Primer for Publishers on Improving Ad Viewability

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Purpose and Context

Transformation in measurement and currency brings with it imperatives for change in processes and responsibilities associated with a number of core publisher roles. Publishers need to address viewability at scale in order to optimize inventory monetization and minimize waste. In addition, and of paramount importance, publishers must reach these goals with the consumer at the heart of the efforts. Poor user experience even with enhanced viewability will likely not yield desired outcomes.

For more than a year, IAB member companies have been sharing knowledge and experiences with viewability implementation. As is the case with any business and currency transformation, requisite knowledge takes time to accrue. The guidance on viewability implementation and improvement herein was gathered from publishers, large and small; some with large numbers of technology resources and expertise, and others with less technology focused organizations.

The purpose of this document is to aid publishers in their endeavors to increase the viewability of the Display and Video (excludes Mobile, Native/In-stream) ads on their site, thus improving the value of those ads for advertisers, marketers, and the user experience. It is intended to be ad-server and content management system agnostic. It is also intended to include ad tech improvements, site changes, and business model changes that can be undertaken.

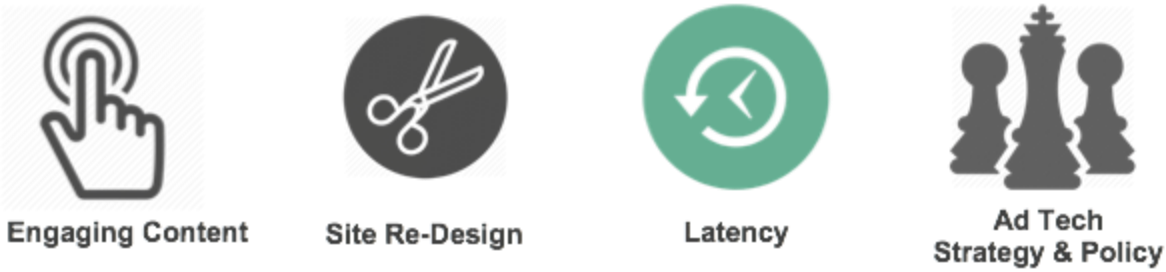
Of absolutely critical importance is the notion that viewability improvement be accomplished in alignment with the IAB LEAN ads program: publishers need to be mindful of the numbers of ads per page, and the type of ads, as well as the viewability of those ads. To this end, they need to partner closely with advertisers/agencies, and 3rd party vendors, in addition to improving viewability of their inventory.

Throughout the document, all references to third party viewability measurement are predicated on the requirement that said vendor(s) be audited and accredited by the Media Rating Council, or MRC. The MRC is the ecosystem wide measurement governance body. The industry standard for viewability is as follows:

1. Desktop display - at least 50% of pixels in view for at least one second
2. Desktop video – at least 50% of pixels in view for at least two seconds
3. For Rising Star ads or ads larger than 242,500 pixels/970 X 250, the standard calls for **30% of pixels in view** rather than 50% for at least one second.

It is important to note that viewability is not about ad effect nor ad engagement. It is simply the delivery of ads that render on the screen, thus providing the Opportunity To See (OTS).

The **primary levers** that influence ad viewability are: Engaging content, site design, latency, and Ad Tech/Ops strategy & policies. This primer will address all of these levers with the exclusion of one—the creation of engaging content.



Viewability Improvement can be driven in roughly four phases:

