The Future of Content Compensation

WHITEPAPER BY SOURCEPOINT

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The Ad Blocking Conundrum

Securing a sustainable future for online content

The digital advertising ecosystem stands in a precarious position with all players operating at cross-purposes. Users have lost patience with ads they find intrusive, turning to the only current option available: ad blockers. Instead of addressing this issue head on, some digital media giants are opting to pay the companies that create ad blockers — the very companies that threaten their livelihoods — to whitelist ads and in doing so, driving users to further extremities. As a result, publisher revenues are under strain — increasingly depleted by the general rise in blocking usage.

What no one seems to be talking about is the future. If users, advertisers, and publishers remain locked in constant conflict, then the rise of ad blockers will continue unhindered and the free, diverse web that we currently enjoy will eventually disappear. But this bleak vision doesn't have to come to pass, provided we adapt our methods now.

Instead of pointing fingers the industry must concentrate on working together to create a sustainable long-term solution that allows publishers to reconnect with audiences in a fair and transparent manner. Ad blocking is too blunt a tool to fix the complex problems within digital advertising. Its black and white approach to online advertising does not allow for the limitless variety of user interests, needs or preferences. Indeed, most users do not want to block ads completely; they simply want to block ads that do not resonate with their needs.

That is why Sourcepoint believes the course of this conversation needs to be fundamentally shifted. Rather than discussing all-or-nothing solutions, publishers must re-engage their users with clear communications that empower them to choose how they compensate publishers for the content they consume and establish a more equal, and open, value exchange.

In this paper we will explore why the most sustainable route to securing the future of online content lies in offering compensation choice to consumers, and thereby providing an alternative to ad blockers that meets individual consumer needs.

Ben Barokas Chief Executive Officer

Ad Block Usage | the symptom

In 1993, Global Network Navigator (GNN) became the <u>first ever</u> publisher to sell a clickable ad. This signaled the birth of not just the banner ad, but also the entire digital advertising industry, which has grown at an unbridled and unregulated rate ever since.

Founded in 1996, DoubleClick quickly became the dominant platform for global ad delivery and effective monetization of publisher sites, before being purchased by Google in 2007. The company began with a transparent and mutually beneficial vision for the web — in early 2000, CEO Kevin O'Connor made a <u>statement</u> outlining the company's commitment to not just "helping other companies become successful in our new economy" but also "improving the value of internet advertising and keeping the internet free for consumers."

Yet as US online advertising revenues grew from <u>\$12.5 billion</u> in 2005 to \$59.6 billion in 2015, the need to provide choice and flexibility to users — and communicate the value exchange — was never prioritized. As audiences flocked to digital from traditional channels, publishers focused too strongly on attempting to maintain revenues in a changing environment, resulting in heavy-handed advertising. Audiences quickly became disgruntled with ads that were irrelevant and interruptive, and — unaware of the important part advertising plays in maintaining the free web began to seek ways to block it out.

Thus, ad-blocking adoption is just one symptom of a larger issue that the industry must start to address, before user confidence reaches the point of no return.





"DoubleClick is improving the value of internet advertising and keeping the internet free for consumers."

> Kevin O'Connor Chief Executive Officer, DoubleClick

> > March 2, 2000

The Data | key trends and considerations

Rising adoption takes center stage

The problem with symptoms is they are the most visible part of a problem, garnering the majority of attention, but leaving the root cause unexplored. Such is the case for ad blocking, with the industry conversation currently dominated by concerns about its immediate impact particularly the rise in ad blocking adoption, which Reuters' 2015 <u>Digital News Report</u> estimated to be at almost half (47%) in the US and almost 2 in 5 (39%) in the UK.

The cost of blockers causes concern

The potential ramifications for online profitability are also high on the agenda. Earlier this year a report by Juniper Research further fanned the flames of anxiety by stating that ad blocking could cost global publishers <u>\$27</u> billion in lost revenue by 2020. Indeed, these fears are not without cause — research conducted by Sourcepoint investigating global publisher attitudes towards ad blocking and its impact on their websites revealed that half (50%) of publishers are already seeing ad blocking rates of between 10%-30% across both mobile and desktop. Furthermore, just over a third (35%) felt that this was likely to increase to rates of between 30%-50% over the next three years.

