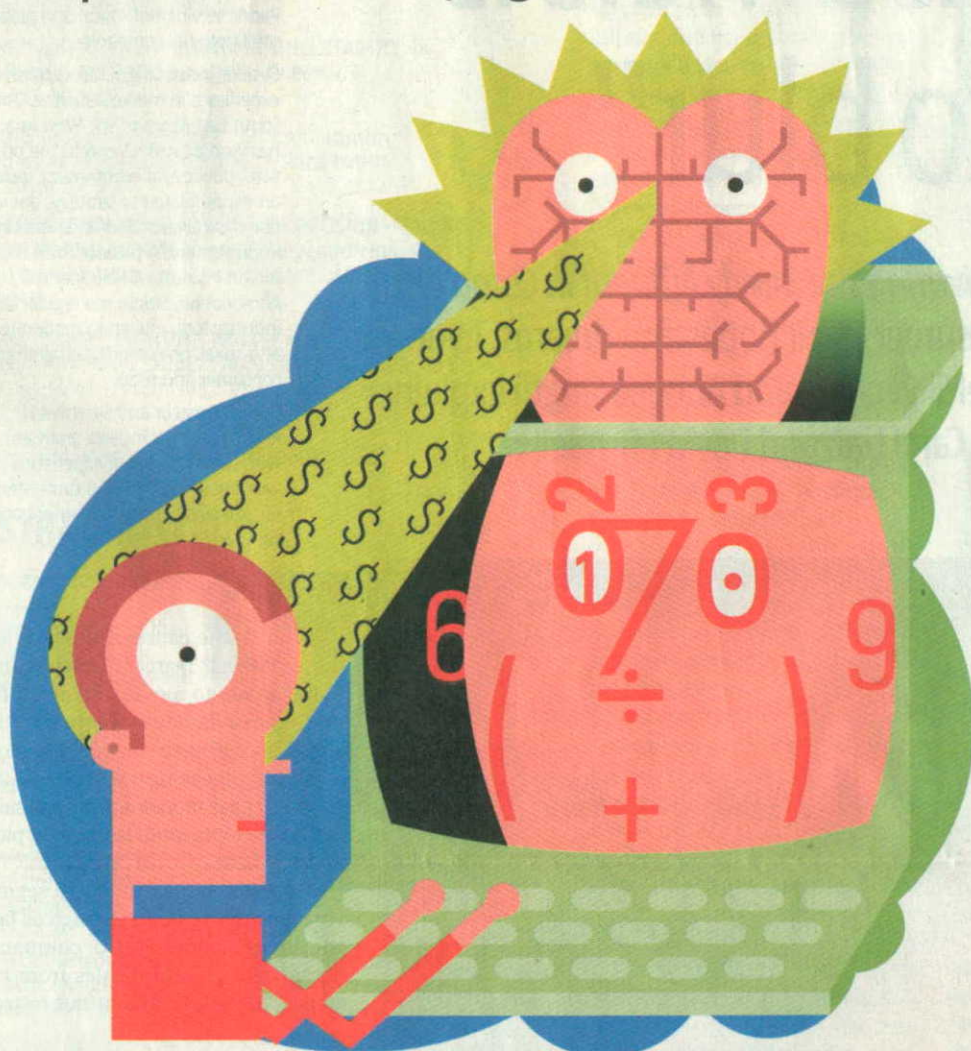


GUEST COLUMN

What ails online advertising

While the internet has levelled the sales playing field, the manner in which advertisers approach the platform is flawed, argues the author



From the look of it, the age of the internet is finally upon us in India albeit a full dozen years later than the evangelists would have liked to see it. Then, as they say, better late than never.

Coming as it does now, it is perhaps appropriate for marketers, who have so far been bystanders, to change their perspective and view the internet as a channel to profit by. The early evangelists of internet painted it as a medium, albeit an interactive one. The internet was firmly positioned as an addition to the existing platforms of advertising opportunities, namely, print, radio, television, outdoor etc.

The internet has evolved in many ways ever since — engines have morphed from being aids to searching needles in haystacks to advertising platforms, the website is merely one more means of content delivery, a telephone is no longer a necessary condition to access the internet. With all these in hindsight, labelling the internet an 'interactive medium' was perhaps a mistake.

