IAB Tech Lab Publisher Ad Blocking Primer

A primer describing the tactics available to publishers in response to ad blocking.

This document has been developed by the IAB Tech Lab's Ad Blocking Working Group.

About the IAB Technology Laboratory

The IAB Technology Laboratory (IAB Tech Lab) is a nonprofit research and development consortium charged with producing and helping companies implement global industry technical standards and solutions for the digital media and advertising industries. The goal of the IAB Tech Lab is to reduce friction associated with the digital advertising and marketing supply chain while contributing to the safe growth of the industry.

About the Ad Blocking Working Group

The Ad Blocking Working Group was created to better understand the issue of ad blocking, and to provide the industry with the tools, information, and guidance needed to continue thriving while delivering valuable content and services to their audiences.

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Executive Summary

This primer describes the options available to publishers faced with ad blocking. It is intended to provide a comprehensive overview of tactics without making any specific recommendation.

Implementers of these tactics are advised to take into account their relationship with their audience, as what might be appropriate in some contexts might be unwanted in others. The conversation about ad blocking continues to evolve, and the norms of expected publisher behavior may change significantly and rapidly.

A wide net was cast with regards to risks and benefits, as the group aims to educate about all possibilities.

Contents

Overview

Faced with growing concerns about ad blocking impacting available inventory, publishers are seeking an understanding of available tactics to offset potential revenue loss in order to continue delivering the desired content and services to their user base.

This primer aims to describe a range of tactics that may be used individually or in tandem in order to mitigate this concern. Each tactic bears risks as well as benefits. The participants in the Ad Blocking Working Group came to consensus early on that no tactic would be specifically recommended in this primer, since the appropriate tactics are expected to vary based on the publisher relationship with audience, as well as on changing norms as the industry as a whole reacts to ad blocking.

There are seven different tactics described in this primer, each with a varying risk and benefit profile. It is the opinion of IAB that conversations with a user should follow the DEAL process, applying the tactics deemed appropriate based on the publishers' relationship with their audience, as well as other factors:

Detect ad blocking, in order to initiate the conversation.
Explain the value exchange that advertising enables.
Ask for changed behavior in order to maintain an equitable exchange.
Lift restrictions or **L**imit access in response to consumer choices

Most of the tactics described below fall into the Lift and Limit section of DEAL.

Tactics

1. Notice

Initiating communication is an important part of most tactics. Whether communication is simply to educate and raise awareness of ad blocking impact, or it's a firmer notice of limitations if ad blocking behavior isn't abandoned, there are important aspects to keep in mind.

Implementations

Most simply, once ad blocking is detected, present a message to the site visitor. This message may occur as a page header, overlay, or landing page at the start of the site visit, or be delayed until the visitor has interacted with the site for a certain amount of time, across a certain number of pages, or other engagement criteria, where it also may appear as an interstitial.

The delivery of recurring notice may be used to induce site visitors to disable ad blocking, in the style that unlimited-trial nagware has done in software.

A variety of messages are possible:

- Education
  This type of message focuses on informing the visitor of the site-wide or industry-wide value of advertising.
- Request for disabling of ad blocking software
  Providing the visitor with instructions on how to disable some ad blocking on the site or across all sites. Some ad blocking list maintainers have issued guidance on requirements that might keep this notice from being blocked.
- Request for donations or micropayments
  Seeking direct revenue streams outside of advertising is a survival tactic being taken by long tail publishers, and platforms like Patreon offer a path for highly engaged site visitors to directly support the publisher. Messaging in this area directs those visitors who have ad blockers active to these options.
- Inform the user of direct implications of continued ad blocking
  When a publisher is using other tactics to limit ad block user access to content and services, notice importantly describes what these limits are, and what options the visitor has to lift them.

The working group indicated that there could be value in providing industry-standard text for these different messages.

Risks

The practice of issuing notice is intentionally noticeable by site visitors, and therefore has a high potential risk. However, the act of issuing notice in itself is not tremendously risky - it's user reaction to other tactics described in notice that are more likely to generate discussion.