It is therefore hardly surprising that just under half (50%) of publishers agreed the ad blocking issue is one of the most significant problems currently facing their business.

A melting pot of industry responses

Responses across the digital space have been characteristically fragmented. In 2015, the IAB launched L.E.A.N (Light, Encrypted, Ad Choice Supported, Non-Invasive Ads), a program intended to address the growing use of ad blockers by improving advertising quality. "Ad Blocking could cost global publishers \$27 billion in revenue by 2020"

> Juniper Research 2016

Meanwhile, Google decided to <u>permanently suspend</u> its use of interstitial ads, Forbes joined the increasing number of publishers trialing a <u>request</u> to turn off ad blocking software, and <u>The Washington Post</u> installed a paywall.

Yet as the industry continues to search for the one true answer, it is vital to remember that multi-faceted problems cannot be fixed with one tool alone. Many have heralded creativity as the answer, particularly at this year's Cannes Lions festival of creativity, and while this is true to an extent; in isolation, creativity alone is not enough.

To re-establish harmony between publishers, advertisers, and consumers, the industry must expand its horizons. By taking an adaptable approach to finding content compensation options that work alongside existing adsupported models, giving consumers greater choice about how they prefer to engage with and fund digital content, publishers can begin to rebalance the need to generate revenue with consumer needs.

Ad Block Ecosystem | the current landscape

Research conducted by Sourcepoint and comScore into the state of ad blocking last year illustrates that the majority of ad blocking still takes place on desktop, with prominent browser plugins such as Eyeo's Adblock Plus dominating over half (51%) of the market.

Yet as content consumption moves beyond home computers, the ad blocking ecosystem is extending its reach to keep pace with cross-channel activities. Last year, Apple began the march of ad blockers into mobile when it announced its iOs9 software would allow ad blocking capabilities, with ad blocking app Peace taking the <u>top</u> download spot within 24 hours of the carrier's decision. Earlier this year <u>Samsung</u> followed suit by adding blocking capabilities across its Android devices and stand-alone blocking browsers, such as Brave, have emerged onto the digital scene.

Now mobile ad blocking has moved up a gear, with mobile carriers utilizing technologies from providers like Shine to facilitate blocking at network level. While the implications of its partnership with operators such as <u>Digicel</u>, <u>Three</u>, and <u>Econet</u> are yet to be seen, this latest development marks a growing movement from carriers towards an advertising model that will allow them to recoup the costs of implementing networks, and reduce the expense of data consumption for their users. With <u>recent</u> concerns raised about net neutrality issues arising from this type of ad blocking — time will tell whether carrier level ad blocking will become an overhyped threat.

What we can be certain of is that by extending the influence of the ad-blocking ecosystem, these developments are set to make it harder than ever for publishers to maintain a strong connection with their audiences. Earlier this year, Sourcepoint surveyed over 150 international publishers to ascertain what they deemed to be the biggest threat to their revenue – more than 50% were either concerned or extremely concerned about carrier-level blocking, and nearly 70% were concerned or extremely concerned about auto-blocking browsers.



of publishers, were concerned about carrier-level blocking.



of publishers, were concerned about auto-blocking browsers.

Compensation Choice

Reinstating the Content Value Exchange

Within the industry it is understood there is an implicit value exchange – by paying to place ads on publisher sites, advertising funds the production of online content and to enjoy it at no cost, users must accept the presence of ads. If the ad-supported model were to be removed, many independent publishers would have no means of generating revenue and may eventually be forced out of business.

But it seems this agreement is too implicit, as an IAB survey recently discovered 56% of the UK population were not aware that blocking ads meant that websites would lose ad revenue. So the obvious first step towards redressing the balance of the digital ecosystem is better audience education. Publishers need to reconnect with their audiences and clearly communicate why ads are vital to sustain the free online experience. As the <u>YouGov study</u> demonstrates, too few users understand that by blocking ads they risk creating a restricted web where large media companies dominate and variety is limited.

