

Lessons from the Facebook, Adblock Plus wars

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The recent war ignited between Facebook and Adblock Plus has once again thrown sharp relief on how the digital industry needs to employ a little soul searching when it comes to strategy and delivery.

Described by some as an 'arms race' and even as a game of Whack-a-Mole for the ad industry, the back and forth between the coders at Facebook and Adblock Plus has given the ad industry, and the digital marketing industry as a whole, pause for thought.

Andrew Bosworth, VP of Ads & Business Platform at the social media giant highlighted that Facebook is aiming to give users more control over the ads they are served on the site. Users will be able to specify which type of ads they do not want to be seen by removing specific interests from their ad preferences.

Some of the older internet users may still remember the days when we saw one or two ads per page. Today we are swamped with ads which are not only intrusive, but are loaded with tracking scripts, quietly gathering data on every aspect of our online behaviour.



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It could be argued that the blame for this lies with the publishers looking to load as much inventory as possible onto their pages. However, the digital ad industry is not without sin, producing ads which are overtly interruptive and packed with features which result in glacial page load times.

Not only can some ads be intrusive, they can sometimes be downright offensive to some. In response to this, the usage of ad blockers is on the rise.

According to a [report](#) from Adobe and PageFair, \$21.8bn in global ad revenue was blocked in 2015 and the number was expected to grow past the \$20bn mark in 2016, in the US alone.

Time to panic?

One thing we have found is that users, advertisers and publishers all have different views about how ads should be served up, and each have valid points. Our current situation is less about who is to blame and more about how we can work around the challenges to find a common solution. One thing we are certain about though, is that the current arms race between

Facebook and Adblock Plus is not sustainable.

To better understand the threat we need to examine who is using ad blocking software and why.

A most [useful study](#) was conducted recently by Ipsos in UK. It found that 18 percent of those surveyed claim to use ad blockers, and of those currently not using ad-blocking software, 58 percent state they are unlikely to do so in the next 12 months.

While this may give some comfort to the ad and publishing industries, looking at the reason why people choose to use ad blocker technology should not be ignored.

The report cites the main reasons for using ad blockers include avoiding disruptive ads (69%), ads that slow down their browsing experience (58%) and security/malware risks (56%).

A solution which works for everyone

We know that the local digital landscape differs from that of the US and UK. To begin, we are far less reliant on desktop and the lion's share of websites are accessed over mobile.

While Apple and Samsung came out last year saying they would allow ad blocking apps on their phones and tablets, installing and enabling it is not an obvious and simple thing to do.

So while we may not face the same threat as our EU and US counterparts, what the lessons from international markets do mean, is that we must take stock of the ads we are creating and how we are making use of them.

In short, we need better ads that are more relevant and less intrusive to the browsing experience.

The ad blocker wars should be pushing the industry away from buying Taboola and Outbrain type ads. These click-bait ads are one of the top reasons for people installing ad blocker software in the first place. Native advertising has far more chance of being relevant and useful.

We should also remember that people don't mind reading sponsored content, so long as they know it's sponsored. A good example of this is a leading car magazine that sometimes runs four-page advertorials – but importantly, these are relevant and informative. Similarly, if I have just bought a new phone, I will happily click on an ad from the vendor that will give me details on how to prolong my battery life.

From a technical point of view, we should improve our targeting. Let's improve the user experience, let's frequently cap so we don't bombard the user with the same ad all the time, even after they have bought the product. Agencies should also know the difference between post impression tracking and post click attribution and apply industry standards.

There is no getting away from ad blocking. At the moment ad blocker software is the blunt instrument employed by people who are fundamentally fed up with intrusive, irrelevant ads, which do nothing more than annoy.

A true solution to the ad blocker challenge is for the ad industry, the publishers and the tech companies to come together and find ways to help deliver what the user wants – rather than the current race to the bottom. More particularly, CMOs need to lead the charge in understanding the challenge and raising the bar of what's expected from their agencies.

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