CHAPTER 13

ONLINE ADVERTISING
CASE STUDY: ZDU
(SMARTPLANET.COM)
CAMPAIGN

Summary

Name of production: ZDU Online Ad Campaign
Writer: John Hargrave
Developer: Media Shower Inc. Developed in conjunction with John Hargrave,
ZDNet Editorial Projects Director
Subject: Promoting ZDU (Ziff-Davis University) a Web site that offers online
courses
Audience: All Web users, but primarily experienced Web users who might
take an online course
Medium: World Wide Web
Presentation location: Where Web is viewed: Home, office, schools
Goals: Persuade
Structure: Linear with interactivity

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PROGRAM DESCRIPTION AND BACKGROUND

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

This ZDU online advertising campaign was designed to promote membership in ZDU, an
online learning site launched by Ziff-Davis Inc. Ziff-Davis is a leading media and
marketing company focused on computing and Internet-related technologies. It pub-
lishes computer magazines, such as PC Week, Mac Week, and Computer Shopper.
It also has a number of online ventures, including ZDNet and ZDU. ZDNet is the
online network of Ziff-Davis that presents online versions of its magazines, as well
as original content about computer technology and information. The ZDU online learning site has recently been expanded and renamed as SmartPlanet. SmartPlanet (ZDU) offers both instructor-led and self-study courses, related products for sale, and an opportunity to interact within the SmartPlanet learning community.

ONLINE ADVERTISING

Online Advertisements Defined
Online advertisements are advertisements placed on the World Wide Web or on commercial online services, such as America Online. For most products and services, the Web is the primary location for ad placement. One of the major forms of online advertisements is the banner. The banner is a small image and text composition that looks like a short billboard. The goal of the banner is to persuade the user to click and go to the Web site where the product or service is offered.

Advantages of Online Advertising
Online advertising has numerous advantages over print and broadcast, among them the following:

• Measurability. Every time a user views or clicks on an online ad, it is recorded. This makes it possible for advertisers to know exactly how many people are viewing their ads, and how many people are following these ads to the desired Web site. It also tells them when interest in an ad is beginning to fade. This is a key advantage over other types of media.

• Rotation. If an ad is beginning to fade, the advertiser can pull it immediately, or the advertiser can choose to rotate new ads into the slot. Advertisers can also adjust the portions of an ad that are not getting attention. This is usually not possible in print or broadcast ads, which are scheduled weeks or months in advance.

• Direct Contact with Customers and Personalization. By simply clicking a button on an ad or on an advertiser’s Web site, a customer can E-mail the advertiser, download product information or a sample, or even order a complete product. The advertiser can also track the user’s ad viewing and product-buying habits and personalize the ads for that particular user.

• Interactivity. There are myriad possibilities here both for the ad and for the final Web site that the ad leads to. For example, on the Web site, a car buyer could click on different colors for a car that he or she is interested in, or link from the ad to an online auto magazine that has reviews on a certain model. The ad itself can be

FIGURE 13–1
Third draft of ZDU online advertising banner. (See the “Chapters” section, Chapter 13 area of the Writing for Multimedia and the Web CD-ROM for interactive color ads.)
highly interactive, as in the ZDU ad profiled later in this chapter that has animations and multiple pages.

- **Cost.** It is much cheaper to let the customer find information on a Web site than it is to hire a salesperson. A downloaded or viewable sample costs the advertiser nothing (beyond the basic cost of the Web site). Compare this to the cost of an expensive mailing. It is also cheaper to design an online ad than it is to produce a broadcast commercial or even a spread for print media.

- **Unlimited Space.** Once an advertiser can get a user to a Web site, then the advertiser can use as much space as needed to present the products. A site can have links to dozens of pages and images within the advertiser’s site and links to related sites that might help the user understand the product. This is a far cry from the severe space limitations of a broadcast or print ad.

**Limitations**

- **Modems.** Of course, it is not a completely rosy picture. Online technology is rapidly changing, but the slow modem speeds of many users make it difficult to transmit online large files, such as video, sound, and large pictures. This means that to work effectively, files must be kept to a minimum size. The smaller they are, the faster they will appear on the user’s screen and the happier the user will be. If users have to wait too long for a screen to load, they will cancel the operation and click elsewhere. Notice the small size of the images in Figure 13–1.

