10 Easy Steps to Best Practice in Online Campaign Development

Introduction

With the unprecedented pace of growth in online advertising, IPA Digital and ISBA's Online Action Group are developing a series of easy-to-digest guidance and best practice notes for advertisers and their agencies.

A recent report from the International Advertising Bureau (IAB) states that "*In 2006 £2.016 billion was spent online by advertisers targeting the 31 million (GfK NOP) people connected to the internet. The growth has increased the internet's share of all advertising revenues to 11.4%, up from 7.8% in 2005.*" With such an increase in its importance in the marketing mix, more and more marketers will likely have to assess whether or not the medium is appropriate for forthcoming campaigns.

This first in the series describes simple steps that can be taken to promote the timely development of successful, on-brief, online campaigns.

1. Briefing and Strategy: all agencies briefed together and strategy agreed upfront

As with any campaign, this is the most important phase. Best results come from agencies being briefed together: creative and media for digital campaigns, and all offline and online agencies for multimedia campaigns. Even if digital is not at the top of the agenda at the outset, it is best practice to keep an open mind and fit the channels that give the best opportunities for success. It's essential that clients and all agencies co-operate at all stages to ensure best results. A meeting at this stage gives the opportunity for all parties to discuss the brief. Any questions, objections or concerns can be voiced and shared. This is also a good opportunity to confirm core campaign objectives for digital channels – e.g. sign-ups, visits, interactions or other brand-based KPIs. Bear in mind that a brand-building campaign is very different from a direct response campaign and it is important to be clear and single-minded on the campaign objectives at the briefing stage. Before progressing any further, it should be ensured that the initial strategy has been agreed by all.

Advertisers should consider encouraging agency partners to present collectively, to encourage collaboration and ensure they have taken each other's views and opinions into consideration – ultimately this should increase the quality of any response, and allow the client to make an informed decision.

2. Budgets: discuss, budget accurately, and allow for contingencies

A realistic approach to budget allocation should be taken. Whilst media costs and ongoing updates to online copy are traditionally lower than offline, there is a common misconception that online advertising is the cheap option. Great creativity and craft come at a cost regardless of the channel, and clients will get what they pay for. With this in mind, advertisers may need to adapt the traditional ratio of production budget to media spend, to take into consideration the lower media costs and the three-dimensional aspect to an interactive campaign. The best time to agree the budgetary split between media and production is straight after the communications strategy has been agreed. Budgets should be agreed upfront and some contingency set aside for any unexpected issues. Often where something new is being attempted, or a new piece of technology tested, hurdles will need to be overcome and patience is required to achieve the desired results. Clients should clearly communicate with all parties so expectations are set in advance of production starting. All relevant paperwork should be agreed and in order on both sides prior to starting the project, and changes should be tracked throughout.

3. Roles and Responsibilities: a single point of approval works best

A project leader should be assigned (client-side and agency-side alike) to ensure smooth running of the campaign. Responsibilities should be agreed and confirmed with the core team and any third parties that are to be involved. All parties should be aware of key stakeholders and who has final sign-off within client and agency organisations – it is ideal if this is the project leader to avoid last-minute changes that can endanger the campaign live date, or result in a project being re-briefed when a lot of time has already been dedicated to the work. Regular meetings or contacts should be encouraged to monitor progress, and should be attended by all parties where necessary.

4. Timings and Project Planning: plan early

Advertisers should plan online campaigns with agency partners at the earliest opportunity. Timelines should be established for all parties, and confirmation that live dates can be met should be sought – once again, a realistic approach is required. Regardless of the channel, the same

principles apply to online as to traditional media. Good ideas often take time to develop and iterate (technical limitations need to be overcome and investigated), and as the medium often allows two-way interaction with the copy in a non-linear manner, all consumer routes and touchpoints need to be considered to maximise the clarity of a communication message. Be aware of charges for late creative that have recently been introduced by major media owners. Consistently late supply of copy is no longer accepted and can result in additional costs being incurred, or valuable inventory lost. Where campaigns require the use of pre-/post-awareness studies and the involvement of third parties, such as research companies, time frames for activity can be affected. Planning and agreeing to specific research methodology, and any resultant recruitment of control groups, will require consideration in any timeline or critical path.

Once all their needs have been considered and agreed, the client should ensure any critical path is confirmed with all parties. Keep this document up to date as this will need to evolve and adapt to the situation as a project develops. Make sure time is allowed for feedback and amendments. This can impact on timelines so, if necessary, the client should ensure they are available for quick feedback. A final sign-off to the work should always be given and all parties encouraged to keep documentation and records up to date.

5. Design and Development: stretch yourselves

Agencies should be encouraged to push their client. A recent comment from a Global Marketing Director on his company's latest digital campaign embraces this sentiment:

> *"This was a tough sell internally. We took an incredible risk in putting this out there. We were dancing on the line and pushing the barriers of this company. **But you hire agencies for a reason, and you really have to trust their competence.***
>
> *"The campaign in question was recently voted Digital Campaign of the Year by AdAge."*

In some cases an agency team may try to do something bespoke – usually in partnership with a specific media owner, or by creating a 'new' format or adapting an existing format in some way to push the campaign experience for the consumer. Before approving such a route, the advertiser should always ensure the team have shared this with a site owner. This will save time and frustration by ensuring that any special formats or tactics are legal, technically possible and acceptable to the media owner. A better result can often be achieved with the direct involvement of media owners, who may be able to grow or adapt the idea through their knowledge of their own audiences. Advertisers should ensure any feedback given to the agency has a rationale, is clearly communicated, and is understood by all parties.

