Avoid ad blocking

With the rise of ad blocking, advertisers are under increasing pressure to understand what is acceptable to online audiences. A new survey, comparing desktop and mobile platforms, sheds light on which online ad formats audiences will and will not tolerate, and offers five essential learnings for the ad industry.

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Ad blockers are on the rise. Originally limited to good old desktop computers, they are now also heavily used mobile devices. Their increasing adoption by consumers has triggered various types of reactions in the digital advertising world. The advent of ad blockers came with such hard words as "robbery" or "blackmail" on ad blockers (not altogether untrue, by the way), which later softened to more reasonable reactions such as white listing, the "LEAN" programme of the IAB or "more acceptable" digital.

With all this is mind, and considering what could be perceived as acceptable from a consumer's point of view, in April and May 2016 in Belgium, Space conducted a survey on some "frequently asked questions" in digital advertising. Among other topics the questionnaire included an evaluation the acceptance of different types of online ads, as well as consumers' perception about data privacy. 1182 consumers aged 18+ replied online and data were weighted by language, gender, age and social status to be representative of the Belgian online population.
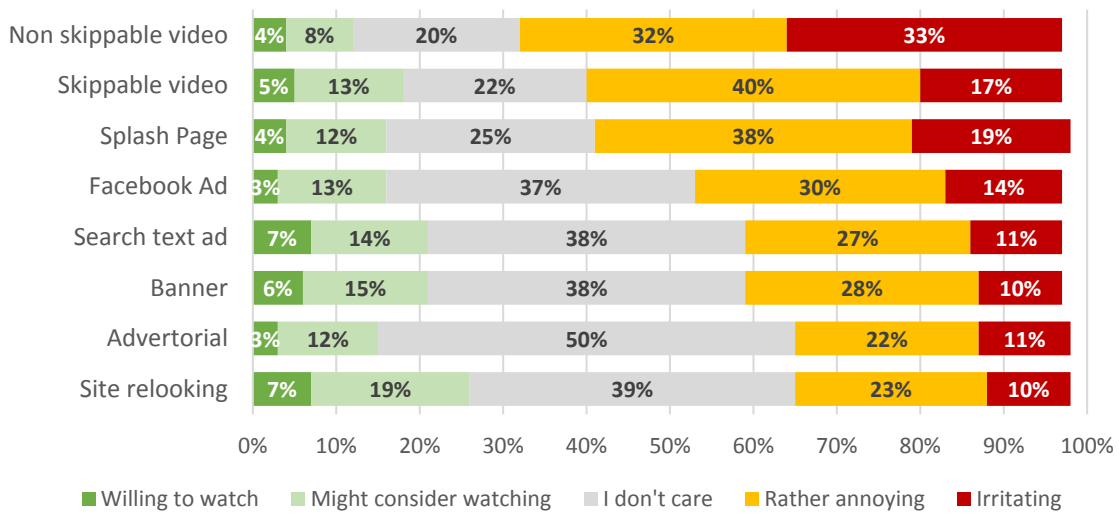
Format insights

The "online formats" chapter of the survey focused on consumers' acceptance of a selection of 8 different types of ads (for evident reasons, we focused on prominent and easy to understand formats). These were described and concrete examples given in order to ensure respondents fully understood what was meant by, for instance, "splash page" or "non-skippable video". We asked interviewees to rate every studied format depending on the platform where it appeared, namely computer or mobile phone (of course, the absence of tablets in the scope may have been a disadvantage for some).

Respondents stated what was their reaction would be by choosing from statements ranging from "I am willing to watch it" (as the highest acceptance level) to "It is irritating: it pushes me to avoid it or leave this website" (as the most extreme rejection level).

Results are shown in figure 1 for the computer platform and figure 2 for the mobile phone. As for most studies, there was a small percentage of non-response, hence the figures not summing to 100%. As far as the computer platform is concerned, the percentage of respondents claiming irritation ranges from 10% -for banners and site customisation (i.e. when an advertiser uses a background takeover)- to 33% for the most rejected format, namely non-skippable video ads. If we aggregate the two rejection modalities, non-skippable video is banned by almost 2/3 of respondents.