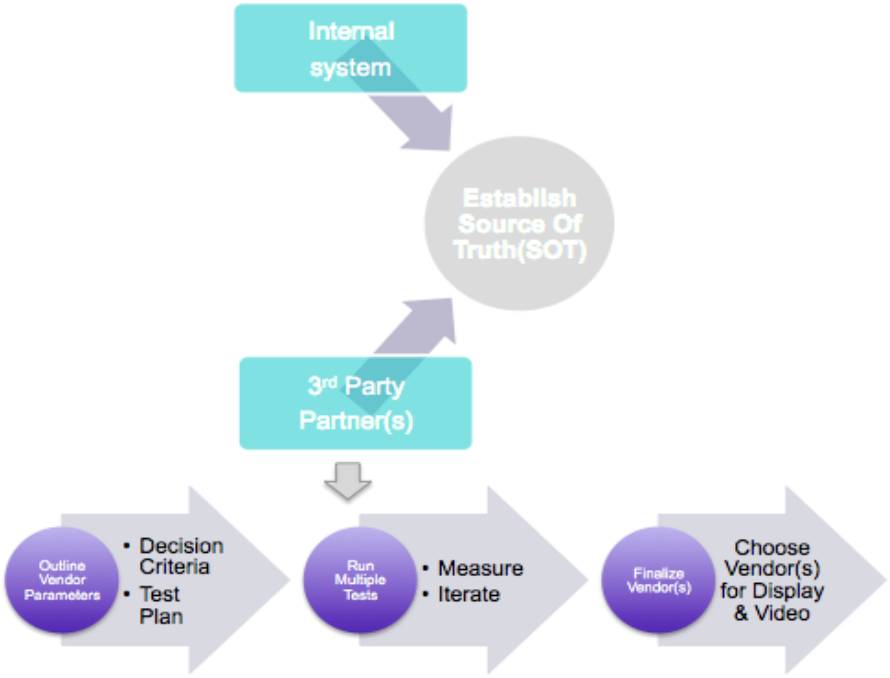
1. Measure & Benchmark 2. Analyze 3. Plan & Execute, and 4. Measure & Iterate

Benchmark

Establish Source of Truth

A pre-requisite for publishers, before embarking on a journey to enhance the aggregate viewability of their ads, is to understand the current state of measurement, viewability rates, and latency of content/ads. Improvement of measurement rates (a.k.a measurability) has a direct correlation to improving viewability rates. Similarly, ad latency improvement has a direct effect on ad viewability. Thus any improvement plan would require a baseline of all these aspects in concert.

As a starting point, establish an ongoing data system, either internal or a trusted 3rd party vendor, as the publisher's source of truth (preferred benchmark source) for assessment of viewability measurement and viewability rates, as well as latency on your site(s).



Ideally an internal measurement system that you trust is the best approach. This involves significant tech investment and may not be viable for smaller publishers. The alternative is to pick one vendor that you expect to partner with, for a reasonable amount of time (refer to Working with 3rd party vendors section for testing steps). This is critical to ensure that, as changes are made, you are operating from a consistent baseline. The current differences between vendors are simply too great to be able to assess longitudinal changes using different vendors.

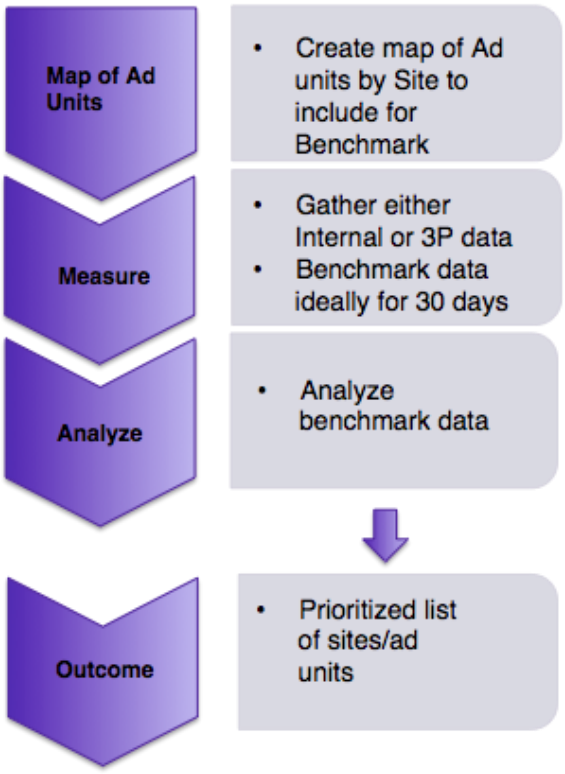
When it comes to choosing a vendor, if you don't have a reliable internal measurement system, outline vendor assessment parameters and compare against internal data sources to determine a vendor of choice. Where there is no internal measurement benchmark, run multiple tests across the vendor(s) to establish trust in vendor's measurement and viewability rates.