Here are some risks to keep in mind:

- Raising Awareness
  There's a risk of raising awareness of ad blockers, especially in the case of false positives.
- Limited Value
  Notice alone has been reported to be of very limited value in changing visitor behavior. There are various explanations for this, including the psychological difficulty that anonymous individuals have in taking responsibility for group behavior, and that browser based ad blocking tools have capacity to block the messaging windows.
- Does not address the audience discrepancy issue.
- Blocked Messages
  Ad blocking list maintainers have issued guidance on what type of notice they might not disable. Adhering to this guidance is not guaranteed to ensure delivery, especially when the Notice tactic is coupled with any other tactic that limits access to content or requires payment.

Benefits

Issuing notice is a conversation starter.

- It's a light touch entry point into further discussions with the user about ad blocking and value exchange.
- It's an education and engagement opportunity.

2. Access Denial

Preventing access is an immediate and obvious way to highlight the value exchange enabled by advertising.

Implementations

Most simply, once ad blocking is detected, deny access to the content that the user has requested. Detection and the access denial may occur on a splash page at session start, in line with the requested content, or as an interstitial after ad blocking has been detected across a certain number of pages.

Implementations can include an informative message about the publisher decision to deny access, and options available to the consumer in order to gain access, like through disabling ad blocking or by registering or subscribing.

Risks

Denying access to content can be a drastic move, especially when transitioning to such a policy. Therefore, always consider pairing with alternate payment opportunity (subscription, micropayment).

Transitioning to this policy may alienate the existing audience:

- There's the definite possibility of shrinking total audience for a site that implements access denial. This audience may migrate to other sites.
- There's also a risk of reduced sharing of content, both because of a smaller audience and a potentially lower willingness to share constrained content.

There are risks around taking a strong stance:

- False or perceived false positives
  The visitor might be on a slow connection or network that has poor connectivity with the ad systems, or they might not know they're actually having ads blocked at the network level.
- Risk promoting ad blockers
  Initial strong stances like access denial generate press around ad blocking. Additionally, false or perceived false positives directly inform a visitor about ad blocking.

On the technology front, there are supplementary risks:

- Search bots might not be able to read the content, reducing search rank.
- Simple ineffectiveness against moderately technically savvy users.

Benefits

Having a follow-up to detection that has immediately understandable implications to the user:

- Has been shown to have a much more significant impact on user behavior than simple notice, because there's access on the line.
- Immediately and directly degrades the ad block user's experience, an important factor in dissuading adoption of ad blocking.
- Reinforces the value exchange.

In terms of metrics:

- This practice may mitigate the Audience Discrepancy issue, provided its effective and consistent access denial.

3. Tiered Experience

Providing a constrained or otherwise modified experience that changes the value proposition when ad blocking is enabled - without outright denying access to the content.

Implementations

A tiered experience modifies the level of access that a visitor with ad blocking enabled has, when compared to the level of access provided to a visitor without ad blocking. This may fall along a spectrum of experiences already established for visitors with paid subscriptions, visitors who have gone through a free registration, and visitors who have done neither.

Developing an appropriately tuned tiered experience will require creativity and ongoing study. Examples include:

- Deliver 90 seconds of dead air in a video stream that is truncated to 30 seconds if the user watches an ad.
- Allow access to three article views per month for unregistered users who have ad blockers, and 10 article views per month for unregistered users who do not have ad blockers.

Risks

Risks that are unique to this tactic include:

- Visitor Satiation
  Visitors may adapt to the degraded experience, feeling that they're OK getting less or waiting longer. This acceptance results in opportunity cost for the publisher. This is especially concerning when high-engagement visitors are satiated.
- Generic, Non-Actioned Dissatisfaction
  Visitors might choose the degraded experience, but feel that the publisher is no longer as valuable a resource, which may result in tarnishing the brand.

