

CNET Analysis

A comprehensive analysis of CNET's credibility, marketing, and advertising

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Credibility

Site description

CNET.com is huge. Extremely so. The slogan that appears at the top of their homepage reads, "bringing tech to life", which is extremely accurate if you interpret it like I do. No matter what kind of life you live, it sure seems like CNET would be able to bring whatever you need about technology to the table. Straight from the front page you can get a taste of the sheer volume of the diverse features this site provides. It is rife with content. The first thing I noticed were the video streams on the front page: videos about cars right next to videos about computers. Content (in the form of editorials) would seem to be the primary purpose of the site, although it isn't really just a site. CNET is actually the centerpiece of, surprise, a network! CNET Networks actually encompasses a list of technology related sites long enough to make listing them all in one sentence a garish ordeal. I was surprised to discover that several sites I had used frequently in the past (GameFAQs.com, GameSpot.com, and Download.com) were a part of CNET. The core (and original) CNET site is devoted to technology content: videos, reviews, etc, although it also has a large community element that is involved in responding to the content. You can review stuff alongside the editor's review, and then someone else can review your review. Dizzying. Right after you read a review, you can immediately download the software (or a trial version), or compare prices from online vendors. Hmm. There appears to be a Commerce element as well. The large amount of linked sites through CNET's network even bears some similarity to a Web portal. I even found an aspect that resembles an ASP; there is a place that checks your connection's bandwidth for you. I'll say it again, this place is huge.

Traffic

This category is especially hard to judge with CNET. It's a network. Different people with different needs might visit any combination of the sites in CNET's network, and never even touch the hub, CNET.com. I found a few good sites for comparison, such as idg.net, a network hub dedicated to popular technology, much like CNET. But then again, like CNET, it would have the same problems with judging its traffic. However, I'll give an analysis a shot with what information I can gather. I used Alexa.com as suggested in class to compare CNET with idg.net, ostg.com, and technologyreview.com. A site's rank at Alexa is based on two factors, the percentage of internet users who visit the site, and how many pages they check out while they're there. CNET's average ranking over the past 3 months has been 78. And in general, it has been climbing. Although it only jumped up into the top 100 last November, it far outclasses my three comparison sites, of which technologyreview.com hovers in the 10,000 range and the other two are just abysmal. Either I picked bad sites to compare with, or CNET far outclasses its competitors. The other data Alexa provides runs along the same lines, CNET captures a great deal more of the internet market than its three peers. According to Alexa, CNET reaches about 100 times as many internet users as technologyreview.com, about 200 times as many as ostg.com pulls in, and over 666 times as many as idg.net. Also, CNET's visitors (at least those using Alexa's data gathering toolbar) accessed more pages at CNET per day than did the visitors of my comparison sites. It would seem that CNET's visitors liked their content enough to visit more pages. But then again, they could have been traveling aimlessly, unable to find the pages they wanted. If this were the case, however, I don't think CNET would be ranked so remarkably higher, so I'll guess that those page views were satisfying ones.

Of interesting note, most of CNET's users spend their time on the reviews and news pages. This part of the site must be the most successful, attention-drawing area. Yahoo.com, Alexa's number 1 ranked site, shows a similar trend. It offers a diverse range of features, but about half of its page views occur in its email section while the other half are distributed over the rest of the site. I would guess that

within CNET's main site, users are primarily concerned with what CNET does best, news and reviews, and go elsewhere to satisfy their other needs, much as Yahoo's users are primarily concerned with the mail service. Alexa also lists what other sites CNET's users tend to visit, and some of the top sites are also owned by the CNET network (such as Download.com and ZDNet). In a way, CNET seems to have an advantage over Yahoo, in that the various sites in its network can specialize in different services and keep users happily moving among them. Yahoo, on the other hand, doesn't have that kind of support from companion sites. They could be losing users who don't think Yahoo's services are as good as similar ones provided by sites that are dedicated rather than diversified. CNET's network, I would guess, is an effective traffic trap.