Common areas of confusion between a media agency and a creative agency are the number of formats and the specifications that formats need to be built to. Creative and media teams must not only consider the relevant message for each individual site and where in the site your message appears, but also the number of executions required, the formats and sizes these need and the technical specifications and standards that each media owner's site will accept. There are still many sites that use non-standard ad formats. Often different sites will have different specifications and even naming conventions for the same advertising format. These can include criteria such as file size, the length of time an execution animates for, or whether or not it is acceptable for it to loop continuously. Therefore, allow time and budget to cover these variations.

6. Tracking and Measurement: measure only what matters

Deciding what is to be measured is crucial and it is essential to get this right before a campaign starts – it should be specified at first briefing. Do not underestimate the importance of this stage and insist on discussing it before any technical build stage commences. Digital media presents a fantastic opportunity to capture implicit and explicit data about users, customers and prospects. However, this is only true if provisions for tracking and measurement are made upfront. Failure to do this can result in a discrepancy between what key statistics senior management expect and what can be delivered. The client should ensure they give or take guidance on what they want to track. Measurement of the campaign needs to reflect objectives, in particular whether the aim was to build brand awareness or generate direct response. Be focused; measure only what matters, or else analysis paralysis will set in later. In order to track metrics, site tracking and ad serving tracking is required. Use clear naming conventions for all creative executions and be consistent in trafficking plans. Teams will need to agree relevant tags on individual pages within a destination site if appropriate, so you can follow user journeys. Do not overlook web metrics packages and see that they are correctly set up and access or reporting provisions are allowed for. It may be better to push a campaign back by a few days to avoid a rush rather than hit a tight deadline only to realise tracking has not been adequately employed.

7. Trafficking and Campaign Launch: plan for Quality Assurance testing

Once the advertising formats have been approved, this is not the end of the project. All formats will need to be tested by the sites and the agency responsible for trafficking. A trafficking plan is a very exact and detailed piece of documentation and requires dedicated time in its own right – allow at least two days for its production. Once they have successfully passed the Quality Assurance requirements for rich media, the creative executions will then need to be uploaded to either a third-party ad-serving tool, rich media platform or application server provider. Remember that any Flash creative

must have click tags embedded. Allow for trafficking and testing before a campaign goes live – this is important and will ensure a smoother campaign delivery overall. Many publishers require a minimum of five working days to test rich media executions before uploading to their sites. This additional time in project planning can vary depending on the amount of inventory running and the number of sites the inventory is to appear on.

8. Produce Back-up Inventory: saves white space embarrassment – and money

With surcharges now in effect for late copy delivery, it is a good idea to have a set of standard 'brand' formats available that can be used if a campaign slips for any of the reasons mentioned above. Agencies should be briefed on this, as in the long term it could avoid wasting budget on lost impressions. Also, where using Flash formats, budget and time will need to be allowed to produce a Gif back-up for the tiny minority of people who do not have access to the required software – most sites insist on this as it otherwise affects the user experience on their sites.

9. Optimisation, Reporting, Updates: monitor and nurture your campaign in-flight

Make the media work for you. It can be quicker and more cost effective to amend inventory or change copy for online advertising than for traditional channels. Advertisers should ensure their creative/media teams stay on top of suppliers. Open lines of communication between all parties are crucial once the campaign is live. Where initial results are less than satisfactory, partners should be encouraged to adjust the creative – parties should not be afraid to change messages and experiment with offers until they get it right. Base optimisation on the objectives established in the brief. But give the campaign enough time to get started before beginning to make changes. Two weeks is recommended as a standard time frame to confirm unsatisfactory results. If initial results are exceptionally poor, action could be taken after one week.

Agree on the intervals between reporting and the days of the week that reports will be run, for consistency and planning. Make sure that the whole picture is considered, and jumping to conclusions on small elements of the campaign that may appear not to perform should be avoided. Remember that users will be exposed to more than one placement and post-click activity can often account for a substantial amount of the results. Tracking can keep updating this issue for several weeks after a campaign has officially finished.

10. Learning from Analysis of Results: test and refine

Every campaign will have results that advertisers and their agency teams can learn from. If for any reason a campaign doesn't work to a client's satisfaction, they should communicate their concerns to agency partners and set up time to discuss and listen to their opinions. Clients should question anything unusual and ask for feedback from all involved in the campaign, then apply these learnings to future campaigns. The opportunity the medium presents should not be dismissed because of one failure – although the same principle should be applied to one success. Different strategies should be tested and a cumulative or rolling results record kept, so campaigns that have similar objectives can be compared. Allow for creative fatigue if a single execution has been running for a long time; expect a decay rate in the results over time. The client and media agency should also undertake a buying review to ensure bookings are actually completed, as fluctuations in site usage may lead them to overestimate the ad impressions they are able to deliver and fall short of contracted delivery levels.

Summary

This paper should be treated as a guide. Most of its content is based on simple common sense and practices that would be employed on any campaign, regardless of its intended channel. Taking this into consideration however, we hope it will provide information on some specific nuances peculiar to the Internet, and issues that might not have been considered at the beginning of an interactive advertising campaign. It is, however, far from comprehensive of the issues that can potentially arise in any campaign.

With this in mind, indicative budgets and timelines are often requested as a guide to help organisations manage their expectations. The stark reality is that there is no such thing as a standard online campaign cost or time frame. Like every other channel the requirements, scale and complexity can vary enormously – how much does a TV commercial cost or how long does a poster campaign take to implement? If at all possible, the client should be prepared to afford the agencies involved as much time in conception and development of an idea as they would with any other medium. This will lead to improved quality and better results in the long term.

Finally, the golden rules for advertisers are:

- never be afraid to ask
- never assume you know, and
- always invite partners to continually keep you apprised of the latest trends in the market.

As with all markets, the Internet is continually evolving and its multi-faceted nature and speed of change mean it can be a full-time job just keeping up with it.