MAKING DIGITAL COUNT

VivaKi execs discuss viewability and why the industry needs to work together on a standard

When marketers invest in digital advertising, they expect their messaging to actually be seen by consumers. But despite an estimated $118 billion spent on digital advertising globally in 2013, 54% of display ads were not viewable, according to comScore, while Vindico says its data show that 57% of digital video ads were not viewable.

As the industry grapples with how to make digital ads more viewable, publishers are feeling the squeeze. Viewability metrics are affecting pricing. Inventory sources are more scrutinized than ever, and buyers are having to convince their clients that achieving the specified CPM means that some inventory falls well below the fold or in questionable environments.

A great deal of education and legwork need to be done before the industry gets to a place where the digital ecosystem is dictated by quality control and transparency. Right now no one is policing practices and processes, but many organizations are working to build the infrastructure and best practices that will guide this industry into the future—one where wasted ad impressions and fraudulent players no longer have a place: VivaKi, Publicis Groupe’s ad tech solutions provider, has been a leading voice in helping agencies and clients understand and utilize viewability standards.

Four VivaKi experts recently talked with writer Julie Liesse about the company’s commitment to the industry’s viewability efforts:

Frank Voris, CEO
Natalie DiBerto, VP, AOD Video
Phil Shih, VP, audience media strategy
Cheryl Stump, director, AOD Video

Ad Age: How do you define viewability, especially for someone who is new to the subject?

Frank Voris: Viewability is an essential building block for successful digital advertising. It’s much deeper than simple screen placement so a consumer can see an ad. It is an opportunity for a marketer to have a brand-safe interaction with the consumer that is relevant and adds meaning or value to their day.

We also have to keep in mind that viewability means different things across channels. For example, video is a huge opportunity right now. Current standards are being tested and reviewed, and there will be a lot of opportunity for this channel once the industry can decide what viewability means for video.

Phil Shih: At VivaKi we define viewability as another measurement or a signal that’s available to digitally reflect the propensity for an ad to be actually viewed by a human being. There are a couple of key points surrounding that definition. It comes down to a lot of translating when an ad is typically delivered and when it’s counted as an impression.

Ad Age: Marketers are accustomed to buying ads and assuming they are going to be seen, or at least properly published. When you talk about “propensity for an ad to be actually viewed by a human,” it sounds alarming.

Mr. Voris: You’re absolutely right. The number of questionable inventory sources, placements and practices out there is alarming. This is a challenge that plagues our industry, and it involves the entire ecosystem. No one can conquer this alone, which is why we are joining forces with our partners to understand how we can make greater viewability a reality by scaling a common set of standards and metrics.

Mr. Shih: What we’ve found on the VivaKi side—and what I think a lot of marketers and folks on both the publisher or sell side and the buy side have seen—is there are a lot of tricks that can be put in place for monetization and for delivery of ads. A lot of that has to do with how measurement historically has been viewed from a digital standpoint, which is oftentimes looking at a last-click or last-view attribution model.

The discussion about viewability brings up this newer signal that allows folks on both the buy side and sell side to ask, “What do I want to do with the impressions that have a lower propensity to be viewed?” As an example, on certain websites the user may scroll down or scroll past certain advertisements or, by contrast, never scroll down to the bottom of a page. That advertisement still may be delivered, and counted as an impression and charged to the marketer—and the publisher may monetize off of that. But it may not have had a high propensity for an actual user to see the ad.

Ad Age: What is the industry doing to stop the fraudulent players and inefficient media buys/placements?

Mr. Voris: Currently, there is no central force guiding policies and best practices across digital advertising, but the Internet Advertising Bureau and Media Rating Council have been very involved in developing viewable standards and metrics. There are also several players working in tandem to support their efforts and help make their ultimate decisions scale.

At VivaKi, we have collaborated with a number of these partners to aid in the overall efforts as well as build out a proprietary set of checks and balances to ensure that buys placed through our Audience On Demand, or AOD, platform are viewable and appear within brand-safe destinations.

Ad Age: Part of viewability is location. Do you automatically assume better, higher viewability for ads that are placed near the top of a page or the beginning of content?

Mr. Shih: That’s a generally fair statement, but it gets more complicated than that. Certainly, for example, a blog may be designed for a reader to continue to scroll down through that blog page, and there may be ads in the middle or at the bottom of the page—and sometimes those ads are less likely to be viewable.

But, for example, some sports websites may have an ad at the top of the page as a leaderboard. Just based on how the content of that website is delivered for the attention of the consumer, the consumer may very well scroll past that top leaderboard—and that also may be an example of an ad that has a lower propensity to be viewed. So it’s not always driven by ad placement. It’s really based
on where the content is and how the ads are placed surrounding that content and that user experience.

