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Wednesday, December 14, 2011

Online Standards Inch Closer to Standardization



Nine months into an industrywide initiative to overhaul and standardize the Wild West landscape of online metrics, organizers are taking cautious steps into a pilot testing phase through 2012, acknowledging the profound implications of their work for everyone on the buying and selling sides of the media ecosystem, not to mention those who currently measure its traffic.

The Making Measurement Make Sense (3MS) initiative, a joint venture of the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB), the Association of National Advertisers (ANA) and the American Association of Advertising Agencies (4As), has progressed from outlining general goals and operating principles toward a six-month testing period slated to begin in the first quarter of 2012, noting even that shift has been a tender one given its seismic potential for advertising in a cross-platform world.

Story continues after the ad

And while the two biggest players currently in online audience measurement, comScore and Nielsen, are not represented among the 3MS panel's 40 members — a deliberate exclusion — both companies said that they have a good working relationship with the panel and have already taken proactive steps to offer metrics products that meet the new standards as they drop.

The problem of online metrics can be tidily and nearly universally summarized: "Look at four different measurement services and you'll get four radically different pieces of information," said David Cohen, global digital officer for Universal McCann in New York. "This has been a problem from day one and continues to be a problem today, so what we're trying to do is step back, create a currency that is now extrapolatable across media types and move toward that."

The vexing persistence of inconsistent online metrics may even be hampering the growth of digital and cross-platform ad sales. "I'm sure it's not helping," Cohen said.

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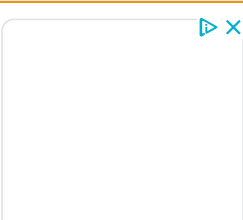
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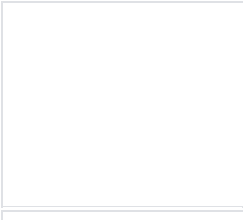
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"To spend \$100,000 in online advertising is far more complicated than \$10 million in television."

Steve Hasker, president of media products for Nielsen, agreed. "It doesn't engender the kind of confidence in online display advertising that publishers would like and the industry would like," he said.

So when the three advertising trade groups announced the 3MS initiative in February, the move was met with a loud chorus of support from all corners of the industry. Perhaps one of the most important validations came from George Ivie, CEO and executive director of the New York-based Media Rating Council, a private, nonprofit organization established by the industry in the 1960s at the urging of the U.S. government and charged with auditing and accrediting audience measurement research.

"It has been a great wake up call to the industry to focus on metrics, governance and making things more consistent," Ivie said.

In June, the 3MS group announced its first major step, the articulation of five guiding principles for digital measurement. The first was to move toward a standard of "viewable impressions" rather than the served impressions currently counted to measure traffic. Since ad units are often outside a viewable space or don't fully load before the ad server can see them, impressions are often substantially overcounted.

The second principle pushes online advertising to move to a currency based on audience impressions, not gross ad impressions. A third calls for the creation of a transparent classification system to mitigate the myriad ad types found in online media as opposed to traditional media. A fourth principle acknowledges an industry inundated in digital interaction metrics, many of which are irrelevant to brand marketers. It calls for identifying and defining metrics most valuable to brand marketers and defining and implementing reliable standards for the existing metrics.

The fifth and final principle may prove to be the initiative's Holy Grail: making digital measurement increasingly comparable and integrated with other media. Doing so would facilitate cross-media platform planning, buying and evaluation, all of which is presently encumbered by digital's stubborn exceptionalities.

The 3MS committee isn't exactly starting from scratch. The MRC's rigorous accreditation process, through which it can take metrics products years to pass, has a number of products both within and at the finished end of its pipeline that are addressing some of these standards. Ivie pointed to a product accredited over two years ago by Salt Lake City-based RealVu, for instance, which he said "essentially invented viewability," along with other products currently under review by comScore, Nielsen and Omniture.

Still, the work in front of the panel is daunting. Sherill Mane, senior VP of industry services at the IAB, is one of the key players orchestrating it, and she said that plowing ahead into the testing phase wasn't an option.

"Now that we have coalesced as an ecosystem around some guiding principles and some proposed solutions and we've embarked upon developing specifications for

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testing those solutions, it's becoming increasingly clear that there are a plethora of variables that we have to take into account as we develop the tests, and the level of care and the level of detail is quite enormous," Mane said.

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