

# online

by Joe Shepter

# ADVERTISING

It began as the most annoying feature of the Web: the banner ad. Those obnoxious little rectangles were the Internet equivalent of Vegas Strip lights and late-night infomercials—loud, blinking and insistent that you click here and click now to instantly get unbelievable rewards. Today things are different. Online advertising has embraced kinder, gentler methods. The best ads now try to draw users in with games, humorous content and useful applications.

Even so, online advertisers face a bewildering landscape of possibilities whenever they approach a campaign. They have much bigger budgets, but are expected to attract even more friendly eyeballs. Just how to do that is the billion-dollar question.

## Process in turmoil

Perhaps nothing demonstrates the unsettled nature of online advertising better than the four firms who contributed to this article. All operate differently, have different organizational structures and advocate different processes. And all are convinced that they represent the wave of the future. (Some aspects of the ad business, like extreme confidence, never change.)

The most traditional among them is Rethink Advertising, a mid-sized agency in Vancouver, Canada. Though its processes are collaborative, it still advocates the same idea-based framework that the industry has been using for the last 50 years.

"Our online work is still about strong ideas and always will be," says partner and co-creative director Ian Grais. "Human nature hasn't changed. People still want to be entertained, surprised and let in on a secret."

A different approach can be found at Struck. Located in Salt Lake City and known for its viral work, it sometimes operates as a Flash-intense production house for agencies like Goodby, Silverstein & Partners. Other times, it serves local clients as a full-service agency.

The Los Angeles office of TEQUILA\ and TBWA\Chiat\Day provides the most interesting of the current models: two semi-

independent agencies inhabiting the same space. One is a traditional agency, the other a non-traditional agency with digital expertise. Members from both sides are invited to create pitches, and the one whose concept wins leads the project.

"The people in TEQUILA\ have two e-mail addresses," says creative director Paul Nguyen to emphasize the point. "You can reach them through Chiat or TEQUILA\."

R/GA, a large interactive agency based in New York, has a still different approach. It works almost exclusively from technology out and produces everything from e-commerce platforms to full-fledged campaigns. Its processes vary greatly, but often resemble software development more than advertising.

## Destination

So what are they producing? When creatives sit down to write briefs, they have a huge array of options: videos, online applications, complex sites and simple banners. Still, the most important feature of online campaigns remains the destination site. On this point everyone interviewed agreed: The destination has to deliver something to the user.

"Online, it's about what people want to look at," says Steve Driggs, executive creative director at Struck. "So you have to entice them to look for you and make them want to stay. You can't do something boring."

The end product is largely determined by the brand. In general, destination sites can make you laugh, entertain you with games or offer useful information. Some are simple, like Goodby's museum-style site (which Struck built) for Specialized, a high-end bike company. R/GA'S work for Nike is much more involved. Nike+, for example, enables runners to plot runs, compete with others and create clubs online. It's as much about creating a community as promoting a message.

## Driving traffic

The problem with destination sites is that they don't generate

Right: **Utah Office of Tourism** banner ads. "Both games were created to highlight Utah's greatest snow on earth," said executive creative director Steve Driggs. "For ski jump, users jump and control the speed and the flips. The goal is to stick the landing; the catch is that every landing on powder so deep is a good landing. When riding lifts, skiers often try to drop powder from their skis on to people below. This interactive banner, created from the point of view of someone on a ski lift, allowed users to score points for dropping snow on people. When they got hit, they reacted and users scored points." Gary Huck (lift)/Jonathan Minori (jump/lift), designers; Mike Kern (jump/lift), design director; Thomas Cooke (jump/lift), producer; Jeremy Morrill (jump)/Corey Hankey (lift), project design and development; Struck (Salt Lake City, UT), production company.

"Intended to feel as if you are preparing for a **Utah adventure**, this site uses amazing photography from Utah photographers as well as an iPod-like device for checking out recent commercials and videos," said executive creative director Steve Driggs. Eric Turner, designer; Mike Kern, design director; Thomas Cooke, producer; Jeremy Morrill/Ryan Potter/Paul Solomon, project design and development; Struck (Salt Lake City, UT), production company.

traffic. Instead, users must be pushed toward them. Whether they do this through blog postings or banners, smart advertisers have to continually devise new ways to draw in fickle consumers.

