Think different: The web's not a place to stick your ads
Matthew Creamer

The marketer, once at the mercy of a locked-up media landscape, can now be a player in it. With all the distribution channels available, why pay for reach?

"Steve Jobs hates the internet." So jokes a contact of mine whenever he laments what he regards as Apple's relatively paltry investment in web advertising. The point that person-who once had a stake in that investment-is trying to make is not that Mr. Jobs is actually a closet Luddite but that Apple, one of the world's strongest brands, isn't as experimental as it should be and, as such, isn't contributing enough to the gold rush that is the digital-advertising business.

That's one way to look at it. Another is that regardless of what it lays out on ads, Apple has a greater online presence than most brands that spend many times what it does. Consider that in December, Apple sites had the 10th-best traffic figures on the web. Those sites, which grabbed more unique visitors than many of the most popular sites where Apple would place its own ads-including The New York Times, NBC Universal and ESPN-are destinations. Plus, there's the endless gusher of Apple-obsessed jabbering on any number of blogs and social networks. Oh, and Apple did manage to lay out $32 million in measured media online in 2007, more than double the amount it spent the year before and four times its 2005 outlay.

Consider the disappointment that an advanced marketer in 2008 wouldn't be willing to spend more than that to spray its brand all over an internet already fairly saturated by it, and you'll clearly see some misperceptions plaguing the marketing business today. First, there's the mistaken belief that marketing is synonymous with advertising. Then there's the assumption still popular in marketing circles that, when it comes to helping companies create brands or move product, the internet's greatest use is, as yet, as another place to stick ads.

MARKETERS AS MEDIA PLAYERS
What you're about to read is not an argument for making over web marketing as the creation of destination websites or a call to make every brand a content player. Not every brand has as much natural pull as Apple, and anyway there have already been high-profile flubs in the if-you-build-a-content-channel-they-will-come department. (Bud.TV, anyone?) But there is a question that's not asked often enough: Should the internet be viewed as an ad medium, a place where brands pay for the privilege of being adjacent to content such as prime-time TV and glossy magazines-those relics of the pre-blog days, when getting into the media game required infrastructure and distribution? The presumed power of that adjacency has provided the groundwork for the media industry for decades and long ago calcified into an auspicious economic reality the big media companies are trying to take with them to the digital future. For the media seller, who can't charge for content these days, ads and ad revenue might be all that's left.

But for the marketer, it's a whole different story. First off, there's reason to be skeptical about the web's effectiveness, long its point of differentiation. To be sure, any online ad is more addressable, more measurable than its equivalents in broadcast and print, but big questions remain about how to measure digital-ad executions. One old way, the click-through rate, recently has come under fire from studies suggesting that a large percentage of clicking is done by a small segment of less-than-desirable consumers who don't boast big incomes, i.e. the kinds of people who spend a lot of time gambling online and participating in web sweepstakes. Second, and more important, is that the marketer, once at the mercy of a locked-up media landscape, can now be a player in it. "The big difference is that marketers are in the same competitive set as media owners," said Matt Freeman, CEO of the digital-ad network Tribal DDB.

Already any number of marketers are working to monetize their corporate websites' traffic by selling ads there, from natural fits such as eBay and Amazon to more random companies such as Papa John's. But these are mundane compared with what Johnson & Johnson is doing with BabyCenter, a deep repository of information about raising a newborn that's a clear competitor

to Bonnier and Meredith, the publishers of Parenting and Parents magazines, respectively. Or Nike Plus, whose sharp interface connects runners all over the world-a real threat to any traditional media owners who want to engage with that running population.

"I keep talking about there being paid media and earned media," Mr. Freeman said. "In television there's really no such thing as earned media. Sure, there are press mentions, but you're not on even footing. It's not a fair fight with the media owner. On the internet, it is a fair fight."

This is a significant statement when you consider how Mr. Freeman's bread is buttered. Tribal has benefited greatly from the flood of online-ad dollars that have, to be sure, paid for countless banners and pre-rolls. But that's not what he's most interested in. Although Mr. Freeman often sounds like he's borrowing from the lexicon of PR, his idea of "earned media" or "earned engagement" isn't the same as landing a client brand in The New York Times. It's a more varied concept that encompasses everything from branded applications and services such as the Nike Plus program to videos passed along through sharing sites. Because people click on these things freely and voluntarily, they come to them with a different mindset than they do marketing communications that interrupt, whether those be TV commercials or online pop-up ads. Also, unlike with TV spots, the cost of distribution is very small, if not free.

Spend a little time with any of the above sites and you have to wonder: Why pay for reach with the array of distribution channels already available? That's a question no media player wants to hear, whether it's old-school or new. Even discussions of still-shiny new phenomena such as social networks, which allow marketers to get up-close-and-personal with consumers, inevitably drift toward relatively hoary notions of advertising simply because the business model that undergirds social media is-you guessed it-advertising.

There are already tons of reasons to be skeptical about hopes for mingling the intense sociality of the web with an interloper like an advertisement. In its fourth-quarter results, Google noted the difficulty MySpace, with whom it has an ad arrangement, has in monetizing its immense traffic. Before that, Facebook, the fast-growing No. 2 player, lost momentum when its plan to turn user recommendations of products and services into ad inventory ran smack into a wall of privacy complaints. While users might be eager to talk about brands and products, as Facebook has maintained, they don't necessarily want to do so with some drooling corporation looking over their shoulders and broadcasting their recommendations to the world in sponsored boxes. The difficulty begs several important questions, among them whether all this is just an attempt to make money off the unmonetizable.

Perhaps it's a doomsday scenario for too many companies to really contemplate, but it's not an entirely new meme. In an interview with the website The Art Bin, web designer Jakob Nielsen, an expert in user behavior who once worked for Sun Microsystems and now consults with Fortune 1000 companies on corporate websites, made the following declaration: "The basic point about the web is that it is not an advertising medium. The web is not a selling medium; it is a buying medium. It is user-controlled, so the user controls, the user experiences."

'BANNER BLINDNESS'

That statement, which foreshadows any number of current marketing platitudes, was uttered a decade ago as the dot-com bubble was still being inflated, in part by massive gusts of web-advertising investments. Recently I asked Mr. Nielsen whether his take had changed at all over the intervening years. He said it'd only been reinforced. His skepticism about ads is based on eye-tracking studies demonstrating "banner blindness," which describes the tendency of the eyes to ignore content-whether ads or noncommercial information-contained in banners on websites. He submits that search-engine and classified advertising work because people who come in contact with those ad forms generally are looking to buy something, which is why they searched in the first place. The same isn't true of display ads, which Mr. Nielsen concludes "aren't very well-suited for the web" and are holdovers from a way of thinking best applicable to other, older media.

"People don't recognize the distinction between modes of engagement," he said. "Most of the times I use the web, I go to get something done, and I don't want to be distracted. With television, I might want a more relaxing, absorbing experience."

That may change as the consumer experience of video on the internet continues to improve and becomes more like TV. But even if it doesn't, you can be sure advertisers will continue to pour more and more money in there, almost regardless of whether there's better way to spend it.

"There's huge financial incentive to say advertising works," Mr. Nielsen said. "To say that it doesn't work-I don't get anything out of that."

Disponível em: <http://www.ebscohost.com>. Acesso em 29/4/2008.