It is a Banner Year

My *Guru's Lair* website at *tinaja.com* recently passed a 150,000 hits per month milestone. So I started exploring *banner advertising* as a new ongoing income source. I quickly found that banner ads have some astounding properties. A few of which appear poised to completely blow away print advertising.

First and foremost, banner ads offer *immediacy*. To the advertiser, they can start generating revenue for you mere minutes after they are submitted. To the viewer, instant gratification is a convenient mouse click away.

Banner ads offer *accountibility*. You know *exactly* who responds to your ad. And exactly when they do so. *All* of your banner impressions are personally viewed. One on one. No newsstand returns, no unread pages, zero channel surfers, and no snack breaks. Your chosen site and page content prequalifies and tightly targets *all* of your viewers. Depending on webmaster arrangements, banner ads can also potentially offer an advertiser *guaranteed results*.

No sale, no pay.

Banner ads offer *flexibility*. You can decide exactly how many viewers you want, can change your banner at any time, can tightly target interest specific pages, update any prices, fix typos, or easily handle splits, regionals, tests, or instant copy changes.

Slice it like salami. All to an intrinsically interested and very upscale audience.

To a webmaster, banners have the major advantage that they *work* as an income source. Older subscriptions or per-hour revenue streams often do not.

The Downside

The downside of banners? First, you've got to have your own web site to be able use them. Your customers do have to be web literate. You have to *thoroughly* understand the web culture and how it works. You have to be willing to give a lot away to sell a little. Above all, your site has to deliver on what you promise.

Your economics also have to make sense. At three cents per impression and a five percent click through, it costs you sixty cents for each actual response. And you still have to close your sale. On the other hand, if your site is any good, they now know about it and are very likely to come back for more. And there is *no way* you are going to ship out a direct mail catalog for sixty cents total cost.

Reliable and secure online transactions aren't quite here yet. But they should show up "real soon now". There's also the older but rapidly fading Internet culture that finds commercial messages odiously offensive. This still limits your banner response click throughs.

It is easy to confuse obscenely bloated *hits* with actual viewer *impressions*. A hit is any access of any site for any reason. Such as getting some wallpaper or a button icon. Depending on the site, one impression can equal *eight* to *thirty* hits. Finally, better websites tend to attract loyal followers. Thus the number of actual viewers is usually far less than the number of impressions. On the other hand, repeating a message raises ad awareness.

Finally, the best banner in the world will do you no good if you do not follow it up properly on your own website. All a banner can do is deliver serious inquiries.

What you do from there is totally up to you.

Creating a Banner

First, you find out the allowable size for your banner. The industry standard seems to be 60 pixels high by 480 pixels wide. I instead use a paired "two-up" format of 65 pixels high by 280 pixels wide.

Second, study existing banners to see what works and what does not. Note that a banner is just the first stage. A stage whose *only* goal is to move an interested party to your web site. Those ancient AIDA ad rules of *attention*, *interest*, *desire*, and *action* apply in spades.

Third, study their intended page background and its content. Make sure your color choices, the "loudness", and the intellectual level of your message are all compatible with the intended viewers and the overall page vibes.

Actually creating your own banner is no big deal. Your webmaster can do it for you at a nominal charge. Or you can use most any illustration or paint program. Naturally, I overwhelmingly prefer to create my own banners in raw PostScript. But use whatever works for you.

Once you have your banner art, you'll want to convert it to GIF format. Note that GIF is clearly better than JPEG where small text is dominant and few colors are present.

Here is one roundabout GIF conversion method that always works and needs nothing but shareware or system software: If you are starting with an Acrobat file, load it into *Reader* or *Exchange*. If not, otherwise image your banner on the screen. Use a screen grabber (such as *Screen Thief95*) to grab the image and convert it into a bitmap .BMP file. Crop the .BMP file to the required number of pixels using *Paint*. Convert to GIF with *Spry Image View*.

Then, go to a GIF editor to see if you cannot chop your file size by reducing the number of colors, eliminating

comments, or whatever. I've found the *GIF Construction Set* shareware useful. But you will have to manually remove some extra end-of-file characters from their demo version.

Try to get your final file size under 5K.

More details on this GIF conversion scheme are found in *tinaja.com/acrob01.html*

Finally, you'll email your GIF banner to the webmaster, along with your payment, placement, and response url link destination instructions.

Measuring Response

Your key to measuring response lies in the *log files* maintained by your ISP. Older log files show you who visited when. Newer ones include *referral* info that shows *where* your visitors *came from*. It's of utmost importance that you gain log file access.

But observe that a log file is only "fairly accurate". Is *110.dialup* on one day the same as *110.dialup* on the next? How about a *112.dialup* instead? Is an hour's delay one visitor or two? No way to tell for sure.

The host site has several response measurement options. The number of times your banner loads should equal the number of first impressions. Quick and simple. The actual impressions can be inferred by web analysis, measuring the relative number of "304" or "use cached info" errors.

The relative popularity of banner page positions can get measured by placing a slightly different banner name on each position and comparing the responses.

One obvious way to measure click throughs is to ask the advertiser. Banners obviously work best when there is free and honest communication between sites.

I have found one way the host can measure actual outgoing click throughs. But it has some inconveniences and gotchas. So it is more useful as an occasional tester than as a continuous monitor.

There's a little known *refresh* redirecting command in HTML. This will move you to another page after a short delay. Have the banner go to your redirect page. Then have the redirect page send the click to the advertiser.