Ad Age: At this point, is viewability on clients’ radars? And given where we stand right now, is it a good time for them to embrace viewability as a metric?

Mr. Voris: I would also add that, overall, there is a huge measurement problem in the industry that prevents true client understanding of the importance of viewability. It’s a basic math formula: Clients have a specific CPM in mind and publishers help them deliver on those impressions, but what the client doesn’t realize is that many of those “impressions” could be nonviewable ads. However, because they meet their desired CPM number, they think they’ve achieved their goals.

This is one place I think our industry can help educate marketers. We need to help them understand that viewable impressions will cost more and that the benefits of paying upfront will far outweigh the risk of buying wasted impressions. The important thing to note is that the impressions may be lower in this scenario but the likelihood that your ad is viewed is strong, and that can only help brand awareness in the long run.

Ad Age: Can you elaborate on the issues in making viewability a usable metric for advertisers and agencies in the digital space?

Mr. Shih: At a high level, we find that there’s just a lot of confusion in the marketplace. Viewability is being utilized oftentimes to talk about ad fraud. Viewability is also being used to help signal other ways of viewing digital brand effectiveness for attitudinal measures. And viewability is being thought of from a black-and-white standpoint that does not really highlight the complexity that comes with delivering ads to all different types of devices—desktop, mobile devices, video formats. Some viewability issues are simply limitations from a technology standpoint or limitations from a business standpoint.

Ms. Stump: For video ads, step one is to establish a standard. Display advertising has a viewability standard: 50% of the ad in view for one second. It’s pretty much agreed upon across the marketplace that video should not necessarily adopt the same standard because it is a totally different medium. The conversation is now being driven by publishers wanting to make sure that they’re not being too limited on what can be counted as a viewable impression.

We’re hopefully within a couple of months of the standard being established by the IAB and MRC. It looks like the standard will be set at 50% of the ad viewable for two seconds.

Ad Age: Beyond the 50% for one-second standard for display and the soon-to-be-determined video viewability standard, are there any other variables to consider in delivering true viewability?

Ms. DiBerto: Variables that need to be taken into consideration include fraud and content quality. An impression might be viewable, but it could also be with 10 other stack ads that are all above the fold and next to little or no content, so the likelihood is slim that anyone is going to view it within one second.

The bigger issue is in programmatic media and making viewability actionable—specifically, when we’re “transacting” in real time. Currently we don’t have the capability to make yes-or-no decisions in real time based on where an ad is on a page and bid for an impression on whether it’s viewable or not. We’re not able to buy in real time against a viewability metric when we need to transact in milliseconds, but the IAB standard is that an ad is viewable when it is 50% in view for one second. The current “pre-bid” solutions in the marketplace use cached data or allow you to bid on sites that have a high probability to be viewable.

Mr. Shih: I think what IAB and the MRC are proposing—one of an ad viewable for a second—is just the initial benchmark. Really what we’re talking about are the more advanced phases of viewability in terms of other KPIs, or goals or objectives for a client’s overall marketing program. That’s going to be determined on a case-by-case basis for each marketer.

Ad Age: What is VivaKi’s vision of the best use of the viewability metric?

Mr. Voris: Ultimate viewability is going to be an aggregation of multiple metrics, and we are currently vetting the most meaningful and accurate so that we can create a single measurement tool. Our goal is to create a quality index in partnership with our various partners, as well as organizations like the IAB and MRC, which are helping to establish common standards and practices for the entire industry.

One of the biggest goals we are pursuing is to identify the value of viewable ads by revising the existing “cost per” rates and replacing them with cost-per-viewable rates. At the end of the day, we believe that better viewability metrics, standards and rates will increase the ability for advertisers to reach people in ways that are relevant and meaningful, while also cutting down on wasted impressions, overinflated ad dollars and massive amounts of fraud happening on the Web today.

Ad Age: There has been some controversy about the viewability standards and the possible impact on publishers, which obviously have a business to protect. Are publishers going to end up with the short end of the stick in all of this?

Mr. Shih: Many of the publishers we work with are as eager to solve this as we are. They know that building meaningful connections between people and brands is the ultimate goal. But the question speaks to the need for multiple partners to focus on this solution. Certainly some publishers may find that they may not score as high in terms of the propensity for the ad to be viewable. But there also will be publishers that are going to have their ads show up with a higher propensity to be viewable, and in that case it’s possible that those publishers will be able to increase the price point that they currently have.