Publishers who don't have an internal measurement system, and don't wish to leverage a 3rd party vendor, can run internal tests (combination of qualitative, and manual server log examination) to establish confidence with viewability measurement, viewability, and latency rates.

The key is that the publisher identify a source of truth that can be applied to the establishment of a baseline and to subsequent testing and iterating, potentially leading to more investment in internal measurement and/or vendor-based measurement.

Measurement

Once the source of truth for measurement has been identified, the key steps described can facilitate establishment of a measurement baseline.



Create a map of ad units by site that should be included or excluded from the measurement benchmark exercise (track by ad size, ad format, property/site, geo location, user consumption behavior, etc.). Be sure to exclude ad units that are not part of your viewability offering. E.g Text Line 1, 1x1 pixels, and the like.

Ad Operations teams can help fine-tune this list based on how vCPM (viewable CPM-billed) campaigns are optimized. Gather internal (or 3rd party) measurement metrics against a map of ad units on key publisher sites.

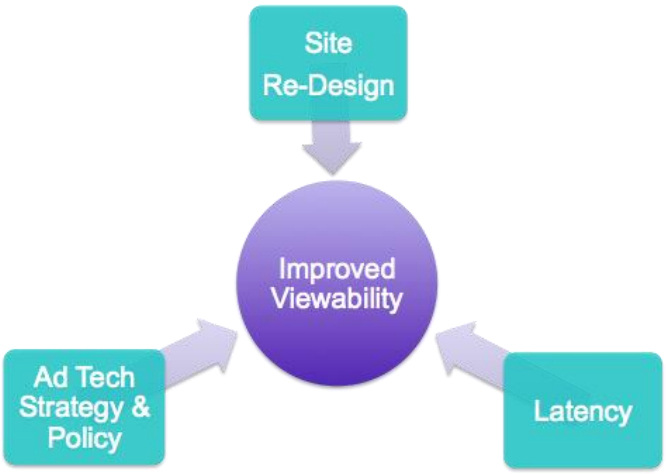
Identify a prioritized list of sites/ad positions that will become the focus of your overall improvement plan.

Here is a sample template that can be utilized for creating an inventory of ad units by site. This can be leveraged for gathering baseline data as well. Note that this initial phase could range from 1 to 4 weeks depending on the scale and complexity of your data systems.

Site	Ad size	Incl/Excl	Measurement%	Viewable%	ATF/BTF	Ad Render Time	Page Latency	Revenue
Front Page	300X250	Y	95%	83%	B	200ms	250ms.	$XXX,XXX
Sports	970X250	Y	80%	74%	A	450ms	…..	$XXX,XXX
News	TL1	N	98%	80%	A	200ms	…..	$XXX,XXX

To achieve improved ad viewability, each of the levers of viewability require adequate focus. Publishers can't improve ad viewability by addressing latency or site-design in isolation.

The recommended approach is to establish parallel tracks to address site design, latency, and Ad Tech strategy and operations.