Is CNET credible? Its traffic seems to indicate it is highly credible.

Popularity

To judge popularity, I have once again relied on the valuable advice I received in class and visited marketleap.com and wholinkstome.com. Marketleap reports CNET to have 10 times as many links as the next closest site in my comparison set. All but technologyreview.com, however, are ranked as 900 lb Gorillas, a particularly noble distinction shared by many of the internet's most recognizable URLs. The results at wholinkstome.com were much the same and quite unremarkable. In key with the amount of traffic reported by Alexa, CNET does indeed appear to be quite popular.

Is CNET credible? Its popularity seems to indicate it is highly credible.

Longevity

Founded in 1995, CNET is the ripe old age of eleven. While this may not seem like such a long time, the internet is quite young itself. Its age shows that CNET has stood the test of time as far as the

ever-changing internet is concerned. It has been popular enough not to be swept out on the shifting tide, and survived the Dot Com bust at the millennium's end. Of interest to me was the proud proclamation that CNET's distinctive yellow color was present from its conception. I would garner that they were successful at marketing themselves from the start, and haven't had to change the formula over the years, but that CNET's most devoted users probably recognize the color as a symbol the satisfaction they have repeatedly received through the services it offers.

Is CNET credible? Its life span seems to indicate it is highly credible.

Quality of content

The sheer volume of traffic that flows into CNET's news and reviews sections would seem indicative of the popularity of CNET's content, if not its quality. CNET must be doing something right, since, once again according to Alexa, CNET has only been growing over the last couple of years. Also, eleven years of operating on the web simply doesn't seem possible without there being something of substance to be had on the site. My personal research leads me to believe that the quality of CNET's content is quite high. They certainly don't lack for volume, and reviews were easy enough to find. The editors' reviews that I checked out were informative, and have often helped me when picking out software at download.com. In the past, I have found them to be accurately in line with both my experience with various software titles and with the average user reviews as well. The banner ads that I saw are certainly appropriate to CNET's target market, espousing such things as the swiftness of AT&T's high speed internet access. Suggested retail items include all kinds of technological goodies that leave the nerd in me drooling. I read one article while exploring the site that talked about some interesting system tweaks that can help speed up Windows XP's boot speed. I found it extremely useful and accurate, and put it to good use on my home system. I have a high opinion of anything that offers

knowledgeable advice about how to learn to take good care of your PC, especially when I can truly learn something in the process.

In the rapidly changing world of software, CNET seems to keep a good pace and not get winded. Their reviews seem to be covering the most recent versions of what software I could recognize. If their top stories are any indicator, CNET has at least one finger on the pulse of the electronic community; their current stories range from top of the line 5 megapixel cameras to features about RAID, a relatively new and powerful type of data storage. I'm a stickler for good writing, but I didn't read anything on the site that made me scowl, and even user reviews tended to refrain from the blight that I like to call "internet grammar". All in all, CNET's stuff is up to snuff.

Is CNET credible? Its content seems to indicate it is highly credible.

Site Design appropriateness

CNET is proud of its characteristic yellow color, which must have served it well these past eleven years. The design retains that influence, but is modern and stylish, with elegant gradients in the Windows XP-like buttons and tabs. The most appropriate aspect of the site design is the access to so much information about technology right in one spot. The left border of the site is lined with categories, and since technology geeks (a lifestyle that I dabble in) like information and have an extremely high tolerance for it, that long list of site content seems extremely appropriate. What you won't find anywhere is the kind of fluff and artistic flair that can be seen in more personal web-sites; CNET is all about the business of information. Video supplements many reviews and editorials on the site, something I find extremely welcome; I always hate shopping for info and getting only tech specs and still images. I like to have something concrete that I can examine in space and interact with, and video is about as close as I can get without actually walking into a store. Demonstrations of features help me

"feel" what the heck is being discussed, and seeing the editors interact with products helps humanize the content. The site really does feel more like a community when you can actually see the people behind it.

