A Viewability & Brand Safety Checklist for Buying Digital Media

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Forward

Regardless of media channel, the onus is on the advertising community at large, to maximize the benefits of the digital media supply chain while protecting the integrity of our brands and ensuring our investments are smart. Over the past two decades, online investment has grown exponentially which has led to important conversations around quality and value.

Today, digital advertisers are focusing on three core supply chain issues:

Viewability - ads must have the technical opportunity to be seen by a human
Brand Safety - brands must be protected from misalignment to inappropriate content
Ad Fraud - investments must be protected from all fraudulent activity

In digital media, the reality is that there is a constant race between the technologies designed to protect brands and those who want to profit through criminal methods. As such, risk will always be a factor when advertising digitally.   As a buyer, it is important not only to stay informed but also to demand that your partners are on the right side of a safe media supply chain.

The IAB Agency Council, has authored this document to outline current best practices to help minimize the risk to brands and their budgets through careful execution of media buys via various technologies. It is meant to be used as an easy-to-use guide that when followed, will help overall with the continued improvement to the quality of our digital supply chain.

IAB Canada Agency Council

IAB Canada would like to thank the agency council members for their dedication to delivering this valuable guide to the eco-system.

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Executive Summary: Key Questions and Topics for Digital Media Buyers

Before any transaction takes place, digital media buyers should get a clear understanding from their partners around the three areas of sensitivity. Following is a summary of considerations for discussion under each category:

VIEWABILITY

- What Is the current definition of viewability? Is there alignment?
- What are the measures in place and general approach to viewability on the supplier side?
- What are next steps for implementing viewability?
- What are some practical tactics to improve viewability?

BRAND SAFETY

- Must the buyer go beyond the standard/default safety filters and mechanisms to ensure brand safety?
- What Is the supplier's plan And policy on brand safety – ie. whitelists and other mechanisms

AD FRAUD

- Is the Publisher TAG certified?
- Has The Publisher Implemented the IAB Ads.txt program to mitigate domain spoofing?
- Has the vendor been trained on brand safety
- Have LEAN Ads Been Implemented? If not, What Is The Current Plan Of Transition?

The following expands on each of the questions.

Viewability

A **Viewable Impression** is a metric of ads which were actually viewable when served (in part, entirely or based on other conditional parameters). This metric addresses the need for an ad to have had the technical opportunity to be seen.

What is the Current Industry Definition of Viewability?

The Media Ratings Council (MRC) and IAB Canada have overall General Requirements when it comes to counting of viewable ad impressions.

For counting of viewable ad impressions, existing key concepts of served ad impression counting should be followed, as detailed in previously issued IAB Measurement Guidelines. These include:

- Client Side Counting
- Filtration of Non-Human Activity and Invalid Activity
- Cache Busting Techniques
- Differentiate Significant Auto-Refresh versus Human-Initiated Activity
- Differentiate Impressions Served in Situations of Out-Of-Focus or Obstruction
- Disclosing Material Internal Traffic
- Full Disclosure by Publishers, Portals, Ad-Servers, Ad Networks and Exchanges
- In the context of viewable ad impressions, this principle of transparency of measurement processes to data users should apply to all measurers of viewable impressions, including 3rd party Measurers.

In addition to the above requirements, **Viewable Display Ad** Impressions are counted when the following criteria are met:

- Pixel Requirement: Greater than or equal to 50% of the pixels in the advertisement were on an in-focus browser tab on the viewable space of the browser page, and...

- Time Requirement: The time the pixel requirement is met was greater than or equal to one continuous second, post ad render

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What about Video and Mobile?

The Requirements for **Viewable Video Advertising Impressions** is as follows:

A Video Ad:

1. That meets the criteria of 50% of the ad's pixels
2. On an in-focus browser tab in the viewable space of the browser page can be counted as a Viewable Video Ad Impression if it meets the following time criterion:

    1. Video Time Requirement: To qualify for counting as a viewable video ad impression, it is required that 2 continuous seconds of the video advertisement is played, meeting the same Pixel Requirement necessary for a viewable display ad.