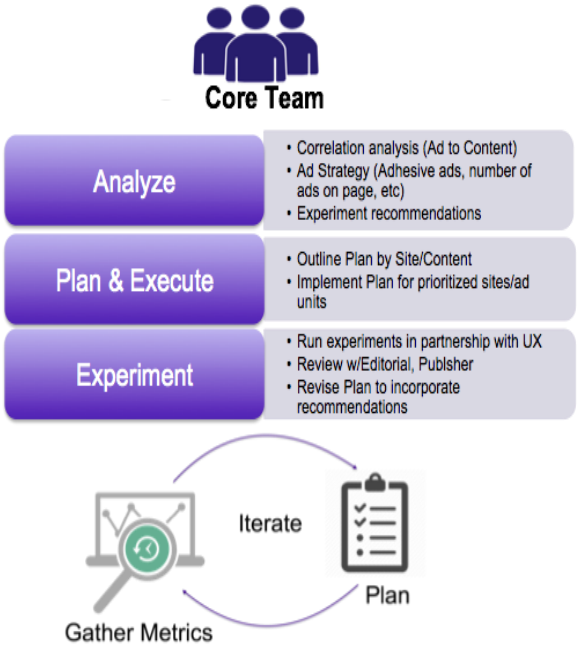
Each such swim lane would ideally have cross-functional "core teams," spanning Publisher, Ad Tech, Latency, Revenue, and Policy teams (to the extent that such teams exist within the publisher's organization). The core-team focuses on the analysis, planning, implementation, and refinement. This enables overall accountability.

Managing the Levers

Site Re-Design

Display: In order to affect site changes that improve viewability, it's important to conduct an in-depth site overview. The data gathered in the benchmark section drives the analysis and recommendations in this phase. The key steps to conducting an in-depth site overview are:

Perform an in-depth analysis of the baseline data—how different ad units are performing across sites. The output from this analysis is a set of recommendations on ad placements by site and page-type, as well as the generation of a hypotheses for experiments that have potential for improved viewability.



Partner with UX design teams on experimentation. Experimentation results would inform empirical proofs for recommendations to Design and Publisher teams. An example would be to leverage content specific ad formats (native video ads accompanying video content).

Establish a vCPM pricing strategy and rate card that encapsulates the publisher site and ad tech optimizations for improved viewability.

The outcome of above steps coupled with financial modeling would help solidify a site redesign plan, which could include:

a. Ad unit A is more viewable on home pages, so make it a persistent unit on home pages

b. Turn off ad unit B on article pages and replace with ad unit C. Make ad unit C adhesive, due to scroll behavior on page

c. Refresh ad unit Z only when in-view and at a set time, due to higher user engagement on page, etc.

Video: With the deeper focus on viewability, even long form video content presentation must be considered. Long form video content often performs at the high end of the viewability spectrum, but changes can be made in two primary areas to improve viewability measurements.

Page scrolling: There are two approaches here depending on how much ancillary content is offered and how important it is to display that content to the viewer during video playback.

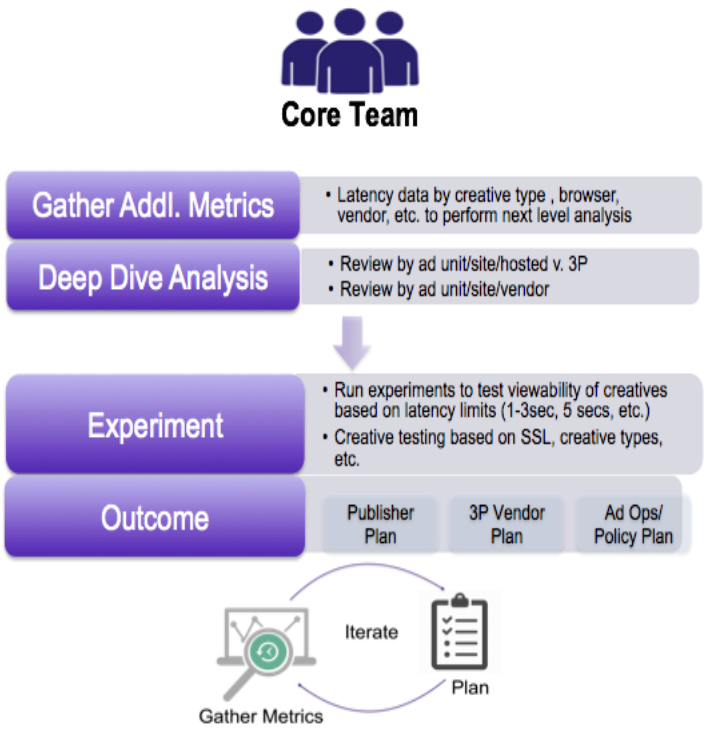
a. Only play back video in full screen mode

b. Lock the video player window into the viewable screen area and only scroll the ancillary content, not the video player

Out of focus tabs/windows: With consumer multitasking being common, out of focus tabs/windows are a core reason that viewability rates suffer with long form video. An approach to dealing with this problem would be to pause video playback when the tab or window is out of focus on the device.