Is CNET credible? Its site design seems to indicate it is very credible.

Revenue

Although not as profitable as giants like Yahoo, CNET still makes plenty of money. As I discovered on Yahoo! Finance, last year CNET reported nearly 150 million dollars of gross profit. Seems like a lot of cash to put back into your business. Also, that number has been on the rise over the past few years. Certainly CNET uses advertisements to drive some of its revenue, but it doesn't use some of the traditional internet money-making methods. It doesn't charge for subscriptions, it doesn't have any paid content that I could find, at least on its main site. The other aspects of its network might do some of these things, but I've only interacted with a few of them (GameSpot, for one, does charge for subscriptions to their premium services). CNET does seem to have a dealer system set up, much like Amazon's "buy used or new" feature. I'll wager a guess that CNET takes some kind of cut for hooking up buyers and sellers. I also discovered through Yahoo! News that both CNET and its networked site, ZDNet license their content. Also, CNET seems to have a partnership of some sort with Computer Shopper Magazine (maybe they bought it), and they quite possibly make some money off the subscriptions they sell through the tiny link at the bottom of their page.

Is CNET credible? Its revenue seems to indicate it is rather credible.

Press coverage

Well, CNET has made it into the press. As I discovered in an article/journalist blog at CNN.com (1), Brian Cooley, CNET's Editor at Large, was considered prominent enough in the electronics world to be consulted by CNN on the importance of events at the 2006 Consumer Electronics show in Las Vegas. Even though his name got in the article, and CNET got recognition, I wasn't able to really find any media about CNET. That is, unless you count the fact that CNET is a new generator itself.

Is CNET credible? Press coverage was pretty thin, so it's just moderately credible.

Existing reputation

Before even knowing what CNET was, I knew the name. Many web surfers probably have a similar experience. Though personal experience isn't always a great indicator, I would guess they have at least decent brand recognition. The best indicator for this category is CNET's age. Eleven years is a long time, and they've consistently stuck to their CNET yellow, so they probably have a pretty good reputation around the web. Also, as I mentioned in the last category, the site is prominent enough to be consulted by CNN for interpretations of electronic trends. CNN must be banking on CNET's reputation and credibility when doing that. Also, CNET has a sizable chunk of well recognized partners in the areas of "cobranding, content feeds, and licensing" (<http://www.cnetnetworks.com/partnerships/>). It bodes well, that CNET is trusted by such sites as the New York Times, Market Watch, Microsoft, and Lucas Arts.

Is CNET credible? Its reputation seems to indicate it is rather credible.

Site knowledge base

One of the things I immediately enjoyed about the editorial-driven CNET was the easy access to the list of people who make it possible. Although they don't throw their resumes around there, you can

get a feel for who's behind the scenes at CNET. One of their Editors at Large, for example, has the honor of being listed as one of Technology Marketing Magazine's top 10 most influential technology editors. Rafe Needleman was doing technology editorials seven years before CNET was born. Users can appreciate that it's easy to immediately contact any of CNET's editors by email. I really appreciate being able to get a hold of actual people, especially after a recent aggravating experience with some technology I bought.

Is CNET credible? Its site knowledge base seems to indicate it is rather credible.

URL

CNET.com is certainly an easy to remember name. Many of its networked sites have easy to remember names too, but even if they didn't, it's easy enough to navigate from CNET.com to anything you could possibly want related to technology. Having started back in '95 probably gave them an edge in being able to pick such a succinct URL. Download.com? MP3.com? TV.com? CNET has certainly bought plenty of excellent URLs for its network, easy to remember, with spellings that make sense and names that match their content.

Is CNET credible? Its URL, along with many of its other features, seems to indicate that CNET is indeed quite credible.