It is that mistake, which is continuing to impact the use of the internet by most mainstream marketers, who, for most part, leave their internet initiatives to their media buying agencies. These professionals, used as they are to buying GRPs and measuring impact in terms of deliveries, are woefully under-prepared to make the optimum use of the internet as a channel and end up with a cookie-cutter selection of a micro-site, the off-line advertising converted to a banner, and if pushed, some paid search as the 'interactive' or 'digital' part of their media plans and buys.

In the process, they are likely missing out building their brands with key demographic groups that would be the consumers of tomorrow.

Impressions vs interactions

Firstly, the *sine qua non* of the internet is interactivity. Thus, the metric that should determine activity on the internet is interactions and not impressions.

Yet, it is the latter that is the basis for taking and evaluating most media decisions. Consequently, not only are marketers losing opportunities to engage with their audiences, they are also losing money by buying impressions that fail to generate interactions. Data shows that such losses can be as high as 90 per cent.

Of course, given the relatively low unit cost of internet advertising, such losses may be marginal. However, while the rupee value of the loss may be marginal, the dent it creates in consumer value could be enormous.

So, what is this Holy Grail called interactions? After all, consumers are not



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going to buy detergent powder on the internet. Very true, but interactions do not necessarily mean online purchases. Interactions can take many forms — viewing videos, sharing web pages, downloading wallpapers or anything else that one can think of. What is critical, however, is that the interaction should be relevant to the campaign and the audience. After all, even in the virtual world, David Ogilvy's dictum of the consumer not being morons holds good. Of course, if an interaction can be linked to a sale or usage, it would be even better.

Measuring Rol and not deliveries

The corollary of interactions is that these need to be measured. Measurements are made of click-through-rates, impressions, conversions et al. While these metrics are good, these, at best, are the necessary minimum. In the internet environment, the logical end of any measurement is whether the interaction that was planned for occurred and, more importantly, did such an interaction lead to the desired impact. The fact is that a well-crafted campaign with defined goals can go up to this level.

However, as long as the use of digital channels is merely to tick off a box, the degree of detailing required to measure the impact would be rarely implemented — feeding, in turn, the self-fulfilling myth that the internet is not an appropriate medium for brand marketers.

The formula of a microsite + banners + paid search (optional) may have been good for a different era of the internet. Today, the internet is no longer just a website; it is far beyond that... social media networks, comparison sites, apps, devices etc, and the list is only growing and not contracting. In this environment, restricting a brand campaign to

formulaic set of solutions is a sign of being behind times.

Such formulaic solutions are a minor aside compared to the biggest crime brand marketers commit when it comes to using the Internet; not even participating in organic search.

Organic search is the defining feature of the internet. Yet, brand marketers launch big budget campaigns, including presence on internet media titles, and yet don't think of integrating their campaigns in organic search.

For example, a search on Google for a recent promotion by a movie mega star, shows listing for many sites reporting on the promotion on the first page of the search results, but none for the contest site itself. Given that the brand spent enormous sums of money in promoting the contest and that the contest entry is internet-based, it seems an awful waste of money not to be using the search engine more effectively, possibly the single largest driver of traffic to a website.

Such ignorance is criminal since research shows that the conversion rates from organic search is higher by several orders of magnitude compared to visits from other sources, including direct visits. And, of course, search engines are the single largest contributor of visits to web sites.

In the event, not enlisting organic search shows a complete lack of understanding of the nuances of marketing on the internet.

Needed: a different pair of glasses

Marketers could have excused themselves for having seen the internet through the filter of 'media'

and left internet decisions to media planners and buyers so far.

Continuing to do so would yield them the same benefits as it would an ostrich with its head stuck in the sand. Forewarned, as they say, is forearmed.

For example, search volumes for a recent campaign promoted by the aforementioned mega star, were as follows:

Search volume for 'Super Star Name + Brand X': 22.

Search volume for 'Brand X's campaign tag line': 0.

Answers to the two questions will clearly show if the campaign was indeed successful. You know who benefitted more from the campaign and who spent more on the campaign. The irony of the situation was that the campaign sought participation of viewers by logging on to Brand X's Facebook page. 🐘

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