The misappropriation of native advertising

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Date : May 24, 2016

Ask any born and bred New Yorker what their definition of a native New Yorker is. It would seem pretty straightforward at first. But the truth is, there are now a couple of widely accepted definitions, depending on who you ask.

Is it someone who was born and raised in New York? Or, by a more creative and recent method, is this "native" a status one can achieve after living there for a certain number of years – most agree at least seven years, but 10 years is undisputable. And, of course, is acquiring indigenous idiosyncrasies and street smarts enough to qualify as the genuine thing?

Native sum

In **advertising**, what we call native can make a big difference under certain circumstances and you really need to know what you are talking about, otherwise fuhgeddaboutit. And, as with New Yorkers, your definition of what native is often depends on who you are.

The biggest concern with the lack of clarity about what native **advertising** is and is not, or what it can and cannot do, is that you run the risk of alienating users who turn to ad blocking or simply become ad blind, as well as confusing advertisers and frustrating publishers.

By the most widely accepted definition, a native ad is a message or experience **design**ed to mimic the natural form and function of the user experience environment where the content exists. Simply put: it blends in.

However, with the recent proliferation of ad formats suddenly being called native, including sponsored posts, content recommendation widgets, **brand**ed content, in-feed **social** posts and now outstream video, is somehow being lumped into native as all these formats try to ride the wave of native's success.

Rather than throw all of those formats into one bundle, it is critically important for advertisers and publishers to fully understand the opportunities and limitations that each format offers – because they are very different.

By their very nature, native ads should be contextually relevant and conform to Web site

aesthetics for a smooth user experience, so they also have high viewability scores.

On the other hand, this translates to a limited availability of ad real estate, and one that is difficult to scale with the finite nature of content and page **design** requirements.

And then there is the often-pricier customized and production-intense nature of native ad content to ensure that it is on-**brand** and that it fits with the more discerning nature of the premium publishers' audience expectations.

Native ads also need to be clearly labeled as ads including "promoted by," "sponsored by," "recommended for you" and "suggested post," otherwise if they simply use camouflage, consumers end up feeling misled and then there goes trust for the publisher and the **brand**.

Stream of thought

It is important to know the capabilities and circumstances for which native ads are best suited to maximize the audience experience and evaluate ROI.

However, muddling the concepts of native with non-native formats such as outstream is ultimately a disservice to advertisers and to publishers in what is already a very confusing marketplace.

Every ad format serves a different use case.

Native **advertising** works best when the content and form of the ad fit within the publisher platform. This means that if the content is a text page, the ad should be in text format.

If the content format is a game, the ad should be blended into that experience. If the environment is a video, the native ad needs to be embedded in the video content.

Alternatively, some formats are not really native because they do not embed into the content of the page, but they do have some similar characteristics in terms of emulating the user experience of the site.

For example, when an ad appears in a viewer's **social** feed or as part of a content recommendation mechanism, both match the flow that a user goes through and the type of information that they expect to consume.

On the other hand, outstream ad formats offer an alternative solution that captures a user's attention while inside the content flow by breaking through publisher content.

Since this outstream format breaks through the content environment, this should not be not considered native.

WITH SO MANY different interests at stake, it may be tough to settle on a single definition that will solve the problem. But it is crucial that all of the parties involved make an effort to agree on

a set of concrete standards to stem the tides of ad blindness and ad blocking.

Data from Business Insider projects that the native **advertising** industry will generate $20 billion by 2018. And if that projection is to become true, it is time for publishers and advertisers to get on the same page – or, at the very least, start working together to decide what and when to call a box on the page.

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