- **Click-Through.** Another major problem is getting people to click on an ad. Unlike a TV ad, which will run whether or not viewers do anything, the product’s Web site will not be seen at all unless the user clicks on the banner. With users becoming more sophisticated, ads are being ignored and the click-through rate continues to go down. Getting users to click will be dealt with in more detail in the analysis of the ZDU advertising campaign later in this chapter.

- **Site Owners’ Resistance to Interactive Ads.** One of the solutions to get better click-through is to make ads more exciting through greater use of multimedia and interactivity. Unfortunately, some site owners are leery of allowing ads with these features on their site because they don’t want to cause problems with users with older software and modems. They are also concerned about creating additional demands on their servers.

**Measuring an Online Ad’s Success: Click-Through**

John Hargrave, ZDNet Editorial Projects Director and the designer of the ZDU online advertising campaign, wrote that there are a number of ways that the success of an online advertising campaign can be judged. Sometimes ads, such as the ZDU ad, are trying to get users to register for a product or service. Other ads are simply trying to create brand awareness. However, most advertisers

look at the clickthrough of an online ad campaign as the ultimate measuring stick of its success. Ads are tracked using impressions and clickthroughs. Impressions are the number of times the ad has been shown, and clickthroughs are the number of times users have clicked on the ad. (Hargrave, E-mail)

The actual design of the ad and what site the ad is placed on are the two elements that have the greatest impact on clickthrough.
Ad Placement to Improve an Advertisement’s Success
To increase an ad’s success (in most cases defined as its clickthrough rate), a banner ad is either placed on a popular Web site with similar content to that of the product or service being advertised, or the ad is placed on a site of general interest, such as a Web site portal. Portals, such as Lycos and Yahoo, are described in more detail in Chapter 12, “Research Portal Web Site and the Online Feature Story: Britannica.com and The Harlem Renaissance.” Portals attempt to make the Web more accessible primarily by organizing links to other Web sites and providing search tools. Portals are a particularly good location for ads due to the following:

- Heavy traffic. A high percentage of all Web users visit portals. The major portals get hundreds of millions of page views a day.
- Personalization. Many portal pages are also able to focus the audience for a product in ways that are impossible for any other type of advertisement. A different ad will appear on the page, depending on what a user is searching. For example, if the user submits a search for “hard drive” on a portal, an ad for a hard drive manufacturer or a computer shopper magazine will appear on the screen, along with a list of Web sites on the topic. If the user typed in a different word to search, such as “music,” he or she might see an ad for an online music store or a new CD. Load a search page, such as Lycos or Infoseek, and try it out. Type different search words and see what ads appear. Of course, what ads can appear are limited to the paying ads currently running on a particular search service. Not all browsers and search services function this way, so try a few until you find one that works.

Writing and Design to Improve an Advertisement’s Success
John Hargrave points out that there is no “magic bullet,” no one trick that will make an advertisement a success. He claims that good ideas, writing, and design are what make great online ads. He does, however, outline the following basic writing and design guidelines for online advertisements.

- Simplicity. Abbie Hoffman once said that the secret of communicating through modern media is finding the one word, image, or phrase that gets your idea across—in other words, oversimplifying to a fault. You must take a complex issue and boil it down to its most one-dimensional component. Nowhere is this more true than in advertising, especially online advertising, where studies show that you have less than half a second to connect with the user before he or she moves on to the rest of the page.
- Interactivity. Interactivity is a subjective term, since all online ads are by definition some way interactive. I define interactive ads as ads which go “beyond a click.” In other words, they do something else besides just take you to the advertiser’s site—they let you play a game, they animate when you click them, they play a sound file or video. Interactive ads generally perform better than those that aren’t. The drawback is that many sites still do not accept, or offer only limited support for, interactive ads. This is inefficient if you’re trying to develop a campaign to be run across many sites.
- That Personal Touch. Personalized advertising is just beginning to take root, whereby you’re shown ads which you’re likely to be interested in. If your surfing habits indicate you’re looking to buy a printer, you’ll be shown printer ads. If you
like to click on funny ads, you’ll be shown more of them. The area that personalized advertising really makes sense at this point is in E-mail. E-mail advertisements (which are usually just text messages sent directly to a person’s e-mail box) average three to four times higher clickthrough than banner advertising. They’re usually cheaper, and they’re much easier to create, because you don’t have to worry about designing a graphical ad.

