

e-marketing

Awareness and engagement in online health advertising

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The Internet ... it's not a fad, and neither is its potential for helping consumers better understand their health. As healthcare consumers continue to increase their use of online resources and demand still more information, why do online health-related advertisements continue to struggle to achieve attention and engagement?

The gimmicks and tactics that have proven effective in other industries, like looping animations, embedded applications and games, and ads that expand to cover the majority of the page, all fail to extend the reach of traditional interruption-based marketing into the health sector. This is because, when seeking health-related information, consumers demonstrate an increased focus on the content in the main body of the page that renders traditional ad placements virtually invisible.

Only strategies that recognize and capitalize on the needs and values of health information seekers will succeed. To do this, it is first neces-

sary to understand the commonalities that health information seekers share. In recent research conducted with 21 participants explicitly interested in specific health-related topics, we mapped their behaviors to three distinct personas and formulated a strategy for each.

A look to the eyes

In persona-driven design, research-based profiles are used to find and illuminate the path to success, rather than to define it. While defining a campaign objective based upon a demographic profile establishes measurable goals, referring to personas throughout the design process allows the creative and media teams the opportunity to evaluate or test content, interaction, creative, and placement before the campaign goes live.

The research and subsequent analysis must accurately identify the needs and values of your target audience within the scope of the campaign, as well as in the larger market,

for comparison against benchmark. It was here that the most important finding of our research occurred – the very distinct difference between health-related information seeking and other kinds of online research and interaction.

To enable this comparison, we used a progressive-baseline methodology that allowed participants to establish their unique behavioral patterns in unbounded exercises before we actively shifted the focus to healthcare. Each successive trial used the behavior observed in the previous trial to contextualize findings.

Subjects were first asked to just “surf the Web” to establish their eye-tracking patterns (and rapport with the facilitator). Once the device (an SMI iView X RED) was calibrated, the unit remained unnoticed by the participants and enabled the recognition of scanning and reading behavior for each participant.

Tasks then progressed into the healthcare market, and then focused on specific assets in compa-

rable placements to enable quantitative analysis of awareness and engagement. Understanding the personal context of interaction for each asset enabled the team to determine why a particular design or placement succeeded or failed.

Hidden in plain view: engaging the health information seeker

The unifying attribute among all participants was the intensity of focus in health-related research. Each participant exhibited a greater focus on the center content area when performing a health information search than when engaging in any other kind of activity.

During the first activity participants were asked to spend some time

using the Web as they would if they had some “free time.” Some engaged in social activities, such as checking a Facebook page or going to a web-mail account, while others checked the day’s news and sports headlines. More illuminating, however, was the comparison between those who were researching large-scale purchases, such as home furnishings or vacation plans, and those who were looking for information related to their health.

Those who performed health-related research demonstrated the greatest engagement with the center content area, almost to the point of literal exclusion of peripheral content and advertisements. They were more likely to recognize and “steer around” in-context advertising placements within the cen-

ter content area, as verified by the eye-tracker. Because this was their first activity, the behavior can’t be attributed to a deeper engagement with the experimental setting and process. In fact, the same intensity was observed in nearly all participants during the scripted health-related activities.

Knowing the level of time and energy invested in the searches related to vacations and home furnishing products further underscores this observation. Those participants had already done some research on the subject and were deeply invested in the outcome of their efforts. Yet they still were more susceptible to peripheral content than the health information seekers, as demonstrated by their behavior and the eye-tracking equipment.

Allen: the task-oriented cynic

Interaction Zones: cold cool warm

Header

Center Content Area Right Rail

Figure 1: advertising target zones for Allen

- rejects anything he perceives to be advertising, even if it isn't
- is open to sponsored content as long as the hosting site is a trusted source

Christina: the defensive scanner

Interaction Zones: cold cool warm

Header

Center Content Area Right Rail

Figure 2: advertising target zones for Christina

- responds defensively to unmet expectations or violations of trust
- willing to explore sponsored content that promises an engaging interactive experience

Vivian: the information shopper

Interaction Zones: cold cool warm

Header

Center Content Area Right Rail

Figure 3: advertising target zones for Vivian

- often views multiple information sources in a single session
- content must be personally meaningful

Some participants were very conscious of their focus on the center content area, referring to the other parts of the page as “the frame” and explicitly saying that they are less likely to engage with content they encounter there. Still, we did observe a greater tendency for their eyes to wander into the periphery when they were engaged in a non-health activity.

Perhaps the most illustrative example was the case of “Lorraine,” the mother of a child with a diagnosed but untreated behavioral disorder. When asked to show her favorite resources and practices for obtaining health-related information, Lorraine landed on a page on a trusted, third-party Website describing her child’s condition. As she had been encouraged to do, Lorraine “thought out loud” and said she was “looking for support.”

On the page was an interactive banner ad for a prescription medication indicated for her child’s condition and featuring the word “SUPPORT” in 24-point type. But because it was part of “the frame,” Lorraine never saw it, even when the facilitator asked her explicitly if the page contained any resources that might “lead her to the support” she was looking for.

The eye-tracking data confirmed that she didn’t dismiss the ad; rather she literally never saw it. At the end of the test, after seeing the same advertisement again, we asked Lorraine if she thought that the ad might lead her to a resource for support and she answered “yes.” Once aware of the ad, she was willing to engage.