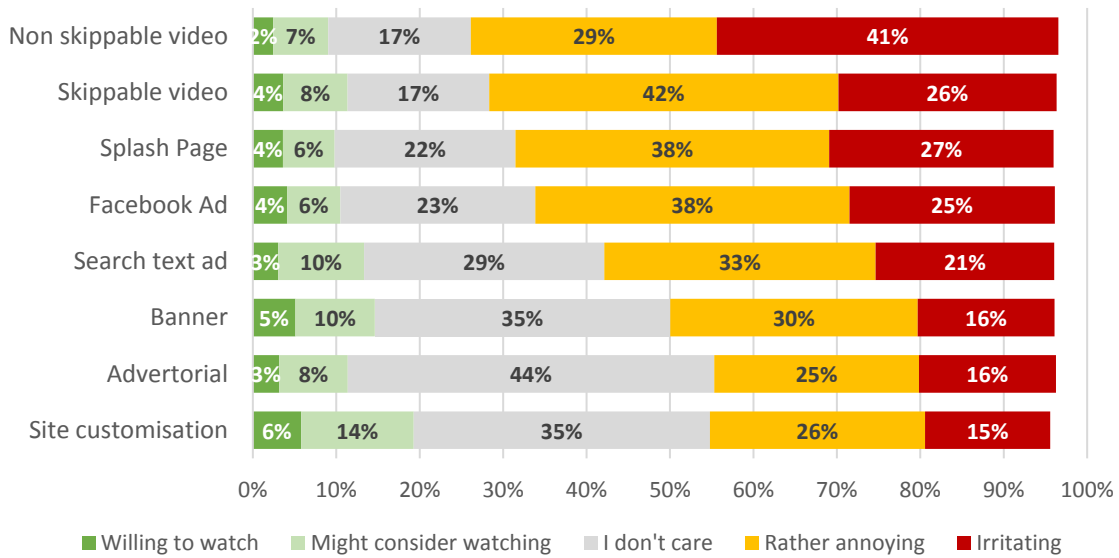## Figure 1. Online formats evaluation: on a personal computer

Format	Willing to watch	Might consider watching	I don't care	Rather annoying	Irritating
Non skippable video	4%	8%	20%	32%	33%
Skippable video	5%	13%	22%	40%	17%
Splash Page	4%	12%	25%	38%	19%
Facebook Ad	3%	13%	37%	30%	14%
Search text ad	7%	14%	38%	27%	11%
Banner	6%	15%	38%	28%	10%
Advertorial	3%	12%	50%	22%	11%
Site relooking	7%	19%	39%	23%	10%

Legend: ■ Willing to watch ■ Might consider watching ▢ I don't care ■ Rather annoying ■ Irritating

When comparing figures 1 and 2, irritation levels clearly increase on mobile. On average, acceptance levels ("willing" or "might consider to watch") are 32% lower on mobile compared to PC.

Rejection rankings are the same on both platforms, but the formats which are most frequently rejected on computer are disliked even more on mobile phones.

Online video is the least appreciated format, with non-skippable being logically highest in the negativity ranking. What is surprising is the relatively minor difference between videos you may avoid and those that force exposure, especially on mobile. When we aggregate "rather annoying" and "irritating", skippable video is rejected by 68% of respondents, and non-skippable by 70%. A small, and not very significant, difference. The solution of Google's True View" offered by YouTube (the "skip ad" button that appears after 5 seconds) does not therefore seem to be a radical remedy for irritation. This irritation might be influenced not only by the format itself, but also by ad clutter or lack of capping management, leading to overexposure.

Figure 2. Online formats evaluation: on mobile devices

Format	Willing to watch	Might consider watching	I don't care	Rather annoying	Irritating
Non skippable video	2%	7%	17%	29%	41%
Skippable video	4%	8%	17%	42%	26%
Splash Page	4%	6%	22%	38%	27%
Facebook Ad	4%	6%	23%	38%	25%
Search text ad	3%	10%	29%	33%	21%
Banner	5%	10%	35%	30%	16%
Advertorial	3%	8%	44%	25%	16%
Site customisation	6%	14%	35%	26%	15%

Interruptive ads

Generally speaking, formats which interrupt the normal surfing flow, such as splash pages and videos, are considered more irritating than ads like site customisation or advertorials, which usually do not interrupt the user's experience. It seems that even the five seconds of forced exposure to skippable video lead to audiences classifying it as a negatively rated type of ad.