TEQUILA, which excels at online guerrilla marketing, uses many unorthodox methods to pump up traffic. To promote its Autoclaustrophobia campaign for the Nissan Versa, it placed an entry for the term on Wikipedia. This tactic raised both eyebrows and traffic numbers, especially since Wikipedia greatly increases search engine results rankings.

The firm used a more involved method to draw attention to its online campaign for the Shadow of the Colossus video game. It deployed a wide array of podcasts, blog postings and fictitious sites to create an online puzzle. Gamers became so intrigued that they collaborated in forums to "solve" the mystery.

Nevertheless, when you're trying to push people toward a site, nothing beats a banner. And luckily, they aren't what they used to be. Thanks to third-party vendors like PointRoll and Eyeblander, design firms can easily add video and interactivity to them. The goal is to make the ad entertaining.

Many banners are not intended to drive traffic so much as to provide a branded experience. A recent Goodby ad for Adobe (executed by Struck) offers a good example of one-stop online advertising. It features a man sitting at a desk. As people approach him looking for documents, users can spin them around, and in a way reminiscent of the old Asteroids video game, fire away at them. "It does a great job of getting across the idea that this is a way to send documents," says Driggs.

### The viral dilemma

Of course, most companies would prefer not to pay for banners. A good banner may ultimately only yield a half-percent click-through rate, and they can be quite costly. The answer to this problem? A viral campaign.

However, viral is a high-risk strategy. It can either drive lots of traffic, or none at all. And it often succeeds by being outrageous—an option not open to every brand. A recent Struck campaign for testicular cancer awareness features a video with a man dressed up like a giant, mile organ. He skates around an ice rink before being brutally checked off his feet by a hockey player. "Check Your Balls," the ad

advises. At once crude, unexpected and hilarious, the video has attracted lots of eyeballs for a small investment.

Unfortunately, success is never assured. Viral advertisers not only have to compete with other online campaigns, they must compete with everyone else on the Net. Companies like Struck usually put out a lot of possibilities at once, hoping one will stick. "Check Your Balls" was part of a video series it created for the client. The rest did not fare as well.

"Viral is impossible to guarantee," says Grais, "You're competing with sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll and cobras swallowing hippopotamuses. How can you rise above that?"

As a result, many advise safer forms of viral. R/GA took a popular approach with its Action Hero site for Verizon. It allowed users to upload a picture and, using 3-D technology, grafted it onto a superhero's body and made into a short film. Users could then send this video to their friends. Above all, it relied on R/GA'S technical prowess to create something so novel that users would be compelled to distribute it vitally.

Even so, high tech is not always necessary. Rethink's admirably low-brow Scream-O-Meter for Playland asked people to yell into their computers as loud as they could. The viral component? Everyone within shouting distance would want to know what was going on.

### The uncertain future

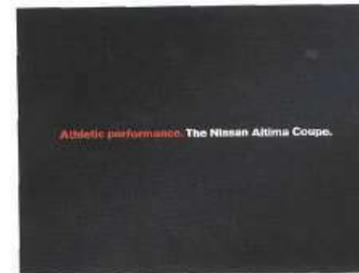
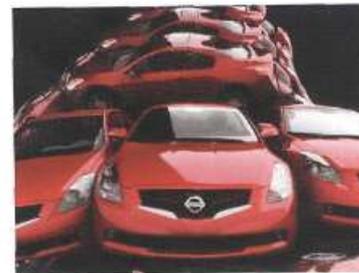
Whatever tactic used to drive and retain viewers, online advertising is obviously at an early stage. Successful campaigns can be high tech, low tech, as simple as a banner or as complex as TEQUILA'S Shadow of the Colossus. Not surprisingly, few of those interviewed for this article wanted to hazard a guess about where the industry is going.

"William Gibson once said that the future is already here, it's just unevenly distributed," says Grais. "We have the tools to create amazing new applications and new paradigms of communication, and they're evolving around a generation of users who've been raised in the online world." Then he pauses. "But we have to solve problems for clients."