    2. This required time is not necessarily the first 2 seconds of the video ad; any unduplicated content of the ad comprising 2 continuous seconds qualifies in this regard.

Mobile Viewable Display Ad Impressions are counted when the following criteria are met:

- Pixel Requirement: Greater than or equal to 50% of the pixels (Density Independent) in the advertisement were on an in-focus browser or a fully downloaded, opened, initialized application, on the viewable space of the device, and

- Time Requirement: The time the pixel requirement is met was greater than or equal to one continuous second, post ad render. This time requirement applies equally to News Feed and non-News Feed environments.

A detailed overview of the definitions can be found here:
[IAB Canada](#)

What Is The Publisher's Or Vendor's Approach to Viewability?

Now that we're clear on the industry standard definition of viewable inventory, the next to securing the agreed upon definition is to understand the supplier's approach to delivering it. This conversation needs to happen before completing a buy.

The same measurement body that has worked with the industry to develop the original definition of viewable impressions also accredits inventory suppliers for using acceptable measurement practices.

Does The Vendor Use Its Own Measurement Tool? If So, Is It Credible And Recognized By MRC Standards?

Media Ratings Council (MRC), is a U.S. based organization dedicated to securing audience measurement that is valid, reliable, and effective to the industry.

The MRC accomplishes its objective by setting standards and conducting audits performed by an independent CPA firm to verify compliance with those Standards. Approved measurement tools have the ability to use the logo and claim to be "Accredited by Media Ratings Council".

A list of approved vendors can be found here:

MRC Accredited Digital Vendors (As Of September 2017)

What Is The Publisher's Approach to Viewability? (continued...)

How Are You Going To Transact On Viewability? Does The Publisher Or Vendor Transact On A Viewable CPM?

The buyer must work with the vendor to determine if they are transacting on viewable impressions (ie VCPM) or is the vendor transacting on impressions only and optimizing to a viewable performance goal.

If You Are Transacting On Viewability, Can I Change The Definition of Viewability?

The goal the industry set to achieve in 2015 was to deliver 100% viewable inventory by 2017. Setting the MRC standards was the first step towards realistically achieving this goal.

The implications of delivering 100% are enormous to publishers. It requires entire property redesigns that incorporate newer ad standards (responsive designs). Publishers committed to making these changes but it was not going to take place overnight.

In the meantime, many marketers and agencies began to use their own definitions. In the broader supply chain, there may have been very little change in costs. In the private exchanges and direct buys, there may have been a more noticeable increase as pressure was more likely to be felt on supply.

IAB Canada's best practice on this matter is to work with your partners to ensure that there is clear agreement on the definition of viewability for new campaigns. This will not only impact costs, but the metrics used to deliver and evaluate the performance of the campaign. Document it!

For more information on the MRC or Viewability please visit:

Mediaratingscouncil.org

What are my Next Steps for Implementing Viewability?

Once a buyer has reached an agreement on the definition and method used to calculate and deliver viewable inventory, the next step is for the buyer to understand how the volume targets will be actioned and reported.   The following questions must answered:

• Does the marketer, publisher, vendor or agency have a preferred viewability technology and is it accredited by the MRC (see previous page for list of accredited technology)?

• What will be the central source of reporting truth? The publisher's internal tools or the agreed upon third party measurement system?

   • In some cases, there will be a discrepancy in delivery between the vendor's internal measurement tools and the advertiser's measurement system. Prior to finalizing a transaction, both the buyer and vendor must agree to which measurement platform will act as the central core of truth.

• Who is responsible for ensuring the creative is tagged properly?

• All necessary parties must have access to the reporting interface.

• Do you understand the cost implications of your decisions? Trading currency? Ad Serving Costs?

What are Some Tactics to Help Improve Viewability?

