

Companion Ads: Are They Necessary?

By Eric Franchi Monday, September 29, 2008



Eric Franchi was part of the team that launched [Undertone Networks](#) in 2002, and currently serves as senior vice president of media. In this role, Eric is responsible for leading Undertone's publisher expansion efforts and overseeing the company's product development, third-party partnerships and business development initiatives. He began his interactive career at [About.com](#).

IMAGINE YOURSELF AS A DIGITAL media planner for a Fortune 100 client (pick your favorite one - we don't need to get that specific for this exercise to work). You have been asked to develop an online video plan for Q4 2008, with a significant budget to boot. Easy enough as there are several quality publishers and a couple of ad networks that are on your short-list for this client. So you send out your RFPs with the usual requirements: professional content only, frequency capping, clickable player, ability to place trackers, accommodate 15-second ads and companion ads, etc. You get your proposals back, and something's not quite right: several of your potential partners can't run companion ads with all or some of their video inventory. What do you do?

The above scenario, while imagined, is factually based. As publishers strive to add more video inventory to their pages, some of it is taking the form of placements outside the "video" sections of sites, such as on the homepage or as a supplement to an article. As long as certain quality controls are in place -- user-initiated video and sound, mainly -- this is still very valuable inventory. Arguably, it's even more valuable from a targeting and relevancy perspective. For a good example of this, check out Walt Mossberg's iPhone 3G review on Dow Jones Corporation's AllThingsD. The video is largely the same content as the article, but seeing the product live and in action along with Walt's commentary makes for a completely different, richer experience. However, due to the nature of the site, the video plays within the page and not in a dedicated video section or within a separate player. And thus, no companion ads.

Companion ads have been part of the pre-roll video package since the format emerged years ago. They make sense, as companions serve as a perfect way to encourage the user to further engage with the brand when they want to -- be it before, during or after the video content plays. They are clickable and oftentimes passed along as added value by the seller. Therefore, companions have become mandatory for most online video buys. But should they be?

In the Mossberg example, I would assume that advertisers would be highly interested in running a video ad prior to the review, but if the plan insists on companions, this site wouldn't qualify. And with more and more of this type of inventory emerging, does it make sense for it to be excluded because of the lack of an adjacent companion ad? Perhaps there is another solution, such as a follow-up ad on the next page. Or does there even need to be a companion or follow-up at all, with the higher brand recall and awareness that pre-roll delivers? Either way, it's something that should be examined further as we continue on the path to the ideal video solution.