

Why Are You Following Me?

by Steve Smith, Friday, January 30, 2009, 10:46 AM

Educating consumers about what behavioral targeting is and is not up to, deep within the cookies of their browser, seems to be a bit like alternative energy development. Pretty much everyone says the industry should be doing more about it, and yet it is hard to see where and with whom it starts. Most online materials related to BT are pitched to one end of the value chain, marketers. It's not clear to me that most of the companies in this space are even comfortable talking directly to consumers, let alone taking the time to develop an accessible language to describe their process.

Specific Media controls the BehavioralTargeting.com domain and uses it to educate marketers about its methods. Even the Wikipedia entry for this field is really an explanation for advertisers. This is understandable, since most people who are familiar with the term likely come from the industry. But it seems to me the industry misses an opportunity to practice more often, and in more places, what it knows ultimately needs to be done.

You guys need to find better, clearer, simpler ways to explain what it is you are doing in our browsers -- and why you are doing it. And what are the real benefits and risks a consumer incurs by tacitly agreeing to your presence? Isn't every possible point of contact with a suspicious consumer a teachable moment?

In an earlier post, I recounted how I struck some retargeting gold when FetchBack tagged and remarketed me during my travels online. An opt-out option is clearly available at the front page of the FetchBack site. Unfortunately, from there you either opt-out (kick over to the Network Advertising Initiative site) or click into a long scrolling privacy policy that doesn't actually get around to explaining retargeting until a few screens down.

It is to FetchBack's credit, of course, that it actually puts a prominent opt-out invitation on its home page, while many of the largest BT firms do not. I found one at Undertone Networks and Revenue Science, for instance -- but not at Platform A/Tacoda, Specific Media, or Collective Media, just as a random sample.

And I am not talking about the presence of mere privacy policies and opt-outs buried somewhere in a site. I was looking for easily identifiable links for consumers who might be wondering why this company's cookies showed up in their cookie-scrubbing security software.

Many BT vendors rely on the NAI site for their opt-out services, and much of the NetworkAdvertising.org site is serviceable and informative. It is clearly designed for the consumer. "Helping you protect your online privacy" is its tagline, and there are FAQs and glossaries throughout to help people understand some of the principles of cookie-dropping and the NAI's membership policies. NAI has an excellent page that scans your browser and tells you whether one of its member's cookies is present. Apart from the fact that most consumers have no idea this resource exists, I think this single page is a tremendous resource.

Curiously, however, that consumer-centricity diminishes as the user gets closer to opting out. Each member also has a link on the opt-out page that pops up a company descriptions. And that is where the consumer is bound to get lost. For reasons that are not altogether clear to me, most of these companies use the space to address consumers as if they were potential clients. Google, for instance, discloses that it owns DoubleClick.

But then, it devolves into marketing pitch: "Our comprehensive set of integrated solutions have become leading tools for campaign management, online advertising, email delivery, offline database marketing, data management and marketing analytics. As consumers embrace new forms of media and business scales to meet the demands of multi-channel marketing, Google will remain at the forefront, helping marketers effectively target, reach and measure the results of their marketing programs."

Is Google pitching me? Really? And that is how it goes for most, if not all, of the pop-up company descriptions. To be fair, some companies tag on a brief explanation of what they are doing in my browser and how they think it might benefit me. But the attempt only comes after long and tedious corporate-speak of the eye-glazing kind that usually opens press releases. I will say that Revenue Science makes a noble stab by actually addressing the reader as a consumer, starting the conversation by suggesting the benefits of being cooked by them.

Is my whining about some innocuous pop-ups on an opt-out site unfair? I don't think so. I think these little bits of misplaced marketing messages suggest next steps everyone has to take if behavioral marketing approaches are going to survive in an age of greater transparency. These small company descriptions occur on a site designed for consumer information and convenience. They are an occasion for the industry to explain itself and even make its case.

Increasingly, an industry that started by engineering black boxes of algorithms and backstage technologies will have to learn to talk more effectively and directly to consumers. You should start by practicing exactly what marketers preach: leverage every touch point.