As we said, some things in advertising never change. CA

Right: "Nike wanted to celebrate the iconic **Nike Dunk** shoe, commemorating the 4,000+ Dunks created in 23 years," said Diana Nasello, R/GA corporate communications manager. "The Nike Dunk Chronicles on NikeBeTrue.com begins with the Original 7 series and the Tokyo White Dunk. We collaborated with original Dunk artists to bring the shoes to life." David Hyung, art director; Grace Chia/Chadwick Shao, designers; Michael Reger, senior designer; Jim Therakalen, writer; Joseph Cartman, creative director; Noel Billig, technical creative director; Geoffrey Roth, Flash developer; Kumi Tominaga/Carrie Kengle/Aaron Ambrose, senior Flash developers; Alex Bentsen, QA engineer; Gabe Jaffe/Adrian Lai/Reshma Taufiq, producers.

"To connect with a younger audience, NikeWomen invited girls between the ages of 18 and 24 to compete for a dream job as the first-ever **Nike Field Reporter**," said Diana Nasello, R/GA corporate communications manager. "The chosen reporter was awarded a six-month Nike internship to interview top athletes at sporting events throughout the country. The exclusive interviews are posted at <http://reporter.nikewomen.com>." Mariana Bukvic/Virgilio Santos/Mehmet Irdel/Pablo Marques/Kim Granlund, visual designers; Fura Johannesdottir/Junu Yang, interactive designers; Tina Divino Morgan/Chad Lynch/Michael Spiegel/Colleen Harlan/Jim Hord, writers; Colin Nelson/Asako Kohno/Geoff Roth, Flash designers; Carol Jinhi Park/Kaitlin Yapchaian/Laura Crow, production; Sunny Nan, HTML; Michael Piccuiro, development; August Yang/Michele Roman, QA engineers.



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Left: Nissan Versa "**Pillbox**" rich-media interactive ad. Sean Ohlenkamp, art director; Maria Smith, writer; Ken Bones, designer; Justin Prough, creative director; Molly Park, producer; Derek Vandebosch, executive producer; TEQUILA\ (Los Angeles, CA), ad agency.

Nissan Versa "**Elbow Room**" interactive game (30K). Sean Ohlenkamp, art director; Maria Smith, writer; Brian Siu, senior designer; Justin Prough, creative director; Max Ellis, illustrator; Molly Park, producer; Derek Vandebosch, executive producer; TEQUILA\ (Los Angeles, CA), ad agency.

Nissan Altima Coupe "**Speed Sensitive Volume**" interactive ad (30K). Sean Ohlenkamp, art director; Maria Smith, writer; Erin Burrel, designer; Justin Prough, creative director; Kristin Ash/Molly Park, producers; Derek Vandebosch, executive producer; TEQUILA\ (Los Angeles, CA), ad agency.

Nissan Versa pre-roll.

"**Autoclaustrophobia**" :15

(Open on montage scenes in black-and-white: A woman sits behind the wheel of a small car, her head tilting to make room for her big hair. A large guy sobs as his wife tries to stuff him into her small car. A backseat passenger's knees get crushed by the seat in front of him. A squished driver hyperventilates into a paper bag. A miserable kid is wedged in a crowded backseat) Super: Never fear a small car again.

Title Card: Versa 36 mpg

Sean Ohlenkamp, art director; Maria Smith, writer; Justin Prough, creative director; Adam Forstadt/Matt Kalish, directors; TBWA\Chiat\Day Los Angeles (Los Angeles, CA), ad agency.

This page: Nissan Altima Coupe pre-roll.

"**Shoe**" :15

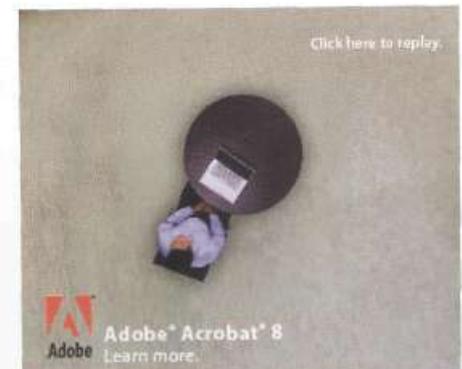
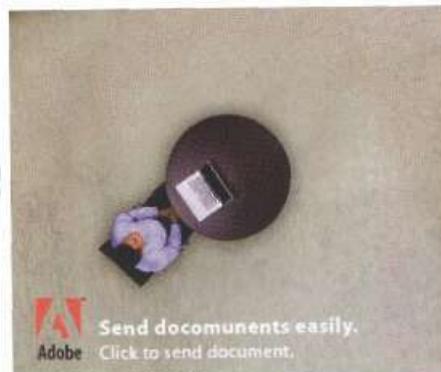
(A giant athletic shoe soars into frame. It lands and runs with its pair toward the camera. Cut to shoes made entirely out of cars)