Your log file will then clearly show your impressions and your click throughs. The percentage response will be the *ratio* of impressions to click throughs.

The gotchas? Well, the viewer is annoyed by yet another obnoxious time wasting screen. And setting the delay to zero will not work. First because of web loading time. And secondly because *a zero redirect time hangs a browser's back arrow!*. So *never* use a redirect delay of less than two or three seconds. Lastly, certain older browsers may gag on a redirection. Full details in REDIRECT.HTML.

The advertiser has at least three ways to gather useful response measurements: One is to ask the host site how many first impressions have been delivered. The second is to ask your ISP for referral log access. The third method gives you absolute control and guaranteed correct info. Create an exact mirror of your home page and give it a unique name such as *www.stupendous.com/home.ad06* Then link *only* the target banner to the *ad06* page. The only way anybody can reach this page is by clicking on a specific off-site banner. So your log files should tell you exactly how many click throughs you will get.

There's lots of website analysis software out there. *Webtrends* is one very popular example. But after using it

for a while, I went back to my own custom analysis code. Written in PostScript, of course. More details are found in WEBSITAN.PS. More on log files in MUSE116.PDF

Payment Options

There are all sorts of creative ways to pay for banner ads. These depend on the goals of the advertiser and those of the webmaster…

- with fixed monthly sponsorships
- per thousand first impressions
- per actual viewer click through
- per hard catalog request or response
- as a percentage of actual sales
- as a percentage of gross profits

The further *up* you go on this list, the better the deal for the *webmaster*. The further down you go, the greater the opportunity for the *advertiser*. Note that the lower options give you *guaranteed* results.

Something that print advertising cannot touch.

Your optimum compromise is often a fixed rate per thousand *first impressions*. Perhaps at $2.90 per thousand or so. A first impression is just that. The first time a viewer sees a banner on their visit. *Total* impressions depend on the site and the visitors, but typically will be something like 20 percent higher than first impressions. This depends on how many pages the ad appears on and how often the visitor returns to a given page during his visit.

There's also a "payment" option of the *banner exchange*. I feel these are almost always a bad deal for both parties. Especially when a banner trading service is involved. These can cheapen your site and quickly drive away your real advertisers. A rare but possible exception is when two *equal sized* sites have clearly complementary products that each other genuinely believes in.

Some Hints

Here are a few banner design guidelines…

Get them to click the mouse – This is the *sole* purpose of a banner's message. Make them an offer they simply can not refuse. Always use compelling action words, especially *new*, *win*, and *click*. But always as *few* total words as possible.

Keep size and glitz down – Speed triumphs over all, since a bored viewer is a gone viewer. Aim for a 5K *maximum* banner file size. Cutesy sound or wild animation quickly becomes annoying. Use those GIF color reduction and compression techiques; eliminate all GIF comments.

Give lots away to sell a little – This is the key secret to successful web sites. Always deliver on what you promise. Never disappoint! Once they have clicked through to your site, it is *your* turn to close the sale. The banner has done all it can possibly do for you.

Force the banners to load last – A web page should be *completely* viewable and actionable long *before* your banners complete imaging. Do this by (A) keeping banner file sizes as short as possible, (B) using the LOWSRC feature of HTML to replace underbanner wallpaper with itself, and (c) preimage any crucial buttons or artwork as *one pixel dots* placed *before* any banners in the file. You'll find a detailed example in BANNLAST.HTML.

Include editorial support – A banner advertiser should also receive extra mentions in the way of annotated hot links and "what's new" editorial coverage. These often yield a higher response than the banner itself. Naturally, you never accept a banner you do not genuinely believe in.

Thou shalt not hassle – Never place a banner where it is force fed upon a viewer. I feel that so-called "interstitial" ads are inherently self-defeating, because the viewer clearly intended doing something else at the time. Clicking *must* be *voluntary*. And, of course, *never* spam email or newsgroups as *any* part of *any* promotion.

Rotate your stock – Moving the banner positions now and then freshens your site and creates the illusion of having more successful advertisers. Juggling also gives advertisers equal access to prime and secondary display positions. Changes can be done manually, with Java, or with a CGI script. Exception: tightly targeted banners usually should stay where they can do the most long term good.

Consider Acrobat – More and more web pages are switching to the Adobe Acrobat format, because PDF is infinitely superior to HTML on all counts. This opens the possibilities of "real" ads inserted and attached to reprints and other editorial content. Such reprints are likely to be printed as hard copy and long term saved.

For More Help

Additional banner examples, demos, and support info appears on my web site. See *tinaja.com/advt01.html* for general info. Tech help files are found on the *Webmastering Library* page at *tinaja.com/weblib01* or the *Acrobat Library page* at *www.tinaja.com/acrob01.html* Full consulting services are available. Yes, we certainly do welcome new banner advertisers. Let's hear from you. ❖

Microcomputer pioneer and guru Don Lancaster is the author of 33 books and countless articles. Don maintains a US technical helpline you'll find at (520) 428-4073, besides offering all his own books, reprints and consulting services.

Don has a free new catalog crammed full of his latest insider secrets waiting for you. Your best calling times are 8-5 weekdays, Mountain Standard Time.

Don is also the webmaster of www.tinaja.com You can also reach Don at Synergetics, Box 809, Thatcher, AZ 85552. Or you can use email via don@tinaja.com