Risks that are shared with other soft or hard walls include:

- Costs
  A tiered experience introduces additional system complexity, and therefore results in higher development costs.
- Escalation
  Risk of escalation of technology arms race between the tiered experience and ad blocking technologies.

Generalized risks include:

- Audience Discrepancy
  Since some visitors with ad blockers will continue to visit the site, the audience demographics measured by site analytics may be out of sync with the audience demographics available to advertising.
- Risk of promoting ad blockers, especially in the case of false positives.

Benefits

Providing a tiered experience has the potential to offer meaningful choice without the same hard wall that Access Denial offers. As such:

- Audience Retention
  Since some access remains available, it's less likely to shrink audience than direct Access Denial.
- More Engagement Opportunities
  A tiered experience offers the opportunity to leverage the space allocated to the blocked ad units for other purposes during the ad blocking users' visit. This provides publishers with a canvas for interesting things, at their discretion.

Additionally:

- It can integrate with existing subscription funnel implementations.
- It is less likely to deny access to search engine spiders.

4. Payments from Visitors

Payments may be solicited from site visitors in a variety of ways - from optional micropayments to required payments, there is a growing set of tools supporting regular donations, and a well-established body of knowledge for subscriptions.

Payments, in this context, are value provided by the visitor to the publisher, and may include non-financial payments as well - the exchange of information through filling in surveys, the organization, rating, or contribution of user generated content, or the promotion of the publisher in other contexts.

Examining paid and free version of mobile apps will provide additional insight into the different experiences that can be provided to visitors who choose to engage in a payment system.

Implementations

When requested, payments may be required and enforced with access denial or a tiered experience, or may be entirely voluntary. A payment system could span multiple publishers.

Implementations where payment is required include:

- Subscription
  Time-based recurring payment.
- Punch-Card
  Non-recurring payment granting increased access across a set number of accesses.
- Timed Pass
  Non-recurring payment granting increased access for a set period.
- Members' Only Section
  Content or features only available to visitors who are making some form of payment.

Implementations where payment is not required include:

- Scheduled Donations
  Seeking support from a subset of visitors via optional, recurring payments. Platforms enabling this model already exist, providing a path to recurring revenue to smaller content producers who don't have the technical expertise to do it themselves.
- Curated Micropayments
  Seeking support from a subset of visitors via optional, one-time payments. The "tip jar" or "pay what you want" concept has been long promoted as a means of supporting open source software.

Additionally, any of these implementations may be offered by a group of publishers, all recognizing the visitor's centralized payment.

Risks

Risks associated with financial payments:

- Operational Complexity
  Above and beyond establishing a registration and authentication system, there is additional complexity processing payments from consumers, especially when dealing with an international audience.
- Increased Risk Profile
  Receiving financial information from visitors exposes publishers to a new set of risks associated with handling payment information. Outsourcing financial processing mitigates some of these, while introducing others.
- Increased Operational Costs
  Cost of maintaining the billing system, whether supporting micropayments, subscriptions, or other, is non zero, and represents an upfront (if self-developed) or ongoing (if outsourcing) cost that needs to be accounted for.
- Pricing Complexity
  Determining a price point that's both reasonable to the user and also covers the loss in revenue from other monetization models is a relatively unknown process. This is especially complicated in the context of micropayments where the value that the user places on the content has impact on the viability of the system.

Risks to engagement:

- Disenfranchise User Base
  There's a possibility to lose part of the audience that doesn't want to engage in an explicit value exchange.
- Social Friction
  If payment is required, there's increased friction around link sharing, social media shares, and other sources of organic traffic.

Additional risks:

- User Costs
  With advertising, the visitor is not challenged to enter different payment information for each publisher they visit. Receiving payments from users can introduce significant time

costs to visitors - especially if there are multiple system handling payments for the sites and services that a visitor interacts with through their day.

