

A photograph of three men in a modern office environment. They are gathered around a table, looking at a large document or presentation. The man on the left is wearing a plaid shirt and has a beard. The man in the middle is wearing a dark cardigan over a light shirt. The man on the right is wearing a blue t-shirt and has a watch on his wrist. The office has large windows and exposed ceiling pipes, creating a bright and professional atmosphere.

Inside Google Marketing: Banner Ads Can Be Creative and Effective

Written by
Bob Arnold

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Banner ads get a bad rap, says Google Media Lab's Bob Arnold. To help clear their name, he shares a few insights on how smart creative strategies can improve banner efficiency and performance, using recent creative work from Google as examples.

think with **Google**

Banner ads have been around since 1994, almost as long as the consumer internet. But let's face it, we've been there and done that. So marketers today often brush them aside in favor of buzzy formats like native and in-app mobile ads.

Here's the thing, though: At Google Media Lab (the in-house team responsible for planning, buying, and placing media for Google), we've actually found that cross-screen banner ads can drive brand lift. When we looked at the results of our U.S. campaigns for 2014, we saw that banners—not video or more complex display formats—accounted for 82% of the unique reach of our tier one campaigns (those with large investments).

So, why the bad rap? As with any marketing campaign, the success of a banner campaign comes down to creative quality. The best banner ads are eye-catching, timely, and personalized. And the key to improving our own banner success rate is the oft-overlooked art of creative testing. Here, I'll share more of what we've learned about banner campaigns at Google, including the key creative principles behind our successful display campaigns and the benefits of dynamic creative.

Three principles for creating successful banner ads

I've got some empathy for folks who think banner ads are boring. If you're looking to tell a complicated story full of emotion and hoping to elicit a reaction, it can be difficult to pull off with a banner. And consumers don't go online to watch banner ads; they go online to chat with friends, read the news, watch videos, and play games. Unlike TV advertising, digital display advertising isn't generally interruptive, so digital marketers might feel like they have the deck stacked against them when it comes to attracting people's attention.

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Does this mean banner ads can't drive brand objectives—or, for that matter, sales? Quite the opposite. In fact, we've found they can lift awareness and rev up intention. In the second half of 2014, for example, the banner creative for our Android Wear campaign increased brand recall and intent by 15.8% and 9.4%, respectively.¹ We also see display as a great means to build “frequency,” or how much the consumer sees the ad. Banner ads are relatively cheap to produce and highly targetable. They can be effective when you have the proper objective and utilize the format in the right way.

Here are three principles that guide my team when we create banner ads, along with examples of each:

1. Be compelling. Banner ads have to be eye-catching enough to attract attention. Only then does your marketing message have the opportunity to break through. Things like animation, the use of faces, brand colors, and clear text help banner ads stand out.

2. Be concise. At any given moment, someone might see a banner ad and only pay attention to it for a moment. In that moment, be concise to make sure your message sticks.

3. Be clear. Banner ads tend to be relatively small, so you don't always have a lot of space to work with. Don't try to say too much; the ad may just end up looking cluttered. Instead, clearly communicate a single marketing message about a single product. The need for clarity goes for call-to-actions, too.

Compelling, Concise and Clear: The Principles at Work



Be Compelling

- 1 A clear shot of the product featured
- 2 Dynamic animation to catch the user's attention.
- 3 Unified copy and title placement, in proximity to the CTA (if used).



Be Concise

- 4 Visible brand hierarchies.
- 5 Convey key points and features using consumer language.



Be Clear

- 6 Each frame should be able to stand on its own with branding, product shot, and marketing.
- 7 Consistent primary brand placement (top works best).
- 8 Consistency for roll-out across all ad unit sizes.

The principles for creating banner ads

Media channels aren't one-size-fits-all. Video is great for telling complex or emotional stories, making it perfect for certain types of brand building, while display is more of a workhorse. Our goal is to create clear, concise messaging for each channel we use. Take mobile: Here it's about building ads for contextual [moments](#) that are often driven by location ([I-want-to-go moments](#), for example). The point is: Don't try to do too much; capitalize on the strengths of each channel to tell a comprehensive story.

The benefits of dynamic creative

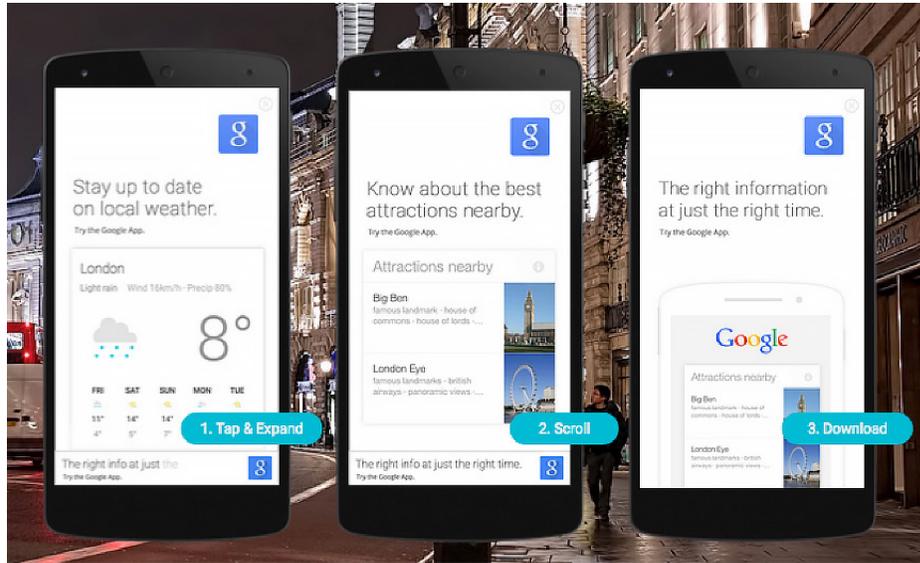
Technology helps us deliver unique ad experiences to our audiences. By using [dynamic creative](#), we're able to create more intelligent and compelling work. The result? Banner campaigns that not only generate excitement and passion among creative folks but consumers as well.