Marketing

Site description

The only problem with looking for likely places CNET might advertise, is that they own sites in every major related category. CNET does, however advertise within its own network. Just browsing around, I was lucky enough to find a banner ad for CNET.com at the bottom of a video game review on GameSpot.com. In all the time I spent browsing around various CNET owned pages, I didn't see another. Of course, it makes sense that these ads would be infrequent, since each site has its own content to cover and its own niche to market too. And plus, all CNET Networks pages link to each other through the cute little bar at the bottom of every page. Not exactly an ad, but mySimon did have a solitary link under the "Shopping Guides" category on their main page back to "CNET Editors' Must-Have Gadgets". And I did see various other in-house ads during my search. I also saw an ad for CNET's Digital Living Magazine on ComputerShopper.com, but I'll talk about that weird story later. In all my research for the next section, however, I never once saw a text ad on a search engine while searching with keywords important to CNET. CNET does have some online ads, but I never noticed one outside their family.

Search engine optimization

CNET's vast coverage of technology products makes it a little hard to pin down just three keywords (or rather, keyphrases) to encompass its whole breadth and scope. Since the title tag conveniently had three distinct phrases, and these phrases matched nicely with the keywords in their meta tag and the main content areas of the site, I guessed those three phrases would be useful for checking how well CNET optimizes its site. I ran these by Yahoo, Google, and Ask. My main results are as follows.

Keywords	Yahoo	Google	Ask
Technology product reviews	1	1	2
Price comparisons	2	5	10
Tech video	2	1	2

Similar iterations like ‘Technology reviews’, ‘product reviews’, ‘tech reviews’, always had CNET in the top ten results on all three search engines, usually in the top two. For some reason, ‘technology product **review**’ knocked CNET down to spot number three on Yahoo. What was strange, however, is that ZDNet (a fellow CNET networks product) stole the number one slot, when it had hardly appeared during my other searches. Also, changing ‘Tech video’ to ‘Technology video’ pushed CNET far out of the top ten on Google and Ask, while Yahoo kept it at the third result. All in all, CNET had excellent results for the phrases ‘technology product reviews’ and ‘tech video’. While ‘price comparisons’ wasn’t quite as stellar, CNET still managed a great performance.

Some of the reasons for this extremely high ranking are easy to see. For one, I counted 24 instances of the word ‘review’ on CNET’s main page. ‘Video’ is also a frequent sight on the front page. And both of these make the majority of their appearances above the fold, within the portion of the page that would be seen immediately by most visitors to the page. Three of the five tabs that made up their main navigation when I started this paper were ‘Reviews’, ‘Videos’, and ‘Compare prices’, and those correlate nicely with the three keyphrases I researched. In the middle of my paper, they did a site redesign and got rid of ‘Videos’ as a main tab. Again, the three keywords I chose came directly from the title tag. CNET knows where to put them. As I will go into later, there are plenty of RSS feeds to link back to CNET and continue to hone CNET’s already polished search engine slipstream. This site pays attention to SEO concepts and puts them into practice.

Affiliate program

CNET does not have a stream-lined affiliate program like the famed Amazon partnerships, but they are open to developing “strategic partnerships” with other web sites. My guess is that due to the

nature of their content, they find RSS feeds more useful. They certainly seem to have jumped on the bandwagon there. They do mention “renting out” their price search capabilities as a possible partnership, but as it is, only two sites in the whole network license their content.

Before, I mentioned seeing a CNET ad on computershopper.com. A few moments and a double take later, I realized that although I had gone to the Computer Shopper site, the URL actually said I was at http://shopper.cnet.com/4002-7409_9-5510693.html. I was perplexed. And I still am, somewhat. Computer Shopper is, to the best of my judgment, not a brand of CNET Networks. It has it’s own look, and runs ads that I’ve never seen CNET touch (such as Google AdWords), and has its own Media Kit separate from the information at cnetnetworks.com that all of CNET’s brands link to. It runs some ads for CNET, and despite the entirely different site style, it does borrow a few design elements from CNET such as the text that announces an advertisement. Some of their content is their own, but some of it links to CNET product reviews or CNET’s shopper.com section. The weird thing is, those links keep the Computer Shopper logo and navigation (and even a static add for newegg.com) at the top the page, displaying a complete CNET review page right below with its own logos and ads. Computer Shopper is a magazine, and its site seems to be integrated with CNET content, even while it remains a separate brand. I surmised that this was possibly an example of what a “strategic partnership” might look like with CNET.