Ad Age: Why is VivaKi so passionate about and invested in the topic of viewability?

Mr. Voris: VivaKi is in business to give Publicis Groupe clients the best performance and to help safeguard their assets. Quality is core to our mission. We are passionate about viewability because an ad served that is not viewed is an inefficient use of our clients’ resources.

Our industry is based on trust, and we act as agents on behalf of our client. If we are placing ads that no one can see, what are we doing? This is the reason we launched VivaKi and IACO, and have implemented a rigorous vetting process, VivaKi Verify. It is also why we are moving toward a more robust set of metrics that will help gauge viewability for our clients moving forward.

We know that in the future, viewable premium inventory will demand a higher CPM than unviewed impressions; but it’s worth it for the sake of growing your brand. After all, you pay for what you get.

“...The number of questionable inventory sources, placements and practices out there is alarming. This is a challenge that plagues our industry, and it involves the entire ecosystem. No one can conquer this alone, which is why we are joining forces with our partners....”

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VivaKi is dedicated to solving the issues surrounding viewability so it can provide actionable data on digital ad buying for both its clients and the industry. To do that, it is coordinating its efforts to adhere to the standards and practices set forth by the Internet Advertising Bureau and Media Rating Council. It is also collaborating with partners throughout the digital space to cover all aspects of the problems that exist. Each company was selected because, like VivaKi, it has made viewability a priority.

Here, the Media Rating Council and four VivaKi partners—comScore, Google, Integral Ad Science and Vindico—discuss key issues and challenges in the viewability arena.

Media Rating Council: Closing the ‘trust gap’

For three years, George Ivie has been immersed in viewability. Mr. Ivie and the Media Rating Council he leads were approached by individual technology companies and then tasked by the Making Measurement Make Sense coalition to develop viewability standards for the ad industry.

“The intent has been to make digital advertising more efficient and friendlier for brand marketers and eliminate the trust gap,” says Mr. Ivie, the MRC’s CEO. “The first priority was to move the industry from measuring not merely when an ad is served but when it is viewable.” Viewability would put digital advertising on par with traditional media such as TV and print by allowing advertisers to buy and pay only for digital ads that had the opportunity to be seen by a consumer.

After studying literally billions of impressions, thousands of websites and current brain research, the MRC this month is wrapping up its work by releasing standards for display and video ads. To be counted as a viewable ad, 50% of a display ad has to be seen for one second. For digital video ads, the standard is 50% viewable for two seconds.

Why 50%? “We set the lowest level where it was likely the whole ad would become viewable,” Mr. Ivie says. Why one second for display ads? “It’s tied to human cognition,” he says. “If you are on a Web page and a display ad comes up, research shows that you are going to make a decision about what to do—ignoring the ad, clicking on it, leaving the page—in less than a second.”

Setting a viewability standard for video ads has proved more complicated because of the longer delivery time, a lack of research about how people interact with video and less consensus within the industry. But the MRC’s research led it to the conclusion that around two or three seconds was the point at which the viewer began to take action on a video ad.

When the MRC releases the standards later this month, Mr. Ivie says, “we are poised to tell the industry that the transactions are there and most can be measured.” He says the industry largely is ready to buy and sell digital display advertising using the 50%/one second viewability standard, and that video transactions are commonly ready to buy and sell digital display advertising using the 50%/one second viewability standard, and that video transactions are common as the fourth quarter approaches, when marketers are hungry for viewability. And in the long run, bringing more brand advertisers to digital media is a bigger plus than maintaining the status quo.”

Up next on the MRC’s to-do list are several possible additional digital measurement standards, including taking its work on viewability and applying it to mobile ads. But mobile delivery adds another level of complexity to the definition of what’s viewable.

All of this work is designed, he says, “to provide assurance and trust to the people who use digital advertising. These standards will bring an enhanced level of accuracy to the value of digital advertising to brand marketers.”

comScore: Working with publishers

With the ad industry finally on the verge of concrete viewability guidelines, many are asking what’s next. How do agencies and advertisers incorporate viewability into their deals with publishers?

VivaKi has been working with comScore to make viewability a reality in a pioneering partnership that uncovers the best data on viewable display advertising, delivered pre-bid for programmatic buying. To get that best data, says Anne Hunter, comScore’s senior VP-global marketing strategy, “systems need to work together. We have taken our system for validating viewability [comScore’s validated Campaign Essentials program] and hooked it up to VivaKi’s systems.”

