Chapter IV

How Consumers Think About ‘Interactive’ Aspects of Web Advertising

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Abstract

Interactivity is a key feature of Web advertising that makes this new format of advertising attractive. In spite of increasing research work dealing with this topic, the body of literature rarely shows how consumers think about interactivity and interact with Web advertising. It is important to explore this phenomenon from the consumer’s perspective because consumers are more active on the Web than they are with other traditional media. This chapter presents an overview of previous research about Web advertising and then reports on an empirical study that sought consumer-based understanding of Web advertising. The study explores various meanings of the interactivity of Web advertising drawn from consumers’ everyday lives.

Introduction

As the World Wide Web has grown in recent years, Web advertising has grown as well and researchers have increasingly investigated the interactivity of Web advertising. Interactivity of Web advertising is currently a central focus of Web advertising researchers.

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This chapter introduces the concept of interactivity of Web advertising and investigates how consumers actually think about the interactivity of Web advertising. An empirical study presented in this chapter employs qualitative research methods in order to acquire deep understanding about how consumers think about and deal with the interactive aspects of Web advertising in their everyday lives. Additional comments and suggestions for future research are also presented.

**Background**

Interactivity is a central concept of Web advertising (WA). Most WA researchers agree that interactivity is a key factor differentiating Web advertising from traditional advertising (e.g., Cho & Leckenby, 1997; McMillan & Hwang, 2002). Because the consumer’s role is regarded as critical on the Web, perceived interactivity — how consumers perceive interactivity on the Web — sometimes gets more attention in advertising research than other venues of interactivity research such as process- or function-oriented interactivity (Reeves & Nass, 1996; Lee, 2000; McMillan & Downes, 2000).

Although researchers consider perceived interactivity to be important, little research to date has investigated how consumers actually perceive and deal with interactive aspects of Web advertising. Some studies (e.g., Sohn et al., 2003; Chung & Zhao, 2003) dealing with perceived interactivity employed experimental research designs that manipulated the level of interactivity — usually creating two conditions, high and low levels of interactivity. Some experiments (e.g., Edwards et al., 2002) used “forced-exposure,” which forced consumers to be exposed to Web advertising in a manner that was consistent with research objectives rather than real-life experiences. Experimental manipulation of interactivity and of message presentation is not consistent with consumers’ actual Web use experiences.

Thus, most research has not yet focused on consumers’ actual thoughts and behavior related to Web advertising and interactivity. Without ample understanding of consumers’ thoughts and behaviors regarding WA, it is difficult for researchers and practitioners to perform their work related to WA. Therefore, investigation of consumer’s perspectives on WA should be a top priority. The meaning of interactivity in Web advertising should be developed with input from the consumers’ points of view. With sufficient understanding of consumers’ insights, researchers can pursue more informed studies in this field and practitioners can develop more effective consumer-oriented WA strategies.

**Web Advertising (WA)**

Several different terms referring to Web advertising (WA) are used interchangeably in the literature. Although Internet advertising seems the most general and broad term, Web advertising is the most widely used term in the academic literature. Furthermore, Web advertising is more specific and excludes some advertising formats that are not Web-based (e.g., email, newsgroup commercials, etc.).
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