RSS

CNET Networks has feeds for just about every on of its brands. Just for reviews and editorials, it has around 80 different feeds (searching for CNET feeds on my yahoo yielded 757 results). They have top reviews, general reviews, video reviews, nearly-anything reviews. You can listen to a particular editorial columnist if you want. Some of their feeds come are supplied with various degrees of javascript to help integrate it into a site. CNET News.com is the 14th most popular feed on myYahoo.

CNET only asks that you don't lift full text articles from their site and give credit where it's due. My guess is that CNET wouldn't be offering such a plethora of feeds if they had not been met with some degree of success in driving traffic. Of course, with their reputation in the web community, I'm sure there are a few web publishers who would trust CNET's content for quality and be pleased to use these feeds at their own sites.

Newsletter program

CNET offers a variety of newsletters. What I will focus on here is their main newsletter, which does something I think is quite interesting and successful. Each newsletter begins with a word from the newsletter editor, who introduces some issue as the focus of the newsletter. This could be a specific question someone has asked in the forums, or a popular issue in the world of consumer technology. Either way, the newsletter encourages users to go back to CNET and making comments about the issue, try to provide solutions for someone's problem, commend others for good comments, or anything else. Quite simply, the newsletter is an invitation to participate in CNET's community. The only problem is, not everyone may be interested or knowledgeable about a particular issue. However, the forum threads dealing with computer issues are often flooded with responses. People seem genuinely willing to help others, or at least show off what they know. I've noticed far more comments on issues hosted in the forums than on threads I just click on while browsing. Does this work for driving traffic back to the site? Yes.

Word of mouth program

CNET does have a word of mouth program. Reviews and videos and editorials and the like gave small text links at the top that say 'e-mail to a friend'. I never noticed this until I specifically looked for it though. The text is miniscule and in an unimportant location (the upper right). Also, users can only

email the link and sample to one person at a time. It's nice that CNET has this feature, but it really seems undeveloped as far as driving traffic is concerned.

Award program

CNET has an awards program not for sites, but for products. This makes perfect sense considering a large portion of their content is reviews and editorials. To win the editor's choice award a product has to be "the best of its breed" and "must also change the competitive landscape of its market". Those sound like some pretty high standards. And since they already have a brand reputation in the tech world, these awards are probably taken seriously. They probably don't drive a great deal of traffic to the site, but rather help cement CNET's editorial image. This creates a nice synergistic set up. A company can be proud to display its Editor's Choice logo and CNET will benefit as well. CNET even provides a cute little page with step by step instructions about what to do if your product has won this award. How nice of them.

Improvements

CNET is doing a lot of good things for driving traffic. The only elements it lacks are fully developed affiliate and word of mouth programs. The affiliate program would have a lot of competition with their already well-developed set of RSS feeds, but there's nothing holding them back from increasing traffic through the word of mouth system. They really just need to make it more obvious that the ability to email their content to other people **exists**. And add the ability to spread the word to more than one email at a time. In general, though, I believe CNET's efforts at driving traffic to be successful.

Advertising

IAB report conclusions

Each quarter the Interactive Advertising Bureau attempts to get a hold on what is going on in the world of online advertising. The 2005 second-quarter report comes to three key points based on this quarter's results: the general state of the internet advertising market, trends the audience being targeted, and trends vehicles through which ads are delivered.