- Real Estate. Generally speaking, the bigger the ad, the bigger the clickthrough. This makes sense—the more in-your-face the ad is, the more you’re likely to notice it. Our banner wraps, which literally wrap around the side of the page, are our highest performing ad unit. (Hargrave, E-mail.) (See Figure 13–2.)

The Future of Online Advertising

Online advertisements have evolved rapidly from the early days of the Internet, when ineffective logos and repurposed print ads cluttered Web pages. Just since the last edition of this book, the middle page, formerly a major component of an online advertisement has disappeared (see the “Chapters” section, Chapter 13 area of the Writing for Multimedia and the Web CD-ROM for more on middle pages). Today ads are designed with the Web in mind from the beginning. This means designing within the technical limitations of today’s online technology. It also means drawing from the persuasive techniques of modern advertising to create an ad that will appeal to the online audience.

This Ad would wrap around the corner of a Web page.

FIGURE 13–2

Banner wrap advertisement for ZDNet.
Hargrave believes that online advertising will continue to evolve with increased multimedia, interactivity, and personalization. As bandwidth capacity increases, expect to see the ads that incorporate multimedia, such as audio, video, and deeper interactivity, as the ads that flourish. The ZDU case study in this chapter is a good example of using multimedia in an ad. Interactivity is also being pushed to the limit, with some banner ads offering the user the opportunity to print product information or make secure purchases without ever leaving the banner space. See the Enliven Web site (www.narrative.com) for examples.

Personalization of advertising will also continue to grow in importance as advertisers understand that the Web can be a one-to-one medium and not just a mass medium. This personalization is being made possible for various tools that track how you surf, where you click, and what you buy online. If Levi’s can “remember” who you are the next time you see a Levi’s ad banner or visit the Levi’s site, then Levi’s can send you personalized messages, talk about sales you might be interested in, offer you a coupon, or send you a Levi’s screensaver, which is of course even more advertising for Levi’s (Hargrave, e-mail).

Future online ads will shatter the impression/clickthrough model by offering deeper ways to interact with the ad. The audience for interactive ads will continue to grow explosively with the majority of upper-income American homes already online (Barkow). This growth in audience will translate into an increase in spending on online advertising. Some experts are predicting that Internet ad spending will top $20 billion in less than a decade (Gardner).

**PRODUCTION BACKGROUND ON THE ZDU ONLINE ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN**

The ad campaign for ZDU was developed by Media Shower Inc. in conjunction with John Hargrave ZDNet Editorial Projects Director. The purpose of this campaign was to draw additional traffic and registrations to the ZDU site.

The development process for this ad is typical of many other online ads:

1. Needs meeting. The creative team meets with the client to identify the client’s needs.
2. Creative platform. This is the creative team’s basic strategy session when they decide what they are trying to say, identify who the audience is, and come up with possible approaches to present the message.
3. First-round creative. This is the first attempt at creating the ads. The ads are posted on a server. With an online connection, clients can look at them on their own computer anywhere in the world and give their comments.
4. Second-round creative. Based on in-house reaction and client comments on the first-round creative, a second series of ads is created.
5. Third-round creative. This is usually the finished product, although with online ads, the second round is often the final one.

This process is similar to what happens in print and broadcast advertising, but in online ads the entire process can take place in two days or less. The major reasons for this compressed time frame follow:
• Client comments can be instantaneous. As soon as the first round of ads is put on the server, the clients can see them and comment on them. There is no need to gather everyone together for a meeting.

• The ad copy and images can be quickly revised because they are created in digital media.

• Ads can be distributed on the Web instantaneously. There are no magazines to be printed or TV show schedules to deal with. An ad is placed on a server, and it is immediately available to the consumer.

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS WRITING THE ZDU ONLINE AD CAMPAIGN

(The Personal View case study from the first edition of the book is in the Chapter 14 area in the “Chapters” section of the Writing for Multimedia and the Web CD-ROM.)

THE CHALLENGES

The goal of this ad campaign was to get Web users to click their way from the banner to ZDU and register for courses. The challenge was finding the most concise way to present a complex service, an online education site, and the value of the free scholarship. This challenge is made more difficult by the small size of the banner. (Note that the name of ZDU has recently been changed to SmartPlanet.)

