

Online Marketing: Banner Ads, Web Rings, Etc.

By Aaron Turpen

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By Aaron Turpen of Aaronz WebWorkz

As we continue to look at advertising on the web, we were going to have to touch on the subject of banner ads and web rings. Banner ads are graphics (usually of a set size - more on that later) that act as the billboards of the Internet. Log on to any large site (Yahoo!, Amazon, eBay, etc.) and you'll see banner ads displayed in all kinds of places. These portals have found ergonomic ways to place these ads, though it wasn't always so. During the heyday of the Internet (about two years ago), you couldn't go anywhere without being flooded with banner ads, pop-up banners, rotating banners, and animated sequences of all kinds. Not so any more, except on the most amateurish of sites.

Banner ads were touted as the best advertising on the web. Find a site with a huge number of daily visitors, buy some "ad time" for your banner and you'll be living large. Not so any more. Except on a few rare sites, banner ad click-rates have dropped below 1%. This means that if you spend only \$3 per thousand impressions, you may have 10 people click on the banner to visit your site. So you just spent three bucks to get ten people to visit your site. Not very economical advertising.

Banner ads are usually created in specific sizes, the most common of these are: 468 pixels wide by 60 high (full-size), 234 pixels wide by 60 tall (half), 120 pixels high by 240 tall (vertical), 392 pixels wide by 72 tall (vertical "menu") and 125 pixels wide by 125 tall (button).

When you buy ad space on a website, you usually pay per x number of impressions. An impression is a page load, meaning every time someone loads the page with your banner

(whether they are loading the page for the first time or not), the banner has made an "impression." Sometimes these are measured in the hundreds, thousands, or even tens of thousands. These rates are dependent upon several factors including the site's popularity (number of visitors per day/week/month), the spot in which your ad appears (sometimes called "screen real estate" or "position"), and a few other factors.

Despite the drawbacks, many businesses still use banners to advertise their websites or products. Although most marketers would advise smaller businesses and those on a tight marketing budget to use a different method of advertising, there are some merits to banner ads. Banner ads are still one of the most popular and useful ways to "brand" your business, product, personality, etc.

If you're still interested in banner advertising, then you will need to know a few things to get started. The first items are of basic marketing strategy. Who is your target audience? Where do these people go regularly when they're surfing the Internet? What other sites appear when searching for sites similar to yours? Do those sites offer banner advertising? It may seem sneaky, but this can be a great way to increase your search popularity in a roundabout way.

If you know most of those answers (especially the first two), then you are ready to get your banner ad created. First, brainstorm some ideas. Look around at businesses similar to yours and how they're advertising. Most banner ads are catchy in some way: either through animation, "trickiness" ("Punch the Monkey & Win!"), or humor: or any combination of those. If you can, create a story board or at least a written description of what you'd like to see in your banner. Once you know what you want, it's time to create it. You can either do it yourself (probably not recommended if you aren't an accomplished graphic artist) or pay someone else to do it for you. Prices can range considerably, but most will charge between \$40 and \$100 for a basic banner. Shop around a little until you find someone with the style you're after in their portfolio and who's inside your price range. Before you hire them, go through the steps in the next paragraph to find out where you plan to purchase ad space. This way you'll know what dimensions your ad should have.

Before you purchase ad space on site x, you should know a few things about what you're buying. Does the site use rotational software to move ads or change them periodically so that user's don't get bored seeing the same ads all the time? Does the site have third-party verification of their purported hits per day/week? What options do they offer

for placement of your ad and can you time it by day of the week or even hour of the day? Finally, what size of banner advertisements do they accept and which one will you need for it to fit in the spot you want to buy?

Now that you have the information, you're ready to get started. Right? Well, maybe. You have another option for banners besides just animated .GIF files. If you have extra money to spend and the site you wish to advertise on accepts them, you can have a Flash animated banner with movement and even sound. They are expensive, but are becoming more prevalent and tend to be "catchier" than normal banners. The down side is that not a lot of web sites will accept these types of ad and the ad placement itself can be more expensive because of the extra bandwidth needed to serve the larger file size. If you can overcome these obstacles and do it, these ads will garner a much higher rate of interest from prospective customers than a standard banner ad will ever be able to.

Other forms of banner advertising are called web rings and link cooperatives. These systems usually operate in one of two ways. The most common is for a "hub" site to supply the links, software, and to serve up the banners themselves. Another is for each site to have the software on their server and for banners to be "grabbed" from the site they advertise. The first is easiest for everyone involved and offers other options as well.

In a web ring, a "click" system can be used to give "points" to sites which get someone to click-through to another site in the web ring. The more points the site has, the more often their own banner is shown on other sites as advertisement. This works well for some sites, but tends to be counterproductive for others. It is a fair system in theory and usually in practice, but takes time to build on. Most point systems clear or average the points every month or so. This continues to give bonuses to sites that have been in the ring the longest, but keeps the system fair for new sites to build themselves up as well.

Another common option is similar to the first but is a one-for-one system instead of a point system. In this setup, every time someone clicks through your site to another in the web ring, you get your banner shown x number of times on other sites in the web ring. This is more of a reward system for generating leads to other sites.

Either way, the biggest down side to web rings is that you have no control over who's banner shows on your site (or very little if they do allow filtering), the sites are usually inter-related and therefore your competitors are likely to show up, and finally they don't always look

professional and tend to draw visitors away from your site- which is the opposite of your reason for advertising in the first place.

Link cooperatives are a little more useful in building traffic and recognition for your website and business. Using this, sites of similar interest who are not competing can trade links to one another using "flow-through" software (which moves the surfer through the sites like a storybook), straight links traded one-for-one (I put a link on my site and you put one on yours), or with an inter-site search engine which searches every site in the cooperative and shows results to the user, with portal pages to the search engine appearing on each site. Of the three, this last one is hardest to find but most useful. You get to trade content with other sites similar to yours AND you get the benefits of inter-trading users who are genuinely interested in your site.

Other systems similar to web rings and link cooperatives exist, usually as a hybrid of the two. Each of these has their merits, but they are hard to find and may or may not be what you need in your quest for online marketing. It's always a good idea to search out your options and find what's best for your situation. Building a name for yourself on the Web takes time, dedication, and imagination.

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