- Limited Adoption
  Optional payment systems, like donations, reduce the pool of visitors that are generating revenue for the publisher, having implications directly on revenue. Additionally, broad adoption of optional payment systems might result in the tuning of content and services to better serve donators.
- Societal Impact
  There are broad societal implications to paywalling valuable information across the board. There is intrinsic societal benefit to ensuring equitable access to content and services.
- Multi-Platform Challenges
  Seeking payment of one form or another is challenging in the web context. Scaling to support the mobile context introduces additional costs.

Benefits

Consumer inertia:

- Inertia
  The subscription model has shown that subscribers are likely to continue paying unless they become extremely dissatisfied.
- Network Effect
  If multiple publishers all recognize a visitor's centralized payment, all sites in the network might see more activity from paying users.
- Relationship Value
  The act of paying for a subscription may cause a visitor to increase the perceived value of the content or service that they're paying for.

Stable, predictable revenue:

- Subscribers
  A subscription is a long term secured revenue source. Tactics like spot pricing can be used to motivate long term subscriptions.

5. Ad Reinsertion

Ad reinsertion is the process of using technology to insert ads that bypass ad blocking. The term “ad reinsertion” indicates that ads are being put into the experience after ad blockers are detected, and does not necessarily mean that the ads originally intended to be delivered are being put back in.

Implementations

There are three main methods of ad reinsertion - changing ad resource names and URLs, using JavaScript and other code in browser to generate unblockable requests, and modifying the supply chain so that advertising resources are delivered by the content server.

Obfuscation

- Modifying the names and locations of advertising resources so that they no longer match the patterns used by ad blocking software. This is the most basic of implementations.

In Browser

- Using technology in the web browser to modify the requests to the advertising resources so that they’re no longer detected by ad blocking software.

On Server

- Using server-side ad stitching like what’s described in VAST 4.0, request the advertising and deliver it from the same server as the content or service.

Risks

The process of using technology to re-insert advertising has a variety of risks.

Risk of escalation:

- Between Ad Blocking and the Publisher
  The practice of re-inserting ads may result in ad blocking software escalating their technology and filters in order to block the re-inserted ads. This may also occur even in the re-inserting technology is used to deliver notice - ad blocking technology does include blocking options for anti-blocking messages.
- Between the Advertising Industry and Anti-Advertising Activists
  By re-inserting ads, especially ads that are not sensitive to user preference around reducing ad payload (LEAN principles), there is a risk to attract attention from anti-advertising activists looking for targets.

Risks to data and measurability

- Less Verification
  Server-side stitching reduces access by third parties to client-side data, introducing a dependency on identity synchronization. This method also has implications on third party measurement and verification.
- Costs
  There are increased technology costs to ensuring client-side data collection.
- Reduced Data Access
  Reduced access to pre-synced cookies and other third party data because ad reinsertion won't have been performed everywhere. Less data to make advertising decisions on, less value of the impression.

Risks to user experience

- Complacency
  The ability to reinsert ads may result in publisher complacency towards user experience.
- Evolving Technology
  There are risks intrinsic to implementing new technologies.

Benefits

Ad reinsertion has some clear benefits:

- Reclaim Inventory and Revenue
  Ad reinsertion reclaims the inventory. However, this doesn't mean that identical revenues will be reclaimed, proportional to the inventory reclaimed. The act of reclaiming inventory generates different access to data, should result in a different creative experience, and a different audience slice of the site audience.
- Additional Segmentation Opportunities
  The fact that a user has an ad blocker active allows additional segmentation, allowing the flighting of experiments in ad campaigns that align more strongly to LEAN principles, for example. The self-selected users provide an opportunity to experiment and adopt more user-centric designs and monetizations.
- Enforcement
  Ad reinsertion uphold the value of a paid "ad-free" version of the content or service, and such a paid version can be an important part of converting visitors to subscribers.
- Consistency
  By enforcing a consistent content or service experience for both users with ad blockers

and those without, a publisher can have only one user experience to test and drive value discussions around.