Advertisers speak with their money, and since the IAB must measure quarterly Internet advertising revenue in billions, it seems advertisers have spoken definitively. Internet interactivity has become, in the words of IAB President and CEO Greg Stuart, the "critical medium [used] in reaching their audiences". Over the last ten years, the IAB has watched Internet advertising grow from being virtually nonexistent to the gigantic industry it is today. The 2005 report summarized the growth during this time, from the beginning boom till the dip around the time of the dot com bust, and now with the industry's rebound performance. Internet advertising revenue is still growing strong, but not as fast as it was at its inception. This makes sense. It seems that the industry cannot continue to grow at astronomical rates; there must be some point at which it settles into a more controlled growth. At the same time, ad revenue in 2004 surpassed the pre-bust total of 8 billion in 2000. And 2005 is doing better than 2004. It seems there's still some room for growth.

Another key point is found in the focus of Internet advertising; that is, consumer advertising dominates, accounting for half the advertising spending. This hardly seems surprising, since the Internet is populated by consumers. And retail advertisers account for half of that. Considering the sheer number of products in existence, this fails to inspire much awe either. The report, at least, provides good, solid numbers to back these up. This trend seems to suggest that it is retailers who find the Internet to be the most useful in sending their messages. Or maybe they just have more messages to send.

The third point the report makes relates to the methods of advertising delivery. In this category, Search advertising dominates. This area is probably impacted greatly by Google's AdWords. This makes

a great deal of sense. With search engines being the public transportation of the Internet, they would be the best place to reach large audiences on the web. It's like advertising in TV Guide rather than on the channels themselves. That way, you get people even before they tune in. Also, search related advertising has the benefit of being related to whatever the user is *actively* looking for. This situation is no doubt highly attractive to advertisers. I would define this as the purest form of interactive advertising, since the user initiates the exchange with the search engine, rather than being bombarded with ads while trying to do something different. Also of note is that the dominant forms of Internet advertising, while increasing in revenue, have hardly changed in proportion from the previous year's report. That is Search, Display, and Rich Media advertising all kept hold of same percentage of the total advertising revenue as they had in 2004. This leads me to think that these mediums may have settled into some sort stability as to how much money advertisers want to put in each.

Two other elements of the report were interesting to me. One was that cost per impression and performance based pricing systems are on the rise, while hybrid pricing has receded a little. It sounds like the industry might be becoming more standardized and simplified. Hybrid pricing might just be too complex to be worthwhile. Also, the existence of performance based pricing is jaw dropping. Imagine only having to pay for a service after you find out how well it works. You only pay the weight loss program for each pound you lose, your lawyer for each case they win, and Google for each click they drive to your site. The Internet must truly be a fun place for advertisers.

The last point of interest to me is that 72% of the total revenue came from only 10 companies. That Percentage has also remained pretty steady over the last six years. Despite the Internet's ability to cater to the individual, it also seems to be a medium that caters to giants.

Report comparisons

Is CNET, like the Internet at large, experiencing a high amount of revenue from advertising? Although I could find no exact figures on how much advertising contributes to their total revenue, I believe some assumptions can be made from observation. While their main page isn't loaded with ads, quite a few can be found when you dig deeper into the site. There are some clearly labeled ads, but sponsored

links are more common. Perhaps more important are the companies who are advertising. Dell, Sony, and HP had some choice logo positions on the main page. Dell seemed to have an ad of some sort on nearly every page I visited. This observation alone is enough to make me think that CNET isn't doing too bad. Of course, CNET's strengths are not how many ads they pack on each page, but how many targeted sections they have to host ads. Cingular showed up while I was browsing cell phone prices. BestBuy popped up among the printers. Putting your ad on a page that will only be visited by people looking for information about your product is probably an advertiser's dream come true, and CNET offers plenty such opportunities. And they charge more for targeted ads. Are they making good revenue? Quite probably.

CNET is a community focused around technology products. As such, the vast majority of their ads are going to fall into either the Consumer or Computer ad categories, IAB's two most common categories (consumer ads accounted for 51 percent of all ad revenue as per the 2005 second-quarter report). I even saw a few ads for Financial Services (IAB's third ranking revenue bringer). Computing advertising showed up frequently, so it could occupy a larger percentage of CNET's revenue than the 15% the IAB reported for the Internet at large. It would seem that CNET's advertising revenue comes roughly from the same categories IAB reports to be the biggest spenders, but there is no doubt some fluctuation due to the sprawling nature of CNET's content. It is likely that Retail, Automotive, Leisure, and Entertainment are all well represented in CNET's diverse sections.