MEETING THE CHALLENGE: DESIGNING THE BANNER

A number of things can be tried in the banner to catch the viewers’ eyes and get them to click. One common approach is the value-added banner, which offers free items, such as downloads of software, or a chance to try a product for free. Another tactic is a teaser: an intriguing line that creates more questions than answers and makes the viewer want more information. The teaser should, however, have some connection to the product. It is generally not a good idea to lure the viewer in with a false teaser, such as saying “Sex, Sex, Sex” on the banner and then try to pitch computer printers. Most users get angry and just click off. The ZDU campaign offered both free items and a teaser.

Because interactive ads get better clickthrough than noninteractive ads, all the ads in this campaign were in some way interactive. There is, however, a fine line between an ad being interactive and taking control of the user’s computer. In the case of this ad, once you click on the ad banner, you are going to be shown some images and taken to the SmartPlanet (ZDU) Web site, whether you want to or not. You cannot stop the process, short of forcing your browser to quit. Most advertisers and probably most users feel that once the user clicks on the ad banner, then there is an agreement that the user can be shown something or taken to another site. Some advertisers stretch this a bit further and will grab control of your screen if you just pass your mouse over their ad. Some sites will even pop up ads or second screens that you have not requested at all. Some usability tests have shown that these unrequested ads are hated and clicked off with a vengeance (Nielsen). It is probably good advice to consider your particular target audience’s reaction to losing control of their computer before you take over and start popping up random screens and dragging them off to other sites that they did not request.
The banners for the ZDU ad campaign were developed in three stages: first-round creative, second-round creative, and third-round creative. An additional change was made after the banner was tested online. (See the “Chapters” section, Chapter 13 area of the Writing for Multimedia and the Web CD-ROM for color interactive versions of these ads.)

**First-Round Creative Banner**

In an E-mail and phone interview, John Hargrave outlined the process of creating these ads. In this first version, the user clicks on the brain and it grows in size, then pauses a few moments before whisking you away to the ZDU site. The client liked the general idea, but wanted to play up the educational concept behind ZDU. He suggested adding something about the “free scholarship” concept—a free trial that ZDU gives out to prospective students.

**Second-round creative banner**

John Hargrave’s team added an alert box that pops up after you click on the banner and before you are taken to the site. The alert box says, “Click OK for a FREE two-week scholarship at ZDU!” The client wanted to change the wording in the alert box, and recommended putting a mortarboard on the brain to further promote the educational angle.

**Third-Round Creative Banner**

The mortarboard on the “big brain” wouldn’t fit within the 468 × 60 pixel screen space allotted to a banner ad, so Hargrave had to make the brain shrink back down so the mortarboard would fit (see Figure 13–1). The new alert box text now reads: “With over 150 online computer courses to choose from, ZDU will expand your mind. Click OK for a FREE two-week scholarship!”

**Final Banner After Testing**

After some testing on the site, it was found that the ad actually performed better if the ZDU logo wasn’t on the first frame. This is probably because of the “curiosity factor,” where people are more likely to click when they don’t know exactly what the offer is.

**THE SMARTPLANET (ZDU) WEB SITE**

Once a banner lures the user to a Web site, it is key that the site be designed to hook the user. The SmartPlanet (formerly ZDU) Web site does this by explaining succinctly the site benefits and the free scholarship offer at the top of the Home Page: “Welcome
to a new world . . . of learning. Pick from 350+ courses covering computers, finance, hobbies, and more. Pursue your interests today!” Just to the right of this text is a graphic with a button labeled, “Join for Free. Learn from the experts, share your ideas with others, and even teach your own courses—ALL FOR FREE!” For a different type of product, the advertiser’s Web site could be very complex, offering a wide variety of information about the product, tours of the facility, free items, and so on.

**CONCLUSION: RESPONSE TO THE PROJECT**

The “Brain Grow” banner was one of the best-performing ads in this series. It received 2 to 2.5 times the site average clickthrough. It had a higher rate of users who registered for the free scholarship than any other campaign in this series.

**REFERENCES**

Nielsen, Jakob. “The Top Ten New Mistakes of Web Design.” Jacob Nielsen’s Alertbox,