A primary benefit of digital—and programmatic (the focus of the [first piece in our "Inside Google Marketing" series](#)), specifically—is the ability to do one-to-one marketing. You've already reached a highly specific audience through your programmatic buy; dynamic creative allows you to pull the audience insights from your media buy into your creative strategy, so your message is just as targeted as your placements.

Efficiency is another benefit. Creative agencies that use dynamic creative to populate their ad units can quickly swap in new assets without having to re-traffic entire campaigns. We do this with our Google Play campaign to promote key content on the platform, such as weekly movie or music releases, quickly. By reducing the creative workload as well as the heavy lifting from trafficking, we expect to see significant gains in efficiency for our future campaign-setup process.

Dynamic creative can also play a crucial role in a mobile strategy. Last year, we launched a dynamic mobile ad unit dubbed the Magic Banner. The ad contained 23 pieces of dynamic content drawn from five different APIs, so over 95% of the ad was dynamic. We're taking things a step further in version 2.0. We want to convey the power of Search in a way that's interesting, relevant, and hopefully, a value-add to mobile users. To do that, we're using search insights and leveraging contextual signals (time of day, weather, and location, for example) to give the audience the right information at the right time.

Magic Banner 2.0's Dynamic Creative



Weather information in the Google Search OneBox is provided by The Weather Channel.

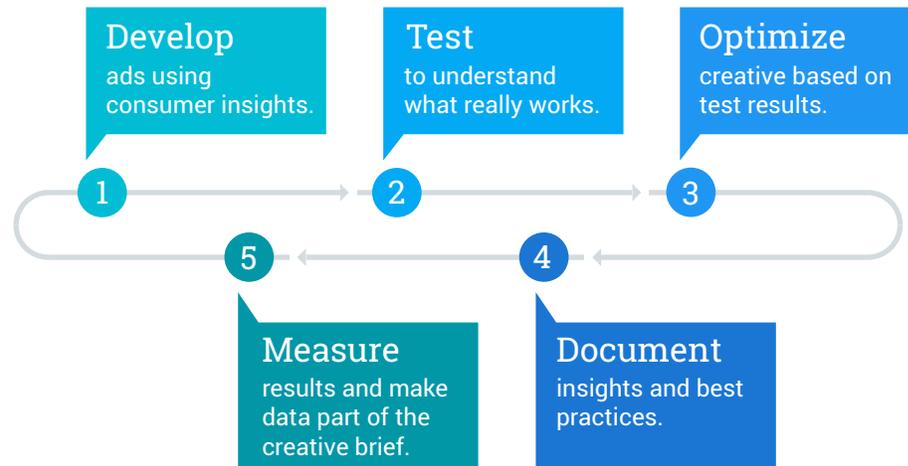
Use creative testing to optimize banner effectiveness

The three principles I mentioned earlier are great in theory, but they can be interpreted and applied in any number of ways. So how do you know if you're making the most of your banner campaign? When you see your digital-campaign results, how do you know if your creative is driving performance (or the lack thereof) or the media is? The answer is to systemize the process with creative testing. Then, you can develop creative best practices using the results.

Unlike in-market testing, where both creative and placement are variables, creative testing only analyzes the creative, keeping placements constant. We look for lifts in *both* brand recall and intent to measure the impact of the creative. If the ad creative fails, we go back to the drawing board. As consumers spend more time online, budgets are following them, so

why not crunch as much data as you can before spending significant resources on online media?

Creative Testing Helps Build a Culture of Continuous Improvement



Steps for the creative testing of banner ads

Smart creative testing helps legitimize digital as a marketing vehicle. And marketers will gravitate to channels and tactics that deliver [measurable results](#). Creative testing also provides them with a benchmark for success.

Without testing, creative quality turns into a subjective—or even a philosophical—debate. Data can streamline the dialogue. Since creative testing isolates creative quality, it's possible to extrapolate which tactics work to formulate a set of best practices. These tests are also relatively cheap (usually less than \$15K). That's just a sliver of a media spend that can add up to hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars.

Given the insights above, the importance of banners shouldn't be underestimated. Strengthening the creative quality of digital display campaigns requires some work and investment, but good creative and proper testing can yield dramatic results.



Bob Arnold

North America, Digital Media & Strategy Lead, Google

Sources

- 1 Google Data, Q3 and Q4 2014, United States and United Kingdom.