Search revenue leads in the Internet at large, but can CNET, primarily a technology review site, be the same? They certainly do have a search-based element. An in-site search yields 'sponsored results' similar to Google's AdWords. Contextual 'sponsored' text-based links abound. This sort of advertising seems to be CNET's forte, although they do dabble in display ads and rich media. The distribution of types of ads does seem to be roughly similar to the IAB's findings.

Site audience

CNET networks reports that four fifths of their audience is male. That's a sizeable chunk. The average visitor's age is 37. That seems somewhat high for a popular technology site, but maybe that's

just because I'm a good 17 years below the average. Of course, if people my age are using this site, then some people 17 years older than the average could be too. An astonishing 88% have gone to college. CNET doesn't mention, however, how many are graduates. Average household income tops 80 thousand. 84% of users are connecting through broadband. That would imply they have enough income to pay for broadband. The next figure I find somewhat amusing. Users report planning to spend an average of \$3,500 on "personal technology/consumer electronics" during the next year. That little tidbit is bait on a line for advertisers. That's just how much they *plan* on spending. So the average CNET user is an adult male with some spending cash who *plans* to use some of it on tech toys of some sort. Sounds like someone I'd like looking at my technology ad.

Advertising type analysis

If ads are the low-hanging fruit, then CNET has an orchard. They provide a plethora of ways to advertise with them. They have about 12 different display ad sizes, and also offer variety of packages for large ad campaigns. For example, CNET's All Access Program includes 2 elements. First is an "Intrmercial" which displays once per day/week for each unique visitor. Then, depending on the page the user is visiting, the ad will either condense into a 300x200 pixel ad or a little box in the upper right hand corner that will appear on the next 4 pages the user visits. This way, no matter how the user got to the site, they see *something*. A similar video ad program is offered as well. CNET also sells video ads that appear before its numerous technology videos (with one of their plans the advertiser's logo continues to be displayed as the 'sponsor' underneath the streaming video even after the ad). CNET also sells ads that begin in an expanded state (that does go over content) and then condense into a smaller ad that user can re-open if they so choose.

Most often, CNET offers its "Messaging Plus Unit" or MPU along with your ad. That is the aforementioned 300x200 pixel ad box. CNET seems to use these the most, but like I said before, they offer a variety of sizes. They even target some of their ads at particular types of advertisers, probably because they only appear on certain pages. One example of this it's the Circular, a text and image based ad that features a product from a technology reseller. It can even include a store locator feature. They fill

a lot of their display ads in this manner. Rather than having all their advertisers submit creatives, they instead have standardized text and image based ads for which advertisers submit various combinations of images descriptions or logos. That they have the power to ask this of advertisers says a lot about their site. And the standardization allows them to control the appearance of their ads and keep it in key with their site. This looks very professional and is quite an intelligent idea. Not only do they take control of many of their ads, advertisers know exactly what to expect from CNET. Advertisers with numerous products displayed on numerous pages don't have to design a variety of catchy, flashy ads. They fill out a form and provide text descriptions to CNET. Users benefit from the smaller download sizes, since part of the ad is text based. CNET offers a variety of these information-based ads.

CNET is extremely specific in its guidelines for ads. Everything is spelled out clearly on their forms, from the size of the ads to text and links that need to be submitted to whether or not content is user initiated. In this area, they clearly know what they are doing and indeed take a lot of burden off advertisers by spelling out such specifications rather than leaving them vague.

Ads compared to IAB guidelines

Nicely enough, CNET says up front that it follows IAB standards by labeling its available sizes "Standard IAB Units". While browsing through these, I noticed that one size was not IAB standard, and for a moment I thought I had caught CNET in a slip up, but alas, they had an asterisk labeling it as non-standard.