The Power of Compensation Choice

Choice is at the heart of the ad blocking issue. After all, a user's decision to block ads is indicative of their desire to choose the format of their online experience and the level of ads they are prepared to accept. Yet not all consumers are against the concept of advertising as a whole — in a recent <u>IAB study</u>, over two thirds of US consumers stated that they could be convinced to turn off ad block software. The two leading responses when asked why they would turn off ad block software were: "ad blocker prevented me from viewing content" and "kept seeing messages to turn off ad blocker to see content".

These findings highlight both a previously underrecognized flexibility in user attitudes and an opportunity for publishers to provide a positive alternative to blockers by entering into an open dialogue with their user base, and improving the quality of their experience. By offering users a range of compensation options, publishers can allow users to determine how they wish to pay for the content they consume — giving them greater choice and reducing the need for blockers.

Publishers seeking a less aggressive way to tackle blocking have already begun to consider using a range of approaches to versatile compensation, such as direct messaging — whereby users receive a message asking them to switch off blockers. Sourcepoint's recent survey looking at the popularity of anti-blocker approaches found that 65% of publishers would either be likely or extremely likely to employ direct messaging as a means to engage direct visitors to their sites, and a further 56% were likely or extremely likely to use the method for optimizing social media traffic.

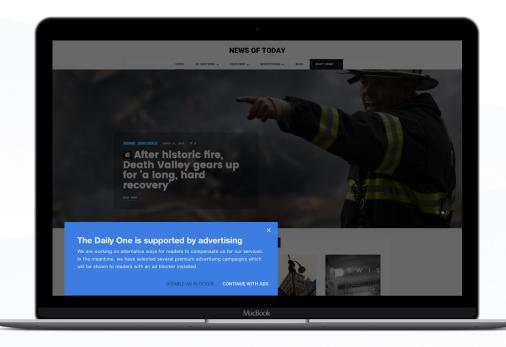
Compensation Choice

Compensation Options

Let's take a look at some of the different attitudes towards compensation models publishers are contemplating.

Content locking — preventing ad block users from viewing content — is starting to gain ground with 34% of publishers either likely or extremely likely to implement the measure to connect with social media traffic, and almost 40% likely or extremely likely to deploy it for direct visitors, according to Sourcepoint research. But with another 40% still deciding if it is the right choice for direct visitors and 36% opposed to employing content locking for authenticated users, it seems that opposition to the option still remains. This is likely due to the absence of choice such a measure imposes, as — not unlike ad blocking — content locking is a blunt tool that simply denies access and gives users no opportunity to choose how to contribute. In addition, there is the risk that ad block users presented with locked content will defect to other sites, leading to a decline of audience numbers.

Similarly, practices such as whitelisting, where ad block providers charge advertisers a fee to allow ads to be served, are also failing to win favor with digital publishers. The 2016 Sourcepoint publisher study showed that three-fifths (60%) of content providers are either unlikely or extremely unlikely to embrace the method and only 6% were likely to implement the solution — a figure that is on par with the 2015 findings. Last year the <u>Financial Times</u> reported that Adblock Plus requested 30% of additional ad revenues from companies such as Google, Microsoft, and Amazon, placing advertisers in the difficult position of either paying a toll or risk not reaching users.



Attitudes towards circumvention, which bypasses blockers to continue serving ads, are more complex. Nearly 60% of recently surveyed publishers were either likely or extremely likely to implement the measure as a means to connect with social media traffic, and just over half were likely or extremely likely to use it as a tool to reach direct visitors. Yet over 20% were still undecided with relation to all traffic sources and 26% were either Nearly 60% of recently surveyed publishers were either likely or extremely likely to implement ad reinsertion

unlikely or extremely unlikely to utilize circumvention. This indicates an interesting split of opinion on circumvention, that may be caused by a conflict of priorities — reconciling the need to conserve revenues by ensuring ads are displayed, with the importance of giving consumers a choice of whether to view them.

In fact, for some media organizations, the potential of causing brand damage by circumventing blockers and reinstating ads users have chosen to remove is too great. Recently, Joe Barone, Managing Partner of Digital Operations for GroupM, North America, <u>described</u> ad-reinsertion as "the least consumer-friendly option available" and announced that the company would advise all clients to "actively prohibit reinserted ad inventory from inclusion in their buys."

