and where he left your site. If you controlled ad serving, you could serve a different offer -- perhaps "10% Off" --which may be more appealing. Once you know a consumer has clicked through, the way you speak to him in all other search ads can change.

The real motive: relevancy vs. control?

If search engines were truly motivated by relevancy, everything I have just described would happen tomorrow. It would allow advertisers to have more insight and faith in the accuracy of their work. It would also allow them to speak more appropriately to consumers - those who have shown interest and those who have not. What still permeates the search space is the fact that most of the engines do not want to give away the control of serving. Whether it is the potential loss of revenue if advertisers realize they are wasting money in fraudulent efforts or the notion that advertisers could pay less by ignoring a certain segment that simply wastes their budgets, the engines at present are driven more by money and control than truly being the most relevant consumer and advertiser vehicle.

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