



Are We Blind to Banner Ads?

Many advertisers are putting a great deal of money into the placement of “banner ads”, those ads that run across the top few inches of a web page. They are often animated and flashy, meant to draw the users' eye right to them, urging them to follow the ad link to their site. But do banner ads really draw the crowds they are expected to?

Not according to a Rice University study done in 1998 by Jan Panero Benway and David M. Lane. Benway and Lane's study was not specified to banner ads, but to any link made to stand out on a page. The idea is that if you have a particular link on your page that is especially important to your visitors to see, for example, the “Buy Now!” link on a sales page, you are naturally inclined to make it bigger and more eye-catching. In 1996 Detweiler and Omanson argued that *"In general, the larger an item is, the greater it's perceived visual importance and likelihood of attracting attention. Make sure that items of greatest importance are easy to see, and clearly distinguished from other items."* This hypothesis seems to make perfect sense, but Benway and Lane wanted to investigate the behavior of real users.



Testing the Existence of Banner Blindness

What they found may surprise you. They created a usability test in which the subjects were required to navigate from a home page to a smaller page located deeper in the site. The test subjects were asked to find information about Internet courses. Right there on the first page was a large ad that screamed “New! Internet Courses! Click Here for Information!” Yet surprisingly, most users scrolled right past this giant ad to a smaller link in the main menu towards the bottom of the page that said simply “Courses”. But once there, they realized they could not find the information they wanted. They had passed up the correct, obvious link.

Further, a 1997 study by Spool, Scanlon, Schroeder, Snyder & DeAngelo showed that test subjects looked over a flashy, animated banner ad and preferred the straightforward link. This habit of users overlooking these large, colorful, animated ads is called “Banner Blindness”.

The Rice Study questions how users would react to two different settings, one in which the links to the information they were asked to find were designed large and colorful, and one where the important informational links were given no extra jazz. They looked for evidence of so-called Banner Blindness in control conditions. The website designed was hierarchical, with four levels of pages. The links on the pages went from broad to more specific the deeper they went.

Participants would be asked to find simple information, such as an email address, by navigating the site. The control site had basic text menu link navigation, while the test site had the information in red banners that were meant to be short cut directly to the required information. The content of the red banners was meant to be a strong hint that the necessary information could be easily found through them.

The Results

The results of the study that tested 3 men and 3 women between the ages of 20 and 30 showed that the success rate of the banner tasks was only 58%, while the success rate of the control tasks was an amazing 94%! The banners were often simply ignored by users, no matter how flashy. Why was this? Users might have ignored the bright banners because they have become so used to such links as being ads that they assumed their information would not be there. Or they simply looked past them thinking they were looking for information that would be found through the regular linkage of the website’s navigation, which is usually small and blue.



Banner Blindness, Another View

A second portion of the study tested how much users really recognize and process banner ads. 73 undergraduate students were asked to do a series of unrelated tasks on a series of pages, some with animated banner ads, some with non-animated banner ads. After seeing 24 pages including ads, the participants were shown those same 24 banner ads, mixed in with 24 new ads that they had not been shown. They were asked to identify the ones they thought they saw, on a scale of 1 to 4 (4 being “I definitely saw that”). In the end, only 20% of those 73 students recalled seeing any sort of advertisement during the test.

This study showed that Banner Blindness is a very real usability issue and must be recognized by advertisers considering using banner advertisements. However, an article in the New York Times noted that sites with banner advertising get more traffic and more brand recognition (Tedeschi, 1998).

This information does not totally contradict the Rice study. It does, however, suggest a design compromise: information that is included in prominent, brightly colored links should also be included in the regular menu to accommodate those users who are more comfortable searching for information that way.



“Click Here, You Idiot”

Now, advertisers are coming up with new, trickier banner ads that make it appear that your computer is telling you something, such as “Memory Running Low: Click Here”, copying the Microsoft interface to disguise itself as a real message. Users might click on this ad thinking it is their own computer, when truly it leads to some corporate website. There are two problems with this type of banner ad: 1) though it does increase the click-through rate, oftentimes once users see that they were duped, they leave right away and 2) users who have been duped tend to get annoyed and angry, and will not appreciate the trick and therefore not appreciate whatever the tricky link was trying to advertise.

Jeffery Veen’s January 2000 WebMonkey article entitled “Click Here, You Idiot” points out that while yes, using ads that look like dialogue boxes or download-progress indicators do actually increase the click-through rate dramatically, he also suggests that click-through rates are worthless. Users get disoriented, discover that they have been tricked, and interrupted, and immediately click the back-button.

However, exponentially, when the click-through rate goes up, so will your number of customers, simply by the fact that you get more traffic. But, advertisers must decide, is it worth angering many customers in order to get a few more people to use their services?