Fundamentally, viewability is a design challenge. While publishers work hard to re-design their properties and implement responsive templates for mobile to help get to that 100% goal, there are some things a buyer can do to optimize for viewability:

- Follow the IAB *LEAN Ad principals to eliminate the impact of creative that is slow to load.
- Leverage Pre-bid filtering. For example, you can remove non-VPAID, non-MRAID (optimized) inventory from your buy parameters.
- Positioning matters. Above the fold placements have proven to provide better viewability results.
- Reporting vigilance - keep on top of automated reporting and look for drops in view ability - optimize the campaigns according to these metrics where possible.
- Post-bid Optimization - Analyze your results. Create white list and black lists based on your performance.
- Development of Private Market Places. If you identify publishers who consistently deliver strong viewability scores (and the right audiences), you can create a trusted private market place.

*For more information on the LEAN Ads Program:
IAB Canada 2017 Advertising Guidelines

BRAND SAFETY

Protecting the brands we represent is fundamental to what we do. It is critical that, as buyers, we understand the process, the resources and the tools we have at our disposal to ensure our messages and brands are seen in the right environments.

Should the Buyer go Beyond the Standard Safety Filters and Mechanisms to Ensure Brand Safety?

While there have always been safety measures provided by vendors to avoid content misalignment, one can not solely rely on automated processes to ensure 100% safety.

Following are some added question a media buyer must ask of their vendors to help keep their brands safe:

• Is there clarity on the definition of brand safety?

Brands, agencies and publishers need to work together to communicate acceptable vs. non-acceptable brand alignments in order to develop strategies online. The level of risk aversion will often dictate whether a white list strategy is more appropriate than black listing questionable content.

• Is the vendor using fresh data to ensure blacklists and omissions are up to date?

This is tricky as context matters. There has been significant movement by the major media providers to add definitions of inappropriateness including hate speech towards various groups and political extremism.

• Do you have access to Semantic or Keyword analysis tools?

Keywords are a powerful tool to help avoid placement in inappropriate areas. As with broader listings, it's important to understand that context really matters when developing those lists.

• What measures exist for content that Is pushed Live (or added to a network) that was previously deemed safe but is objectionable to a particular brand?

Publishers need to keep on top of this in the context of their advertisers.

• Are there pre-bid technologies they could employ that exist in their advertising technology stack?

This provides added transparency.

- Do you know how risky your expenditures are?

It's important to have a good understanding of how much exposure your brand is receiving on the open exchange (riskier) vs. the private market places. Most brands still incorporate the open exchange for scale and cost but it's critical to be informed about the risks of broader market places.

- Does the marketer and buyer understand that the use of metrics like cost per acquisition and cost per click opens up brands to riskier placements?

Staying away form easily gamed metrics like clicks is a great way to avoid murkier inventory. When you are looking at acquisition or engagement metrics, you are able to make optimizations that are based on real results.

- Are there new third party technologies to test? Perhaps those that allow for insight into previously closed eco-systems?

Working with verification systems is a great way to get insight into your brands' high risk exposure. These tools allow you to set parameters and get reporting on in-campaign activity. Some of these tools allows you to preemptively block the content and others simply report on having been exposed.

- Have the publishers implemented ADs.txt?

ADs.Txt is a global IAB initiative that helps to secure the supply chain by only allowing authorized buyers to access the inventory. It also prevents domain spoofing where a brand may be diverted from a legitimate domain to one that is unsafe. More on this to come.

These steps along with internal protocols within the buying teams and the brand stewards are essential to keeping brands safe. The onus is on the buy-side to stay vigilant on behalf of the brands they represent.

Is your Vendor or Publisher Committed to a Brand Safety Agenda?

By asking the questions listed in the previous section, you will have a good understanding of whether your partners have sufficient knowledge and training around brand safety. If you determine by their answers that they are not prepared to help establish a brand safe environment, then you must decide whether they are willing to work with you or whether you need to work with another provider.

Some advertisers feel that it's important to work with vendors that have demonstrated their commitment to brand safety through certification programs like TAG.

Trustworthy Accountability Group (TAG) has gained a lot fo traction over the past two years as a global solution to combatting fraud and promoting brand safety. It is a cross-industry accountability program that is heavily supported by IAB in Canada and globally to create transparency in the business relationships and transactions that support the digital industry, while continuing to enable innovation.

TAG focuses on four core areas: eliminating fraudulent digital advertising traffic, combating malware, fighting ad-supported Internet piracy to promote brand integrity, and promoting brand safety through greater transparency.