The result, Ms. Hunter says, is that “we are giving VivaKi very granular data about the effectiveness of specific ad inventory that they can access through AOD”—Audience On Demand, VivaKi’s addressable media-buying platform to target digital advertising. This allows VivaKi to make buys based on the best information out there, down to the individual URL and individual ad being delivered, to capture viewability information. And the data is coming in so they can assess it pre-buy.

comScore is working to help both brand teams and online publishers navigate toward viewability metrics. “When agencies are buying viewability, and clients are only paying for that, there need to be well-defined expectations on both sides because it’s such a new metric,” Ms. Hunter says. “There need to be conversations between buyers and sellers, and an understanding [of] where the technology works and where it doesn’t—and what to do when it doesn’t.”

To help people get started using viewability metrics, comScore produced best practices booklets—one for buyers and one for sellers—with checklists and benchmarks. After comScore started giving the booklets to clients in November, the word got out; comScore now has put copies of the best practices booklets in the hands of 150 different companies.

“Advertising agencies, media agencies, tech companies and publishers all need to ensure they have a couple of people in-house who understand the standards and the technology, and that they have a standard process for discussing viewability,” Ms. Hunter says.
Google: Developing the right tools

Depending on whose data is used, almost 50% of digital display ads today are not viewable. “With numbers like that, nothing else matters to brand advertisers,” says Jason Miller, Google’s director of brand metrics. “As an industry, we must address this issue and make sure brands can answer the question ‘Was my ad seen?’”

Google believes that part of the solution to the industry’s viewability issues are tools that not only measure viewability, but also provide a method for advertisers to target and pay only for viewable impressions.

Google’s Active View is a start in that direction. Active View offers an integrated and actionable way to measure if an ad was viewable by detecting the position of the ad relative to the browser window. It offers a common measurement for buyers and sellers of ads, and allows advertisers to look at their ads across platforms.

Says Mr. Miller: “Measurement alone does not make viewable impressions a currency. To become a currency, we need to develop technology that allows advertisers and publishers to not only measure, but also transact [using] viewable impressions. That’s why we’re investing heavily to build tools to allow both sides to value, buy, sell, serve and optimize to viewable impressions.”

In December, Google began offering advertisers the option to target and buy only viewable impressions across the Google Display Network. Since then, Mr. Miller says, the company has seen “thousands of brands” buying viewable impressions across more than 100,000 publisher sites. Google is working to offer viewability-targeted buys in its other display advertising this year. “We predict that 2014 will be the year in which viewability will become a standard that buyers and sellers transact on,” Mr. Miller says.

“VivaKi has been an important partner over the past year as we’ve been testing our Active View product and looking to bring it to market,” he says. “Their feedback has helped shape the way we think about viewability and its importance in the ecosystem.”

Mr. Miller says Google believes that when more advertisers and agencies use viewability metrics in ad buys, the demand for viewable—aka higher-quality—sites will inevitably increase and, in turn, increase publishers’ interest in competing for those dollars by addressing viewability issues on their own sites.

Integral: Tackling low viewability

Scott Knoll puts it bluntly. “At the end of the day, if your ad is not seen, it will have no impact.”

That sounds obvious—but Mr. Knoll, CEO of Integral Ad Science, says it’s shocking how much money is being spent on digital advertising that does not have a chance to be seen by consumers.

For the first half of 2013, Integral reported that only 44% of ads across digital channels met the proposed industry standard for a “viewable” ad. The standard calls for 50% of the ad in view for one second or more.

Mr. Knoll says a big part of the problem is that the industry is buying and evaluating digital advertising using standards that were developed a decade ago—things such as click-through rates, number of ads served and other direct response-driven metrics that allow people to “game” the system but don’t focus on brand-building results, including basic viewability. The good news, he says, is that the industry “has woken up to this, and it’s forced us to re-evaluate how we are measuring success and making sure we are creating the right atmosphere.”

He says low viewability is a “symptom of other problems” with many digital ad placements: the structure of the page, the presence of too many ads or content that’s not interesting.

Integral is working to help clients avoid low-viewability ads through its TRAQ Score, a measure of overall quality, available pre-buy. The Integral system “looks at every ad on every page and measures the probability that the next time the ad is delivered it will be viewable,” Mr. Knoll says. “We then rank all inventory by viewability so that buyers can see how each ad compares to another. They can turn up the viewability depending on their goals.”

VivaKi works with Integral to target viewable ad buys for its clients. “Through our partnership, VivaKi proactively targets ads that are in view and fraud-free. Since programmatic buying can only target based on the probability that an ad will be in view, by partnering with us VivaKi has access to the most robust dynamic database for its targeting,” Mr. Knoll says. Integral’s database views more than 2 billion impressions daily and is constantly updated.

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