Ad Latency Improvements

Viewability measurements start once the ad has been fully rendered. Hence, latency pertaining to ad render time has a direct impact on the viewability of an ad. Below are a schematic and a description of how to structure and conduct a latency baseline exercise. This exercise is the core component of a deep-dive into specific latency drivers.

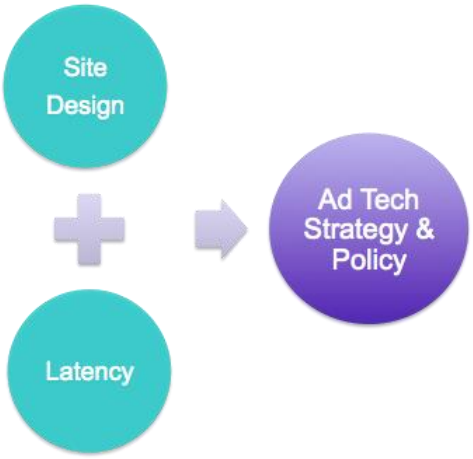


Gather additional latency metrics for those sites/ad units identified in the benchmark section above, specifically including ad rendering time, site-served and 3rd party serving vendor, browser, creative type (Flash/HTML5), secure/non-secure, etc.

The analysis of data from the site re-design section above, can educate the latency improvement plan. Since 3rd party served creatives generally tend to have higher latency, establish a vendor-specific latency plan, prioritized by revenue impact. Instituting asynchronous ad calls, avoiding passbacks, and other such tactics could lead to reduction in ad rendering time.

Video: In a long form video environment and in some dedicated short form video content experiences where the user experience is primarily delivered via a video player, there is a linear stream of content and ads. In these environments, latency is less of an issue because (1) the user focused on a singular consumption experience, and (2) with the expectation of highly desired content that typically is longer length, the user may be willing to sit through minor latency.

Ad Tech Strategy & Policy Changes



The plans for site re-design and latency improvement can educate and evolve the Ad Tech strategy and corresponding process changes.

For example, higher file weights may be contributing to higher ad rendering time, for certain ad units. Broadly we will break this into the following categories:

Rules for determining viewability of below the fold ads

1. Only serve below-the-fold ads when they become viewable. Share this signal with your partners in the bid request (as an ATF unit).
    a. Below-the-fold ads may need to be adhesive on certain portions of the site. Be mindful of the user experience when making such design changes.
2. Limit existing creative weight on specific sites, and on 3rd party creatives
    a. Discuss with Creative and Sales
    b. Assess how much is too much
    c. Charge more for heavy assets
3. Change existing processes, e.g. site-serving instead of 3rd party serving certain types of creatives if you have that option
4. Establish creative-size limits on RTB calls
5. Adjust ad-refresh configuration and methodologies. Experimentation will guide the optimal ad refresh configurations. Please note that auto-refreshing ads can improve viewability in certain instances but can also negatively impact the user experience.