So in sizes, CNET conforms to the IAB guidelines (except for that one). But what about its Rich Media? In terms of user control, the answer is yes. CNET requires ads to be stoppable, leaveable, closeable, and generally user controlled. The IAB sets a maximum length of 15 seconds on nearly all its rich media ads, they do however, have different specifications for Broadband Ads. CNET, does exceed the 15 second limit on its Expanding ads (they allow up to 30 seconds on most of their offerings). Its broadband ads seem to be in tune with the IAB, though. They require no audio that is not user initiated and video teasers cannot go beyond 30 seconds. So they can deviate from the IAB, but for the most part they follow to the letter.

Advertising rate analysis

Unfortunately I have very little fodder with which to churn up an analysis in this section, but CNET didn't leave me empty handed. They do charge for ads on a cost per impression basis. Their ad units also range anywhere from five dollars all the way up to seventy, the primary factor being how target the ad campaign will be. Under this system, a run of site ad would be on the lowest end (the example price I was cited was \$13 CPM). I was told that a more targeted ad, say a banner (728x90 pixels) in the digital camera section would cost \$58 CPM. While these simple numbers don't spell out CNET's entire pricing policy, they do show a great deal. CNET is clearly aware of its targeted nature and the value that presents to advertisers. It of course offers some premium ads on the front page (there's a 300x200 "Messaging Plus Unit" right beneath their headline video links) but the choice cuts are really those buried deeper in the site within their various product categories.

Email campaigns

CNET does rent their lists. They advertise "targeted email marketing to over 5 million CNET Networks' opt-in subscribers." There are several words in that succinct sentence that advertisers like to hear. Targeted is one of them. When you create an account with CNET, you have the option of subscribing to any of their numerous newsletters. Some of these, such as CNET TechSpecials, are sponsored newsletters. CNET does collect a little information about you when you sign up, such as your zip code, gender, and birthday, but they don't pry for more information. Although I don't have any exact numbers on how much they charge for email campaigns, it probably runs a little steep due to their targeted nature and the fact that they are opt-in.

Integrated advertising

CNET does have an ad campaign offering called the Featured Product Page in which an advertiser gets a whole page to say whatever they want about a product. The advertiser gets to say they are "sponsoring" these featured products. Before I read about this on CNET Networks Media Kit pages, I had no idea those particular pages were provided completely by the advertisers. I felt a little deceived.

This certainly falls into that gray area that people trying to provide unbiased commentary on these products probably squirm about. CNET does have a lot of ads promoting various products, but they are usually clearly labeled as ads. In this case, yes I believe CNET does cross the line. They need to be clear that these products are picked and described by their advertisers rather than just saying “featured products sponsored by”. Their editorial reputation depends on it.

They do have some pages that do this better, though. For example they have little mini stores from some advertisers. The advertiser can show case some of their products and CNET displays info like their editor's ratings and user opinions. These pages are a little clearer and don't seem as bad, since although the company is choosing what products to show the content of the page remains based around CNET's editorials and communities. In fact I rather enjoyed the idea of being able to browse a company's selections with CNET's ratings side by side.

Improvements

CNET needs to be vary sure they aren't being deceptive in what content is theirs and what is provided by advertisers. For the most part they are doing a good job. I applaud their initiative to label ads and sponsored sections. 'Sponsored', however, has such a vague meaning that companies like CNET should use it with discursion. When they use it in a way that seems deceptive, discerning users will be disillusioned. CNET depends on its editorial reputation as well as its community aspect, so a lot of the community's faith rests on that reputation. I would like to say that CNET shouldn't use the word sponsored at all, but that's kind of like throwing away money. Rather, I recommend that they scrutinize their use of that word thoroughly, and make sure they are clear on what they mean. Although they have nice labels, they could, for example, link to a page that describes exactly how they are using a word, and exactly what an advertiser gets when they sponsor a section.

Sources

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