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Ending the pop-under ad scourge



BY JIM CARROLL

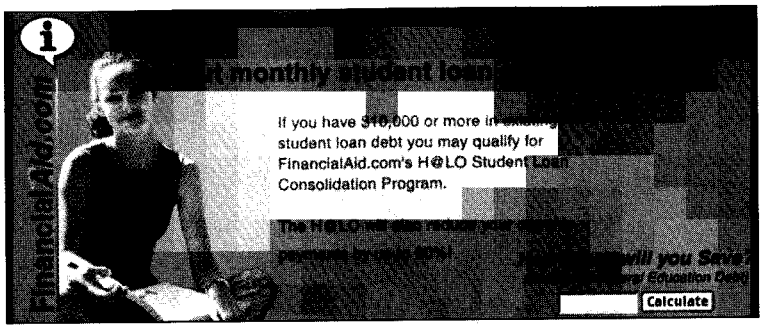
The growing number of pop-under annoyances indicates the herd mentality that so often surrounds something new online is once again in full charge

One thing I can't stand is laziness. And today I'm kind of bitchy because I continue to get relentless reminders that there are still people in the digital marketing community who are guilty of the absolutely worst form of slothfulness. These people are so lacking in creative talent that I think there should be a collective uprising within the mainstream advertising community against them.

What has me in this rather agitated state is the same thing that is likely bugging the heck out of you–pop-under ads. You're probably familiar with them. A pop-under ad loads under the site you are viewing, so in many cases you don't even know that it's there. It's only when you close your browser that you notice it sitting waiting for your attention. And, in fact, if you've been to several sites that do pop-unders, you'll see a whole bunch of little windows with ads spewed all over your desktop.

Admit it–many of you have found that your online activities have been degraded to nothing more than an orgy of annoying little advertisements that seem to be popping up–or rather, popping under–with increasing frequency. They're everywhere, from mainstream media sites to the smallest of online initiatives. Suddenly everyone has thought to themselves, "Aha, here's the way to riches online. Pop-unders!"

What mystifies me is that some marketers believe that the pop-under is an effective means of online advertising. In the end, the only thing they seem to be accomplishing is pissing off their customers. But wait. This is the Internet, where anything that doesn't make sense is often accepted as mainstream. Maybe those who believe in the power of pop-unders are the same folks who actually believed in the typical dot-com business plan of "giving stuff away at a loss and making it up in volume."



Pop-under advertising–like this ad for student loan consolidation services–loads under the Web site being viewed. Increasingly, it is pissing off Web users

The pop-under is a modern day scourge. Their popularity indicates to me that people in the digital marketing community who promote this way of doing business online have the creativity of the average earthworm. And yet, sadly, the growing number of pop-under annoyances indicates the herd mentality that so often surrounds something new online is once again in full charge.

Of course, it all began this summer with X10.com, a company that wanted to promote its "remote video camera." It seemed to be a device that would let users film naked women without them knowing about it. People suddenly found little X10 ads were all over the place, and began to wonder what was happening. And it didn't take long for the mainstream to grab onto the idea, with a resultant explosion in the number of pop-under advertisements.

And yet, the numbers and facts are demonstrating that pop-unders fail miserably. YumYum.com, an online recipe site, discovered this reality the hard way. It ended up serving X10.com ads as a result of its relationship with an online advertising company. Soon YumYum.com was deluged with complaints. It immediately went into a cease-and-desist mode.

Not that X10.com itself has had any great success. Numbers from New York-based Jupiter Media Metrix show that while its ubiquitous pop-under ad quickly launched the site into one of the most visited on the Web, people stayed there for less than a few seconds. In other words, just about long enough to click the big-X on the top-right hand side of the window to close the damned thing.

Pop-unders emerged so quickly on the Internet, and bothered so many people, that it isn't surprising that a slew of articles have been written against them. Despite all this editorializing, I think one important angle still hasn't been talked about. Quite simply, anyone in the advertising community who supports this form of online interaction is simply showing their incompetence to the world. They might as well hold up a sign that says, "We don't do creativity. We simply write HTML code."

What should you do if you are responsible for your online marketing strategies and buys? Well, if an agency suggests that pop-unders become a part of your online strategy, run away as fast as you can. That is all the evidence you need that the organization lacks the ability to service you properly.

Let me be even blunter. If someone suggests you incorporate pop-unders into your marketing strategy, they're probably not worth their fee. We should never have to pay for laziness. Instead, focus your efforts on the real things that work online. Be creative, experiment and learn new ways of reaching and dealing with your customers. But don't give in to what is quickly emerging as one of the most hated means of customer interaction online.

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