Are your online videos unseen? Here are 10 ways to fix that.

Just when digital marketers were getting excited about comScore's recent report, which showed U.S. online ad spending reaching a record $12.1 billion in the fourth quarter of 2013 fueled by video advertising, The New York Times had to go rain on the parade. On a recent Sunday, in a piece titled "The Great Unwatched," the Times pulled no punches in explaining how most digital video ads are never seen. Yes, the problem of digital ad placement is real. Ad platform Vindico found 57 percent of digital video ads were not viewable. ComScore estimates that 54 percent of all digital ads are never seen. And in early 2014, the Association of National Advertisers suggested digital placement is still so shoddy the industry needs a new "measurement mandate" to solve the mess.

But the outlook does not need to be dire. Here are 10 simple solutions marketers can take to make sure digital video ads are actually seen – and achieve results.

1. Understand there is no black box
First, do not accept the story you can't find out where digital video ads ran. Everything on the Internet is trackable. If a media buyer does not provide full transparency of where video ads were served and how many were completely viewed, they are doing a disservice to a client. If your ad agency can't pull this type of report, find a new agency.

2. Understand that low cost and high quality are diametrically opposed
While intuitively a brand would want every video ad to be served on a main page in a prominent pre-roll position, also accept that the Internet is a big forest and there may be value to secondary video placements such as smaller playing windows. When you buy quality inventory, media costs go up, so there is an inflection point where your plan may have acceptable waste (e.g., uncompleted video views) for desired return (clicks, leads, sales). Sometimes you can buy the whole inventory nut more cheaply than just the part of the nut you want.

3. Whitelist your sites
To tip the quality of video placement in your favor, deploy your ads on a "white list" — a custom list of 1,000 or so cherry-picked websites. This approach may have a downside in throttling impressions and potential responses, but your media planner should

be able to run forecasts before the buy to ensure ads will achieve scale.

4. Avoid below-the-fold inventory

This should be part of your white-list approach. Video ads running below the fold are always suboptimal. But be careful; even major brand sites such as Forbes.com often have secondary video inventory that runs on autoplay. Picking so-called "marquee" websites is not enough to prevent poor placement.

5. Overlay quality placement targeting

Quality can be further tuned with contextual targeting solutions, data overlays that don't fire off an ad until the placement meets preset standards. Third-party vendors such as Peer39 and Grapeshot can scan pages prior to the ad bid (the programmatic approach in which ad inventory is often purchased) for quality issues. For instance, you can avoid "parked domains" — www.chocolate.com is sadly not a real site, so you wouldn't want a cooking ad to run there — or have video ads placed only on sites with three or fewer total ad slots on the page.

6. Consider cost-per-view digital buying

While most digital advertising is bought on a CPM or cost-per-click basis, you can also buy video ads on a "cost per view." YouTube offers this option, as do in-game or in-app mobile video networks. This approach builds viewability into the actual media buying structure.

7. Consider mobile

Mobile video advertising, while nascent, solves many of the challenges that PC browser-based videos face. First, video that runs on a mobile device usually takes over the entire screen, creating a "100 percent environment" that most brands should love. Users can't put the video in a background tab to avoid it. And bot traffic on mobile is (so far) hardly an issue. The only downside with this approach is it is so obtrusive, you may risk ticking off consumers.

8. Monitor completion rates as your core metric

Leading ad-serving services, such as Google DoubleClick Campaign Manager or MediaMind, give media buyers complete transparency in how video ads are running. Completion rates should be as core a metric as clicks and conversions.

9. Track results

Advertising is a game of what you catch, not what you spill. If video ads are driving response, leads and sales at an acceptable cost, then you should put more money into them.

10. Don't be lazy

The real answer is viewability is controllable, with a little bit of work. Yes, lazy buyers will hand the media budget over to an ad network and cross their fingers hoping the campaign works out. But they should be careful, because they may get thrown in front of a New York Times bus. To solve the video viewability riddle, you simply have to connect the quality placement dots.

The truth is all advertising has potential waste, and video ad placement is no different. As more digital ads flow to programmatic, the opportunity for machines to misdirect campaigns grows bigger. Winning in digital requires more than a fat finger on a DSP button; it also requires smart thinkers.

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