As IAB UK pointed out: "People are more tolerant of ads that don't interrupt their user experience" (*Ad blocking software- consumer usage and attitudes*. Wave 4, February 2016). Interruption is indeed what differentiates the top 3 rejected formats from the remainder. For mobile, higher rejection rates for any kind of ad may be linked to the resulting reduction of connection speed, the increased bandwidth and battery consumption (see *Adblocking Goes Mobile. Pagefair 2016 Mobile Adblocking Report*, November 2016)

In this survey, demographics influence ad perception to a limited extent: younger and older unanimously reject splash pages and online videos. But in certain cases, such as Facebook ads, respondents under the age of 35 seem to be more tolerant than older participants. Nevertheless, even these heavy users of smartphones clearly prefer seeing ads on their PC than on their own pocket devices. This is creating a problem for advertisers, when we know that this target is increasingly mobile first.

Data privacy

As noted earlier, another part of the survey polled respondents on their sensitivity to data privacy issues. We asked if they were concerned about the fact that brands could own personal data on them, the will to be paid for these data, and their approval of the "deal" that underlies the online ecosystem, namely their data in exchange for free content. Those attitudes towards data privacy sometimes also play a role in the evaluation of online formats. In particular, we analysed the acceptation/rejection of the various online formats, segmenting people based on their answer to the question "The fact that brands own data about me is an issue". A large majority (86%) of respondents approved that they do have a problem with commercial brands getting hold of their data. Only 14% claimed they saw no issue with it. Both groups of respondents show fairly similar rankings: formats

they reject the most are video ads (non-skippable in particular), as well as splash pages, and mobile ads are more problematic to everyone.

The difference between both groups lies in rejection level, which is systematically lower among people who see no issue in brands owning their data. For this type of respondent, the balance between negative and positive evaluations of online ads even show some "non-negative" values for "soft formats" (typically customisation, advertorials, search text ads, banners or Facebook ads, but in the last 3 cases, only on computer). In other words, those respondents do accept forms of "soft advertising", although preferably not on their mobile.

So, people who are positively oriented towards (some) online ad formats are less than 1 in 6. They tend to be young (under 35) and middle market. In addition to demographic profile, the results do show a significant learning: once people feel relatively comfortable with the "data issue", they might be more receptive to online advertising, if it respects their online experience. In other words, following on from in-depth research to online formats, the online ad industry should also develop an education programme that explains to consumers what their data are used for, what are the limits, the legal constraints, their rights for opting out. This could lead to an increasing number of people being comfortable with the use of their data. Or, put another way, if given the possibility to opt out- this could prove beneficial for the acceptance of online advertising- particularly for the least intrusive ads.

5 lessons

So, we have established that interruption is the main concern of surfers. The acceptance of softer formats by individuals who feel relatively comfortable with the data question, as well as the preference for advertising in situations where consumers are more laid back (typically the PC) show that there is some room for improving the advertising experience. The way forward is limited and difficult but it is worth trying.

For agencies and advertisers, this leads to five lessons or recommendations:

- Even though "skippable video" shows little differences from non-skippable, the overall indication the survey is that people want to be respected in their surfing experience. Therefore, we should give priority to skippable messages whenever possible.
- When "intrusive" formats seem necessary, let us pay the greatest possible attention to message relevance. This means, first, sharp targeting; second: an attractive and meaningful offer, and third, all in the appropriate context.
- To prevent irritation, which may quickly result from intrusiveness, let us make sure that the exposure frequency to our ads is optimal. If possible, we should be better to use a single and central tool to follow up this frequency, throughout all digital channels: display, social, video and search.
- Let us avoid being blinded by click ratios. Evidences abound that clicks are not correlated to all existing ROI or branding metrics. If 2% of the prospects do actually click, 98% of them may feel irritated by our ad.
- Finally, we should always refer to the L.E.A.N. principles as stated by IAB: "Light, Encrypted, Ad choice based, Non-invasive ads". This is indeed the guidance given by the online ad industry to respond to the growing penetration of ad blockers and from now on should never be forgotten.