Title Card: Athletic performance. The Nissan Altima Coupe.

(A single Altima Coupe power slides to a dramatic stop. End on a heroic rear shot of the vehicle)

Sean Ohlenkamp, art director; Maria Smith, writer; Curt Detweiler, creative director; 1st Avenue Machine, director; Carrie Schaar, producer; The Mill, London, 3-D animation company; TBWA\Chiat\Day Los Angeles (Los Angeles, CA), ad agency.

"Goodby tapped Struck to produce in-banner games to highlight **Adobe Acrobat 8** and the ease with which you can send documents. The game is set in an office with an overhead view of a desk. Office drones come at you and you have to spin and send documents at them Asteroids style. If you hit them they turn around. If not they keep coming and coming. The game communicates the ease of sending documents." Chris Valencius, art director; Francis Chung, writer; Will Hammond, creative director; Ryan Goodwin/Rich Silverstein, executive creative directors; Matt Sheridan, editor; Paul Solomon, director; Kelsie Van Deman, producer; Mike Geiger, executive producer; Struck (Salt Lake City, UT), production company; Corey Hankey, project design and development; Goodby, Silverstein & Partners, ad agency.



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This page: "Verizon wanted to increase awareness as a broadband and entertainment company. So we gave people control over a phenomenal resource: a computer that rendered customized CG movies and allowed users to cast themselves as the hero who saves the world," said Diana Nasello, R/GA corporate communications manager. "Users first uploaded a photo of themselves, which was then modeled in 3-D using computer graphics engines. Then they selected scenes, dialogue, music and film titles, pressed 'go' and their movie was created. Action Hero used a first-of-its kind movie customization engine that we developed." Seth Jablon, art director; Reed Loar, visual designer; Douglas Dauzier/Jay Zasa, creative directors; Chris Hinkle, associate technical creative director; Mark Voelpel, CG supervisor; Kirill Yeretsky, CG project leader; Andrew Robinson, associate creative director; Kajal Gala, associate interaction designer; Lina Fenequito, Flash developer; Russ Alderson, technology project leader; Roman Kalantari, senior software engineer/solutions architect; Cory Salary, QA engineer; Heather Martin, executive producer; Daissy Vicuna, senior producer; Peter Blitzer, line producer; Mitch Wenger, account supervisor; Richard Marks, group account director; Jason Tarantino, associate planning director.

Right: "At **Scream-0-Meter.com**, visitors were dared to scream as loud as they could at their computers," said co-creative director Ian Grais. "The meter would then judge how ready that person was for Playland, on a scale of one to ten. Discounted Playland tickets were available to anyone who could max out the meter." Mike Nowland, art director; Jason Perdue, writer; Chris Staples, co-creative director; CrashlMedia/Justintense Rich Media, programmers; Ryan Paton, producer; Rethink (Vancouver, Canada), ad agency.

"At **Solo Mobile's** microsite, keptalking.ca, viewers could watch and connect a sixteen-commercial campaign featuring spots linked by phone conversations. Easter eggs were hidden throughout the commercials. Viewers could win free airtime by answering questions about the spots. By putting together and calling a hidden phone number, sequence callers were entered to win a grand prize," said co-creative director Ian Grais. David de Haas/Rob Sweetman, art directors; Katie Ainsworth/Jono Holmes, writers; Mike Nowland, designer; Chris Staples, co-creative director; David Wellington, director; David Perrault, video director; GGRP, sound design; Laura Rioux/Ann Rubenstein, producers; JMB Post Production/Steam Films, production companies; Burnkit, Web developer; Rethink (Vancouver, Canada), ad agency.