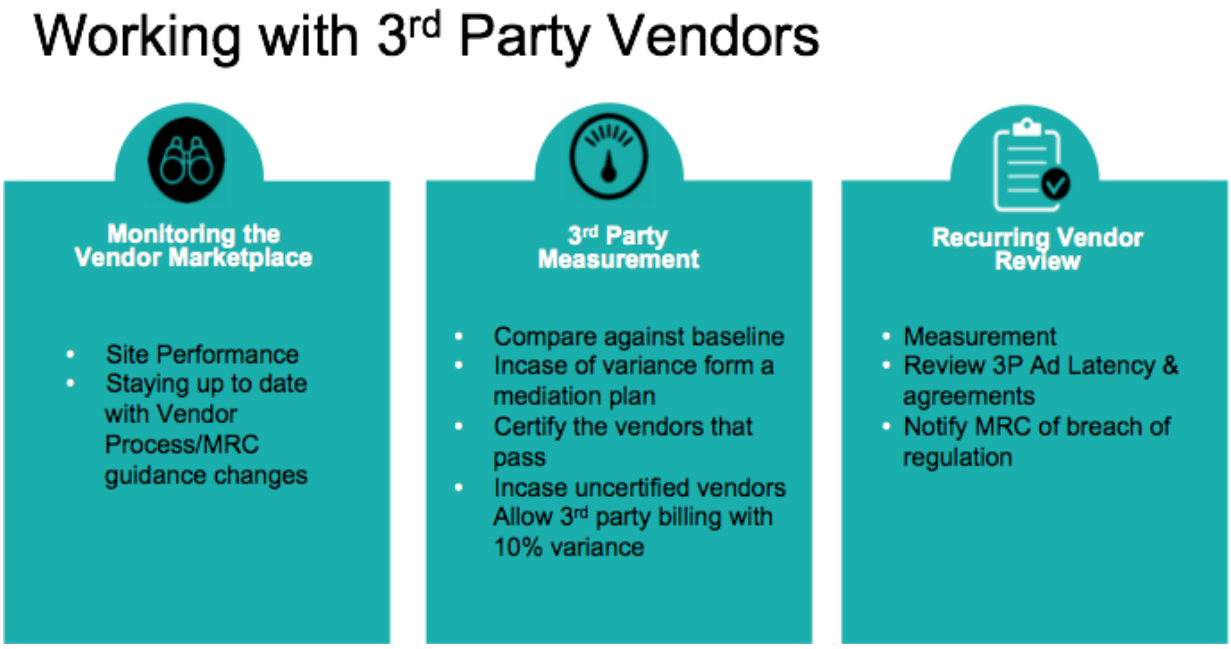
Ad Tech strategy and policy should be continuously monitored and evolved based on industry changes such as Chrome 45 “Power Save,” HTML5 versus Flash, secure creative, ad blocking, etc.

Partnership with 3rd party vendors is critical to achieving improvement across the three levers of viewability. In addition, continuous advertiser education will result in better outcomes for both the publishers and advertisers.

Working with 3rd Party Vendors

Advertisers/agencies base business decisions on directional analysis of publisher viewable rates, as provided by their trusted vendors. However, publishers don’t have visibility into how the vendors are measuring viewable impressions. Thus it’s important to have ongoing visibility to how different vendors assess the viewability of your site.

This doesn’t need to have the same detail of work you do with your own systems, or primary vendor, but is necessary to understand the risks you are encountering when you agree to bill off a new vendor. For example, a typical outcome might be “we see that Vendor B consistently measures our 300x250 10 percent lower, and 160x600 20 percent higher than our primary vendor.” This exercise will also uncover whether there are large risks (e.g. your primary vendor estimates the site viewability at 65 percent, but a vendor you haven’t worked with before estimates 30 percent).



Monitoring the Vendor Marketplace

Monitoring the Vendor Marketplace involves understanding how your sites(s) typically perform.

It's also important to stay abreast of changes in vendor processes/MRC marketplace guidance. For example, higher file weights may be contributing to higher ad latency for certain ad units. Broadly, this can be addressed as a combination of 3rd party measurement, 3rd party serving, and ongoing reviews with vendors.

