Inside Google marketing: How we use contextual signals to break through with mobile users

Author
Arjan Dijk, Tommy Wiles

W hen we reach someone on mobile, we know a lot about what they're currently doing. There are loads of contextual signals, like time and location, that allow us to personalize our messages and connect with people.

And we know that when we get mobile advertising right, we get big returns from that investment. Of course, the first order of business is to nail the fundamentals: Build for the small screen, optimize App and Play Store listings, get tracking right, and move from app installs to app engagement. But once we checked all of those boxes, we challenged ourselves to get even more out of our mobile advertising.

To really break through with mobile users, it's important to take full advantage of their context. Today, people expect digital experiences to be made just for them. At Google Media Lab, we manage the media strategy for all of Google's digital advertising campaigns. And that means we're in the perfect position to experiment and fine-tune Google's mobile marketing strategy.

It hasn't been easy. Getting signals and data to inform creative is difficult and takes time. We've had a lot of success, but we're also still experimenting and learning. Here's what we've learned about using contextual signals and how to successfully tap into them.

think with Google

Turn location data into deeper engagement

Utilizing location signals is becoming table-stakes for marketers. Compared to a year ago, smartphone users are significantly more likely to purchase from companies whose mobile sites or apps customize information to their location.[1]

Location tells you something important about potential users. The challenge is to connect that to your brand in a meaningful way.

In our case, we experimented with a campaign for the Google app. We thought carefully about users' context and what might be most useful to them in that moment. If someone is in an airport, for example, chances are they're traveling. And if someone is traveling, they're likely to be curious about their destination. With that in mind, we created a series of programmatic ads that focused on travel tips, landmarks, and points of interest.

If someone was in San Francisco, they were served an ad that featured the Golden Gate Bridge and relevant questions, like "How long is the Golden Gate Bridge?" This locally-relevant approach worked, and the campaign increased daily active users by 85% when compared to our control group.

Connect people with their interests

The sites people visit on their phones tell you a lot about them. In addition to using that behavior to identify potential consumers, it can also be used to hyper-customize messaging.

When promoting Google Photos, we wanted to drive awareness of its storage features, particularly for iOS users. We looked at contextual signals, like a user's location, the time, and their interests to craft messages that were more likely to breakthrough. Ultimately, we zeroed in on people's interests, based on the apps they were using, because we found interests were most likely to drive photographic moments.

For parents, for example, we created mobile ads that captured sweet moments with the line, "The best moments only happen once." It highlighted the joy of capturing—and fear of missing—that perfect moment, successfully promoting Google Photos' "free-up" feature which allows users to delete backed up photos and save space on their phones. We created dozens of versions, then delivered them programmatically. The campaign generated a 9% lift in brand awareness and a 6% lift in "free-up" feature awareness.
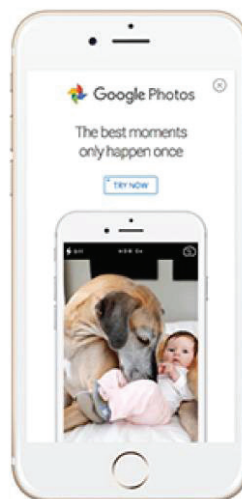
Understand your user's daily routine

Desktops and laptops provide a limited view of somebody's day. But phones are a constant companion. People turn to mobile to help them get things done, make decisions, and inform purchases. And if you understand your customers' routines, you can better deliver compelling messaging.

One example of this in action is a mobile advertising campaign we ran to increase awareness of the Chromecast app and explain how casting works. We started by figuring out popular kids TV shows based on search behavior. Turns out SpongeBob SquarePants beats the pants off of other shows based on search volume. So, we tried to find the best time of day to get in front of the parents of those SpongeBob fans. We knew that kids were watching on Saturday and Sunday mornings or in the late afternoons. But we also believed that a good time to reach parents would be when they were prepping dinner and looking up recipes.

While the campaign didn't drive significant brand lift, the expansion rate for those ads was three times higher than the industry average. We're still experimenting with creative and looking for the right time of day to deliver a message when we want to affect weekend plans. But we're regularly using these signals to influence our mobile ad campaigns.
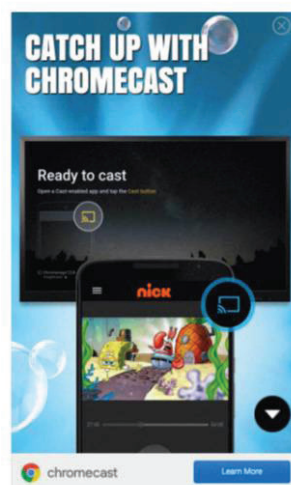
Context is in the eye of the marketer

Connecting our messages to mobile-specific content has been a game changer. Location, time, and app targeting are just a few of the tactics we've employed to reach mobile users. Other mobile signals like device model, operating system, Wi-Fi connectivity, even carrier, are all signals we're exploring.

Context is more important to people today than it has ever been. And people expect marketers to deliver highly relevant messages. Using these signals are helping us do just that.

Arjan Dijk
VP, Growth Marketing at Google

Tommy Wiles
Senior Digital Media Manager, Google Brand Studio

Sources

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2015: n=1,291 U.S. online smartphone users 18+).