TAG certification is gaining significant traction in Canada despite there being a cost associated with registration. The certification process can take a few months to complete. Ask your publisher or vendor where they are in the process. It is an important organization that will further improve safety for the digital advertising eco-system.

If you would like to learn more, you can visit:
[Trustworthy Accountability Group](#)

AD Fraud

Ad fraud (also referred to as Invalid Traffic) is concerned with theory and practice of fraudulently representing online advertisement impressions, clicks, conversion or data events in order to generate revenue.

Are you Promoting a Clean, Non-fraudulent Supply Chain?

The only solution to cleaning up the supply chain is to choke out the bad actors and insist on working with legitimate media suppliers. This requires commitment and vigilance as well as a good look at your personal supply chain.

Following are some questions you might want to ask of your partners:

Are you TAG certified?

TAG is especially focused on fraudulent activity. Certified businesses receive a payment ID that can be prioritized in the buy cycle. It acts as a deterrent to fraudsters as they will eventually be cut out of the chain.

Are you PIPEDA compliant?

Are you managing data according to PIPEDA requirements? If not, this illegal activity can by association implicate a brand. Make sure you are working with players that take privacy seriously.

Have you implemented Ads.txt?

Ads.txt is an IAB program that works globally to eliminate domain spoofing and to cut out unauthorized resellers from the supply chain.

How will you resolve invalid traffic reporting?

Much like viewability, any agreements on make-goods must be discussed prior to commenting a campaign. Ensure the vendor is using an accredited third party verification system or that it will accept your third party verification system as the true measure of valid vs. Invalid traffic.

More on Ads.txt

The ads.txt project aims to prevent various types of counterfeit inventory across the ecosystem by improving transparency in the digital programmatic supply chain.

When a brand advertiser buys media programmatically, they rely on the fact that the URLs they purchase were legitimately sold by those publishers. The problem is, there is currently no way for a buyer to confirm who is responsible for selling those impressions across exchanges, and there are many different scenarios when the URL passed may not be an accurate representation of what the impression actually is or who is selling it. While every impression already includes publisher information from the OpenRTB protocol, including the page URL and Publisher.ID, there is no record or information confirming who owns each Publisher.ID, nor any way to confirm the validity of the information sent in the RTB bid request, leaving the door open to counterfeit inventory.

Ads.txt is a simple, flexible, and secure method for publishers and distributors to declare who is authorized to sell their inventory, improving transparency for programmatic buyers. Ads.txt supports transparent programmatic digital media transactions and can remove the financial incentive from selling counterfeit and misrepresented media. Similar to robots.txt, ads.txt can only be posted to a domain by a publisher's webmaster, making it valid and authentic. As a text file, ads.txt is easy to update, making it flexible. The data required to populate the file is readily available in the OpenRTB protocol, making it simple to gather and target. And because publishers sell their inventory through a variety of sales channels, ads.txt supports the following types of supplier relationships:

- Domain owners who sell on exchanges through their own accounts
- Networks and sales houses who programmatically sell on behalf of domain owners
- Content syndication partnerships where multiple authorized sellers represent the same inventory

Currently, there are over 35,000 domains registered globally to the program and the growth is anticipated to continue at an extremely rapid pace. Most major Canadian publishers have either implemented the program or are in the process.

Source: https://iabtechlab.com/ads-txt-about/

Conclusion

As the industry pushes on into it's third decade of incredible innovation, we are quickly understanding the importance of security and brand safety. The good news is that we are able to develop technology that can help block our fraud and inappropriate content with some certainty.

It is important for all touchpoint in the media supply chain to lean in and participate in the securing of the supply chain. Take inventory of your partners and ensure that they believe and support the same standards you do.

In closing one truth will remain as we work towards a better advertising environment. Buyers have choices. With that, the buyers must insist on quality and transparency or understand the risks associated with lower cost, lower standard inventory.

For more information on these areas of discussion, join our Committees and Councils where we unpack these issues and help drive the industry towards improved transactions.

Contact committees@iabcanada.com to get involved!