Indeed, Barone went so far as to say that GroupM was determined to go further than "non-payment for reinserted ads, as actual damage can occur to brands." He warned that while the practice may be the "shortest path to revenue recovery", there might also be severe long-term and short-term effects for publishers.

The situation is further complicated by Facebook's latest announcement that it is to bypass ad block technology and serve ads regardless. Although it is unclear how this will impact GroupM's resolve to avoid ad-reinsertion in the near future, it is apparent that Facebook has made a bold move to revitalize the conversation.

Compensation Choice

Providing Compensation Choice

The variety of individual user needs and preferences is infinite, so when it comes to content compensation options there is no 'one-size-fits-all' method. What we can be certain of is that consumers are not likely to be receptive to methods that do not give them a choice — last year a video ad survey by Rapt Media found that almost 9 in 10 (89%) of consumers wanted more control over the ads they see online.

"...almost 9 in 10 (89%) of consumers wanted more control over the ads they see online."

Rapt Media, 2015

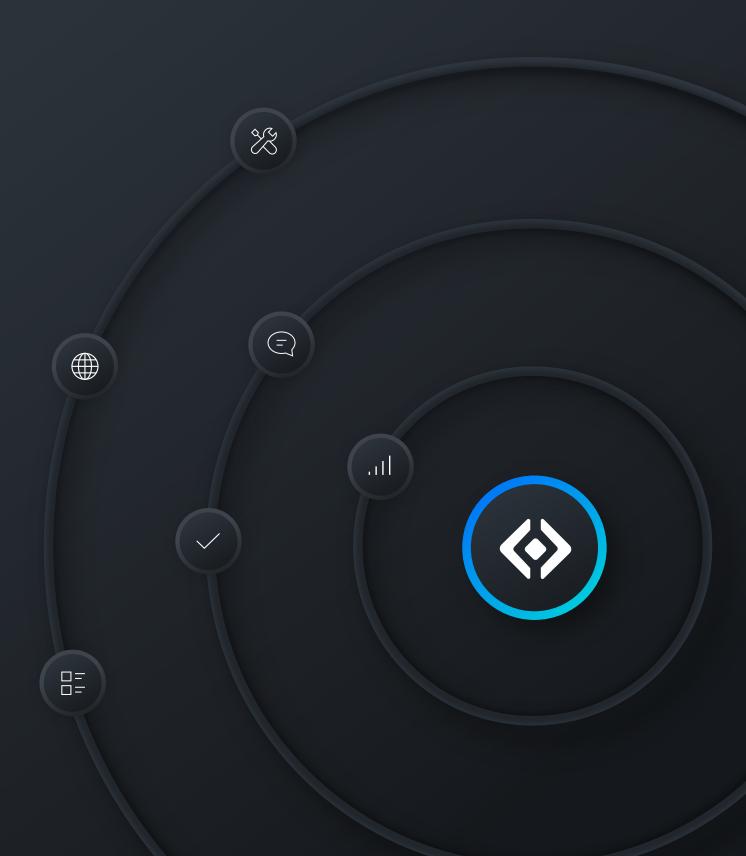
With the requirement to regain ad block users strong, not only to prevent further increases in adoption, but also because they are a highly valuable audience segment (as asserted by almost half (47%) of digital publishers), a sensitive and adaptable approach is critical.

To keep audience relationships strong and sustain operations, publishers should provide a selection of adjustable compensation options that complement existing adsupported models and user needs. When we consider the restrictions of content locking, whitelisting, and — to a certain extent — circumvention, these are likely to be focused on initiating a conversation with users that gives them the freedom of choice.

In the short-term this may include messages that ask users to disable blockers, give the option to make a micropayment, offer a subscription, or allow access to a limited number of articles in return for viewing certain ads. In fact, when Forbes tested the latter of these options — an ad-light exchange — the publisher was surprised by its success. Over a period of 30 days, Forbes served 2.1 million visitors with a notice asking them to deactivate their blockers in return for reduced ads and 903,000 users (42%) did so, enabling the publisher to retrieve 15 million impressions it would have otherwise lost. Additionally, over a quarter (27%) of publishers in the Sourcepoint survey advised they were either extremely likely or likely to implement a similar ad-free or ad-light subscription service, which indicates an encouraging willingness from publishers to adopt adjustable payment models.