- Sustains the Ad Supported Business Model
- Mitigates Audience Discrepancy

6. Payment to Ad Blocker Companies

Implementations

This is a business practice rather than a specific response to an in-session blocking. It is included for completeness.

Risks

Paying ad blocking companies has direct risks to the industry:

- Directly Fund Ad Blocking Technology
  Money spent funds the continued development of ad blocking software.
- Less Creative Options
  Reduced scope of creative options because of required adherence to “Acceptable Ads” criteria. Additionally, these criteria may be a moving target.
- Potentially Short Lived Gains
  The business model is unproven. Payment and inclusion into some ad blocker whitelists may motivate users to migrate to more stringent ad blockers that do not allow any whitelisting, more damaging to the industry overall.
- User Impact
  Payment may result in user backlash.

There are also limits to the unblocking:

- Partial Reach of Ad Blockers
  Some ad blockers do not allow any whitelisting, and that audience would not be gained.
- Partial Reach of Partners
  Payment doesn’t gain access for all partners - it doesn’t enable the standard flow of data through the supply chain, resulting in lower value for the audience that is reached. This also results in increased discrepancies when multiple parties try to measure campaigns.

Benefits

Paying is not without benefits:

- Gain Access
  to audience that is running ad blockers, except for those that opt-out, or use ad blockers that do not allow whitelisting.
- Relatively Predictable Cost
  Does not result in an engineering challenge against an unpredictable opponent.

7. Payments to Visitors

A variety of models already exist that reward visitors and users for their time spent with advertising. From mobile games that provide extra time, lives, or items to players that choose to view ads, to web clients that propose to share some advertising revenue with their users, payments to visitors are an increasingly investigated method of motivating users to value ads.

Implementations

- Financial Revenue Share With Users

  Share a portion of advertising revenue with registered users.
- Rewards

  As has been established in mobile gaming, the allocation of non-currency rewards, like gaming credits, can also be applied in non-gaming contexts by providing article access or other perks.
- Collaboration

  The coordination of multiple publishers through a single value exchange makes both financial and non-financial rewards more easily distributed.

Risks

Any system that generates payment to the general public has some fundamental risks:

- Fraud
  By paying money to registered users, there's a risks of motivating groups to view ads abnormally to generate money.
- Low Value
  The amount of money that's actually clearly allocatable to a single user might not be enough to motivate participation.
- Strong Identity Requirement

  If there's money on the table, there's a requirement of personal information, a significant change in the amount of data requested of visitors.

Additionally, complexity may be a permanent blocker:

- System complexity
  System complexity and the need to achieve a critical mass so that the investment in overcoming complexity pays off.

Benefits

A network of publishers providing visitors with a small pool of currency to reallocate to other publishers may generate a virtuous cycle.

Rewarding visitors:

- May be Cyclical
  May end up being cyclical, especially when paired with the ability to accept micropayments.
- May Raise Awareness
  The act of rewarding makes viewers aware that they've been getting content for free, brought to them by advertising.

Conclusion

This primer presents a variety of options. While each tactic will likely be found inappropriate by some, providing insight into the breadth of actions available was deemed valuable, especially paired with guidance on the risks and benefits associated with each.

Glossary

There are a few recurring concepts in this primer. These are discussed below, in more detail.

Audience Discrepancies

The makeup of the audience predicted based on first party analytics does not match the measured audience makeup in the advertising context, because ad blocking is unevenly adopted across demographics.

False Positives

A “false positive” is a condition where ad blocking is thought to be detected, but in fact is not. There are two types of false positive, from the site visitor perspective:

Actual Detection Errors

The detection code makes a mistake.

Unknowing Use

The visitor has had ad blocking installed by a system administrator, institutional network provider, or ISP.

Incidental Promotion of Ad Blockers

The visitor is made aware of ad blockers specifically, where they may not have been aware before, due to false positives. Alternatively, implementing post-detection tactics generates press that raises general awareness of ad blocking.