This and other anecdotes led us to the conclusion that, when performing research on their health, consumers develop “tunnel vision” that severely limits the effectiveness of highly contextual banner ad placements.

Of course, this behavior was only one of several noteworthy trends. Analyzing the entire population, we distilled three distinct personas with similar needs but significantly different values that inform the content, design, and placement of ads.

Persona 1, Allen, the task-oriented cynic, is focused on his goal with laser-like precision and actively avoids engagement with anything he perceives to be advertising. Allen views banners as a nuisance and does his best not to see them.

As soon as he lands on a content page, his first action is to use the scroll-wheel to maximize the amount of visible content vertically and to push any perceived advertising off the top of the page. This is a behavior observed in many user types that we have labeled “scroll-to-hide.” Because of this behavior, Allen never sees advertising placed at the top of the page.

For pages with a defined “right rail” (a column of content to the right of the main body), eye-tracking analysis finds that Allen does not track into the right rail at all, and even a standard 15-degree allowance for peripheral vision does not permit even awareness or recognition.

Allen knows the conventions in online advertising placement and is often able to quickly recognize ad placements because they are “outlined in dark blue” or are explicitly labeled as advertisements. Because he believes trusted information comes only from medical or scientific sources that are not selling anything, he will dismiss any content that appears to be an advertisement.

The best strategy to reach Allen is through a sponsored partnership. In our research, numerous “Allens” chose a sponsored page on the health portal, because the content appeared to be better organized or generally more accessible than the third-par-

ty, unbiased content they said they wanted. Because the hallmarks of sponsorship, such as the product logo and the name of the pharmaceutical manufacturer, are located in the “frame” of the page, they tend not to be noticed, and the content, therefore, is judged at face value and on the basis of the overarching reputation of the hosting site.

Persona 2, Christina, the defensive scanner, welcomes sponsored information as long as it is relevant. Like Allen, she tends to avoid those areas of the page usually dedicated to advertising and other content she assumes to have low value. Her quick judgments mean that content that could be valuable is marginalized when presented in “the frame” because it will not be noticed. We call this behavior “defensive scanning” because Christina is “defending” her attention from distractions. Lorraine’s not noticing the link to “SUPPORT” because of where it was placed is an example of a “Christina” in action.

Christina’s proficiency with technology and online content is a double-edged sword: she is perhaps most likely to allow technology and online content to contribute to her healthcare decisions, but because she is on the lookout for distractions it can be difficult to deliver marketing messages to her. She is an expert at “scrolling to hide,” but can be receptive to placements within the center content area that integrate seamlessly with the surrounding copy and appear to be more like a pull-quote than an advertisement. There is also the option of placing sponsored content directly below the navigation, but this position is much less reliable than the center.

The best strategy for engaging with Christina is the use of quizzes, polls, and the promise of interactive content that will allow her to express

her thoughts, hear the opinions of others, or test her knowledge. Because Christina is less concerned with the source of her healthcare content, preferring to judge each piece of content on its individual merits, she will frequently link to another page or even another Website in the middle of her information search to engage with such content.

Persona 3, Vivian, the information shopper, represents the most accessible audience. Like the others, her primary focus is initially on the center content area of the page, but she tends to view the whole page as a canvas on which information of value may be presented and rarely scrolls to hide a banner placement at the top of the page. Our eye-tracking data show Vivian scanning the whole page and reading content of interest no matter where it appears. Once engaged with content she is more likely to read it all the way to the end of the page, but may not be as willing to click to the second page of a multi-page article.

Vivian is able to recognize advertising but does not generally dismiss content because it is sponsored. Her experience has shown that sponsored content is just as likely to be meaningful to her as content that is too clinical or impersonal. She is empathetic by nature and more interested in experiences and feelings than facts, as long as those experiences and feelings are genuine and informative. Vivian is the most likely to view multiple sources of information because she explores the greatest number of content sources on each page. She does not engage

as deeply with interactive pieces other than personal stories; she is likely to read comments, but unlikely to leave her own. She is not concerned with a comprehensive knowledge of a medical subject, and prefers content that appeals to her on a personal level.

The best strategy for Vivian is to appeal to her empathy with the promise of personally relevant content on a topic of personal interest. For Vivian, health information searches are not different in nature than other searches; even when shopping, planning, or communicating, she values empathy and personal connection. The gravity of topics like mental illness and life-threatening conditions makes those connections more palpable. Because the topic must be personally relevant, only highly targeted campaigns will appeal to her.

A search like no other

These personas illustrate that health-related searching is materially different than shopping or planning for a vacation and manifests differently for each persona. Understanding which personas are in your target audience and producing an optimized campaign promises value to the audience within the context of their activity.

Partnership with a trusted resource will reach the cynics who actively avoid promotional messaging, while well-placed ads that promise and deliver on meaningful interactivity will breach the walls of the defensive scanner. Appealing to the



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empathy of the information shopper will create the personal connection that drives engagement and influences behavior. Selecting the right winning strategy will enable healthcare marketers to meet the needs of their targeted audience in ways that align with their values and behavior.

Editor's note: This is one of an occasional series of guest columns. Dante Murphy and Georgia Spangenberg work in the User Experience department of Digitas Health (digitashealth.com).

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