Moving to the long-term, there is even more scope for flexibility. Publishers could establish tiered systems for frequent visitors to accrue articles by viewing ads, or implement a system of collecting subscription revenues, whereby users can quickly and conveniently pay for access to content. Whichever method is deployed, it will be vital for publishers to ensure they remain focused on education and versatility if they want to win users back by providing value, rather than giving them no other option.

Recommendations | From Ideas to Actions



Recommendations | From Ideas to Actions

By now, the scale of the ad blocking issue and its impact on the digital ecosystem – content providers in particular – is widely understood. Most publishers recognize that the problem has not only already reached a critical level, but is also set to become more so if left unaddressed: 78% of the respondents in Sourcepoint's 2016 survey revealed they were currently taking steps to measure ad block rates on their sites and a further 51% expected those rates to reach over 30% within the next three years.

To ensure that publishers retain control over how they generate revenues — and are therefore able to keep content production sustainable — it is essential that they take action now by beginning to construct their content compensation strategies and engaging in direct conversations with audiences about the options open to them before their attention is lost.



The Content Compensation Platform

Foundation for Enabling User Choice

In this paper, we've explored the reasons why it is vital for publishers to embrace multi-faceted solutions with the capacity to accommodate the many problems that ad blocking poses, as well as the needs of individual users, and their organization's unique requirements.

The question is: as publishers consider the array of solutions before them, how can they ensure the tool they select is able to meet all of these demands effectively?

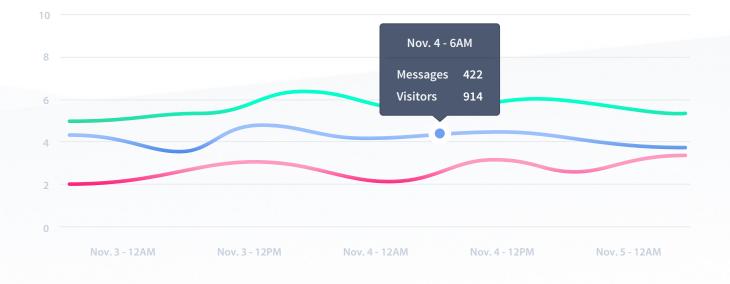
Although a number of methods have arisen to meet this challenge, the most efficient to emerge so far seems to be one built with choice in mind: the Content Compensation Platform. A powerful combination of enterprise-grade technology and robust data, these tools are designed to help publishers make informed, long-term, strategic decisions about content compensation, and communicate openly with users about compensation choice.

Data: First Seek to Understand

If the backlash against irrelevant, ill-targeted digital ads has taught the industry anything, it is that a strong foundation of data is essential to understand and meet audience needs.

The same principle applies to creating an effective compensation strategy — before publishers can reach out to consumers, they must build a complete picture of what exactly is driving audiences to block ads and how they can be best approached.

This makes employing detection technology a vital first step for any publisher. By accurately identifying the size and scope of ad block audiences, detection tools arm publishers with indispensible knowledge about their preferences across properties, geographies, and devices that will later form an invaluable resource for successfully re-engaging their interest.



The Content Compensation Platform

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Messaging: Engage in Conversation

Once publishers have determined the proportion of audiences with ad blocking software installed, they can then seek to reconnect with users via considered, transparent messages that explicitly communicate the relationship between online content and advertising.

By entering into a conversation with users, publishers will not only begin to reinforce the association of content consumption with compensation, but also enhance awareness of the long-established value exchange that has so far ensured the continuation of the free web. With this form of education through messaging, it will be vital for publishers to address users on an equal level with messages that enable them to understand what their ad blocker means for the site they are using and why it matters to them.

For example, a publisher may show a message to an ad block user, informing them that the content they are viewing is supported by ads and ask them to turn off their ad blocker.

In this way publishers will be able to reconnect with ad block users, offer an opportunity for them to disable the software, and introduce additional choices for users that want to opt out of traditional advertising.



