TO BANNER OR NOT TO BANNER?

USER RESEARCH ON A WEB MARKETING TOOL

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THE QUESTIONS AND THE RESEARCH PROCESS

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- ♦ To use or not to use Web banners?
- ♦ If Web banners are used:
  - ◊ In what form?
  - ◊ To what extent?

These were the specific questions that UT Southwestern Library staff needed answered when they envisioned extending the marketing power of Web banners to all library pages, including the home page. Prior to that animated GIFs had been used on a few pages. Strong contrasts in staff opinions on the desirability and effectiveness of banners prompted the interested parties to form a task force to research user reactions and preferences. The task force created a survey that was:

- ♦ Administered in both paper and Web versions for two weeks in April 2003
- ♦ Designed to survey reactions to the use of banners
- ♦ Designed to also gather opinions on design
- ♦ Composed of only four questions and a request for comments
- ♦ Linked to a working banner (Web version only)
- ♦ Promoted through the Library's email newsletter and a link on the home page (Web version)
- ♦ Distributed to clients in the Computer Commons area (paper version)
- ♦ Successful in obtaining 102 responses

Because questions still remained, a follow-up Web survey asked for feedback on an actual working banner. It was:

- ♦ Administered for a month in May 2003
- ♦ Linked from the animated "New Technology" banner
- ♦ Created using Macromedia Flash
- ♦ Required a Flash player on the client's computer
- ♦ Not as successful – only 17 responses received

THE RESEARCH RESULTS:

FIRST SURVEY RESULTS: 102 RESPONSES

1. How frequently do you pay attention to banner ads?

Never, 45%
Frequently, 11%
Sometimes, 44%

2a. Would your reaction for home page banners be?

Negative, 37%
Positive, 25%
Neutral, 38%

2b. Would your reaction for banners on other Library pages be?

Negative, 33%
Positive, 18%
Neutral, 49%

3. What are your design preferences?

Prefer no banner at all, 32%
Animated, 24%
Non-animated, 20%
Doesn't matter, 25%

SECOND SURVEY RESULTS: 17 RESPONSES

1. What is your reaction to this banner?

Negative, 41%
Positive, 59%

2. What are your banner design preferences?

Text only, 6%
Non-animated, 6%
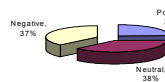No banner, 41%
Animated, 47%

SAMPLING OF USER COMMENTS:

Negative:
- ♦ The flashing/animated banners are particularly annoying
- ♦ Don't do it!
- ♦ Less clutter — happier patrons
- ♦ Banners interrupt or slow page loading
- ♦ No banners! They are very distracting
- ♦ Prefer no intrusive commercial ads
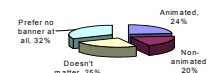- ♦ Frustrating to have a popup appear

Neutral or positive:
- ♦ Like to know more about library resources
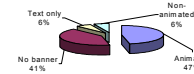- ♦ Non-animated if you do use them
- ♦ Good way to advertise

INTERPRETING THE FINDINGS:

From the survey questions:

- ♦ More than half of clients say they pay attention to banners so it is worthwhile to consider the issue.
- ♦ A significant number of library clients do not like banners (33%-41%).
- ♦ Slightly more clients object to banners on the home page versus secondary pages (37% vs. 33%).
- ♦ On the first survey, design preferences were close between animated and non-animated. On the second, animated was preferred by those positive about banners.

From the comments:

- ♦ The highest number of complaints about banners involve distraction and page-loading time.
- ♦ Clients sometimes thought we were promoting brand names instead of providing information about our offerings.
- ♦ The concept of banners was sometimes confused with pop-ups.
- ♦ The issue of banners can produce strong opinions.
- ♦ Clients (and staff) were annoyed by the popup window generated if users had not installed the Flash player.
- ♦ Some clients find our pages too "plain vanilla".

THE CONSENSUS

The strong adverse reaction to banners was not surprising to some on the task force, but was greeted with dismay by the more marketing-oriented members. An ingenious compromise was worked out to serve both marketing purposes and the need to avoid alienating clients with banner distraction and possible page loading problems:

- ♦ The home page would be kept pristine to avoid alienating clients at the most important Web location.
- ♦ Banners would be permitted on secondary Web pages
- ♦ Banners would not be animated. They would be, instead, static or "billboard" banners.
- ♦ GIFs would be used instead of Flash to avoid the need for installation of third party software.

THE NEW STANDARD FOR BANNERS:

- ◊ Static or billboard type
- ◊ 170 x 65 pixel GIF
- ◊ Two to four lines of text
- ◊ Optional graphic
- ◊ Border around the GIF
- ◊ Only on secondary pages
- ◊ Placed in the upper left corner

Static Banner Example:

Free from the
National
Library of
Medicine

Click Here