It should also be noted that users using a different interface, such as Mac or Linux, would recognize right away that the ad is not really a message from their computer, and will surely ignore it. However, enough users are using Microsoft that advertisers using such methods still get a high click-through rate.

Veen believes in integrity in advertising, not deception. Good business, he suggests, is based on respecting your customers, not fooling them. Those types of ads are like a shopkeeper running up to a person on the street and telling them there is some sort of emergency in order to get them into the store, only to reveal that it was a ploy. Would you stay and shop at that store?



The Eyes Have It

John S. Rhodes of WebWord.com vehemently believes that banner ads, trickery or not, is a waste of money. He says they simply do not work. In his 1999 article, "Usability Perspectives on Banner Ads", he admits they might be good for brand-recognition campaigns, but not for getting customers to actually visit and use your advertised site.

Rhodes points out that people who use the Internet often habitually know where to look. Their eyes naturally go to certain parts of the page: the middle and the left hand side where navigation tends to be, sometimes to the bottom. Eye-tracking tests have shown this. People know by now to ignore the top few inches of the page, because that's where the banner ads are. They simply don't look up there anymore.

Some people even have programs that block banner ads altogether. Like the hated "pop-up" ads, for which now many Internet access hosts brag "pop-up blocking", sites like AdSubtract.com offers software downloads that will change the configuration in your web browser in order to block banner ads from the pages you visit, so you don't even have to ignore them, they simply don't appear in the first place. Mozilla Firefox now offers free code to add to your usercontent.css file.



But How Blind Are We?

In 2000, Michelle Bayless wrote an article for Usability News titled “Just How ‘blind’ Are We to Advertising Banners on the Web?” She explains that banner ads are similar to television commercials, and have extremely similar immediate recall rates, 40% for banner ads compared to the 41% of 30-second TV ads (Ipsos-ASI, 1999). She also referred to the Benway-Lane study, and pointed out that a similar study showed that the click-through rate of a banner add increased by 77% when the ad was placed 1/3 of the way down the page, rather than at the traditional top (Athenia Assoc., 1997).

Bayless wanted to perform a study that would answer specific questions about banner ads that previous studies had inspired. She wanted to know how well visitors remember the banner ads they see, how well they can recognize an ad they have seen if they are shown it again, and whether or not animation affects recognition and memory.

35 participants were shown pages that had banner ads placed in the middle of the layout. Ads were placed there for Amazon.com and Ebay.com, some with animation, and some static. The Ebay ad was bright, with contrasting colors, and the Amazon ad, while also brightly colored, was slightly more subdued. Participants were not told that they would be required to remember anything they saw on the four pages shown to them, they were only given simple informational tasks to carry out on those pages.

Only after they had completed those tasks were they given blank paper and asked to reconstruct the layout of the pages they had seen. This was to test to see if they had noticed the banner ads and what they were for. They were told to include everything they remembered- images, links, charts, anything. They had ten minutes to complete their drawings.

Then the participants were shown a series of 12 banner ads and were asked to recognize and indicate the exact ones they had seen. 43% of participants did recall seeing a banner add at the middle of the page. Of those who were shown the Ebay ad, 14% recalled seeing something but didn't know what the ad was for, and 32% recalled seeing the ad and that it was an ad for Ebay. Of those shown the Amazon ad, 23% remembered seeing an ad, and 17% remembered both the ad and the company name.

Of those who saw animated ads, 57% of participants recalled that the ad was animated. Interestingly, of those shown static ads, again 57% remembered that they were static.



The Results

In the end, only 9% of the participants were able to recall seeing an ad, remembered what company it was for, whether or not it was static or animated, and identified the kind of animation shown. But in basic conclusion, 7 out of 9 times, the banner that was recognized correctly was the animated one, suggesting that animation does have some positive effect of recognition and recall.

The results of this study show that banner advertising has a positive influence on brand recognition. However, it should be noted that the two companies used in this study were already fairly famous, recognizable brands.

Bayless's study showed that maybe users aren't as blind to banner ads as we think, but their recognition of them is special. Banner ads are more effective for brand recognition than for generating click-through rates and traffic to your site. The brighter, more contrasted the ad, the better it is seared into the brain, whether the user consciously notices it or not.

Conclusion

People find advertising annoying, and they are finding more and more ways to get rid of pesky ads that interrupt their Internet experience. Banner ads may work for a while, but as we have seen, some people are becoming blind to even seeing them, and immune to the tricks. Advertisers and students of usability should be aware of these developments focusing on utilizing banner ads for their influence for brand recognition, and perhaps putting less focus on generating higher click-through rates. Sites that respect their customers and keep them happy are usable sites.



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