Choice: Provide Options to Users

The advent of mass ad blocking is a perfect example of cause and effect in motion: the industry provides a digital experience that offers little flexibility or choice and in response, users try to take back control by installing ad blockers. So, in searching for a way forward, publishers must listen to users and create a more adaptable experience by allowing them to choose their preferred method of content compensation.

Once a publisher has initiated a conversation with its audience through educational messaging, the stage is set to offer users optionality in paying for its content.

The choices publishers offer will, of course, vary as they seek to meet specific audience needs, but this also means there is one universal requirement: to select a compensation platform with the capacity to support an extensive range of options for consumers.

A Selection of Compensation Options

The traditional ad experience: enabling consumers with ad blocking tech to easily disable their software and opt-in to the traditional ad-supported model.

Consumer whitelisting: giving users a simple way of adding a publisher's site as an exception for their blocker or part of a 'consumer whitelist'.

Site-specific subscription: implementing infrastructure, subscription tracking, and payment processing capabilities that enable consumers to provide direct financial support for content by subscribing to a publisher's site. **Micropayments:** establishing a system whereby consumers can pay for content access on an article-by-article basis through micropayments.

A 'consortium' or multi-publisher subscription process: creating a network of publisher sites and payment processing platforms that allow consumers to make a single payment to access a wide range of content across multiple publisher sites.

Alternate ad experiences: offering a customizable ad experience wherein consumers can unlock content by viewing certain ads. For example, watching a video or taking part in a survey may unlock all publisher content for one day.

The Content Compensation Platform

Foundation for Enabling User Choice

Persistent Content Delivery

Ad blocking tools don't just disrupt the delivery of ads themselves; they can also interfere with other forms of user communication, such as efforts to offer compensation choices. How then, can publishers ensure the messages intended to diversify and enrich the user experience have the opportunity to do so, even in the presence of ad blocking software?

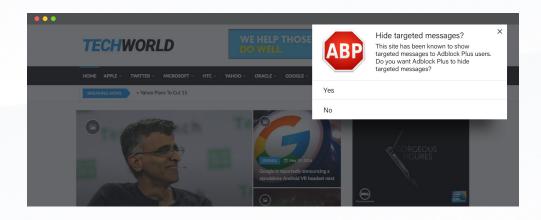
The solution once more lies in leveraging technologies built to overcome these challenges. A key attribute of the content compensation platform is persistent content delivery, which maintains the lines of communication by making sure publisher messages — whether ads, informational messages or advertising alternatives — can be reliably served.

Thinking Beyond Ad Block Users

While much of the industry conversation has focused on the symptom, it's important to remember that the key drivers behind ad blocking go much deeper. At the root of the problem is a failure to understand the interdependence of digital advertising and content that is not only prevalent among ad block users, but the online audience as a whole. Although a publisher's content compensation strategy may focus on the near-term challenges associated with ad blocking, longer-term technology investment decisions should therefore keep an eye towards the future. Publishers need to start thinking about ways in which all users will benefit from their revised content compensation strategies and if their technology platform can adjust messages to suit a mixed audience of blockers and non-blockers.

Strategic Services

It is indisputable that technology has played a major role in fuelling rapid evolution across the digital publishing industry and is a crucial consideration in the evaluation of any content compensation platform, but technology is not everything. Expertise and services that enable publishers to realize the full value of a solution — such as design services for on-brand messaging, technical consultation, and industry benchmarking — are equally as important, which makes them vital factors against which compensation platforms should be assessed.



Conclusion

When we consider the escalating scale of the ad block problem it's easy to understand why each branch of the digital ecosystem is gripped by concern for its survival and tempted to look for one solution to rule them all. But, just as ad blocking is not enough to help consumers address the industry's failure to uphold and maintain the online value exchange, there is no single remedy for those on the publishing and advertising side either.

Restrictive solutions that do not treat the fundamental cause of ad blocking are not the route to a more sustainable future. To ensure its longevity, the industry must work in tandem with users to create a better digital experience, which is driven by and centered on choice. By entering into a transparent dialogue with their audiences that both educates and offers compensation options that accommodate individual preferences, publishers can restore balance to the ecosystem while safeguarding the diverse web that we all enjoy.

About Sourcepoint

Headquartered in New York with offices in London, Berlin, and Seattle, Sourcepoint provides premium publishers with content compensation alternatives that foster more open, balanced and transparent value exchanges with consumers.

Founded by technology veterans and backed by Spark Capital, Foundry Group, Accel and Greycroft, Sourcepoint was founded to meet the expanding compensation challenges faced by premium publishers.



Why There Is No One Holy Grail to Address Ad Blocking

In times of crisis, it's tempting to look for a miracle. Just as for King Arthur's knights of the Round Table it was the epic quest for a sacred cup, for the digital advertising industry it's the search for a single solution with the ultimate power to help address its ad blocking challenges.

Given the growing scale of adoption — the IAB studies show 22% of UK adults are now blocking ads — it's easy to see why the idea of one, mystical solution is so appealing.

Indeed, many options are already being enthusiastically hailed as the Holy Grail, with solutions including improving the quality of creatives, whitelisting and ad blocker circumvention, along with micropayments and subscriptions to name a few. But with usage of ad blocking technology still rising and due to reach a quarter of the UK population by the end of next year, it's clear the pursuit of a single answer to the ad blocking issue is a fairy tale — enticing but unrealistic.

So how can the industry reach a sustainable resolution to the challenge of ad blocking that benefits consumers, publishers, and advertisers, while securing its own future?

The Power of Education

When something works well over a long period of time, we often fail to appreciate the positive aspects of the situation and begin to take it for granted. Since the advent of the internet, digital content has largely been provided without any direct cost to the user, so the free web is now an expectation.

Research shows less than half of the UK population is aware that production and publication of the content it freely consumes is only made possible by revenue from digital advertising.

To stem the rise of ad blocking and improve user satisfaction, the industry must educate consumers about why ads are needed and the role they play in keeping digital content accessible, outlining the explicit relationship between online content and advertising. By transparently re-establishing this online value exchange, publishers can ensure there is a clear understanding that advertising is the means in which content creation is funded, and begin to rebuild customer relationships.

Thomas Mendrina GM International

Choosing Wisely

There are numerous approaches that can be taken to resolving the ad blocking challenge, but the motivation to block ads cannot be attributed to any solitary cause. Consumers do it for multiple reasons — from aversion to disruptive formats and the impact on browsing speed and performance to concerns about privacy — which no one-size-fits-all tool can accommodate.

So, while it's true digital content must be paid for, finding a sustainable and mutually beneficial solution will mean offering a range of flexible options rather than a single method.

In addition to communicating with audiences about ad blocking, publishers must allow users to choose the compensation method that best suits their needs. Those needs will differ greatly depending on a user's historic interactions with a site – think subscriber vs casual browser – along with how they have arrived at a site, for example, from search, social, or directly to the website.

Audience's needs will also be impacted by contextual factors such as device, like mobile phone, tablet or desktop, time of day, and usage situation.

No One Solution

The possible approaches to content compensation could include serving a message to ad blocker users asking them to switch off the software so ads can be viewed, providing the opportunity to make a micropayment for each individual piece of content, or offering a content bundle whereby paying a subscription or viewing a selection of ads will unlock certain articles or videos. Each of these will appeal to users in certain situations or at particular moments. 22[%]

of UK adults are now blocking ads

There will inevitably be some friction in implementing these approaches. The industry can't expect an entirely painless transition to a place where audiences are paying for content they thought they were consuming for free. But if it takes the lead from King Arthur's chivalrous knights and handles the situation with due care, the industry can emerge from this turbulent period with a stronger, healthier online ecosystem and more satisfied, engaged audiences.

Although there is much that is bewitching in the idea of one solution, technology or method that could spell the end of ad blocking, the reality is more complex. The growing use of ad blockers is a response to an online experience that provides little transparency, flexibility, and choice, so to find a way forward, these are the things the industry should seek to provide.

Instead of devoting their energies to a fruitless quest for the Holy Grail, publishers and advertisers must work to regain the audience's trust and cooperation. By engaging consumers in a transparent dialogue and enabling them to shape their own content consumption experience, the industry can help restore a level of sustainability to the digital content ecosystem. Not quite Camelot, but not far off either.



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