3rd Party Measurement

1. Run tests with 3rd party viewability vendors, and compare against your measurement baseline
2. Identify gaps in vendor measurement by ad size and site
3. Where the measurement variance is greater than acceptable levels (e.g. >10%), establish a remediation plan with the vendor to fix measurement as a pre-condition for certification. Publishers are not required to have a vendor certification process, as long as measurement variances by vendor(s) are known and operations risks are minimized via active vendor partnership.
4. Certify a limited set of trusted vendors for 3rd party billing
5. If advertisers choose a vendor outside of the trusted vendor list for billing purposes, then allow for 3rd Party vendor billing, as long as measurement is within a certain tolerance level (usually within 10%)
6. Integrate with 3rd Party vendors for better optimization of viewable campaigns (use 3rd party measurement to optimize), if this is an option for you. If you use a SSP, you may be able to do this through private marketplaces and their vendor integrations.

3rd Party Ad Serving

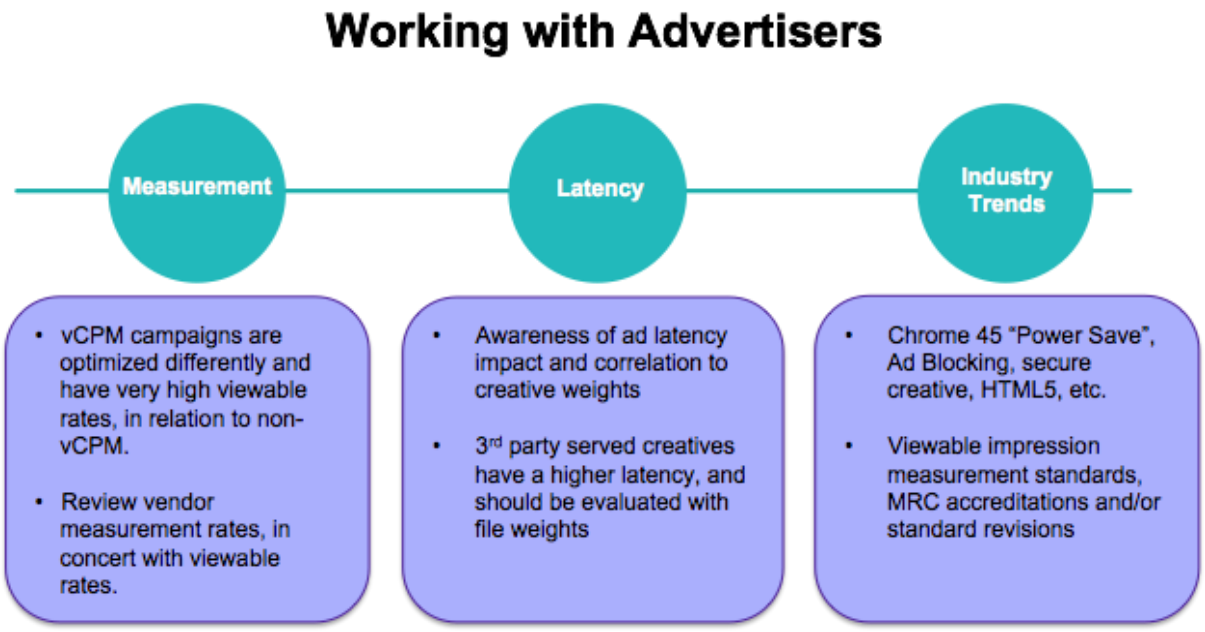
1. Prior to allowing a 3rd party ad serving vendor to serve ads on your site, publishers need to run tests to validate the vendor can successfully serve ads on their sites
2. Measure latency against response time and render time against publisher latency guidelines, for an initial vendor certification
3. Since latency has a significant bearing on viewability, ongoing monitoring for a set period (30 to 60 days) may be necessary, prior to a final certification.

Ongoing 3rd Party Vendor Review

1. Measurement: Review measurement rates from different vendors and share the results with them on a regular basis (monthly or quarterly depending on revenue/impression volume). Review contractual agreements, so the vendor is aligned on measurement rates.
2. Ad Serving Latency: Review latency stats with 3rd party ad serving vendors on a regular basis, particularly due to the impact on viewable campaigns. Review contractual agreements and adjust for SLA expectations.
3. Communicate irregularities to MRC. The best way to resolve measurement issues, and ultimately improve measurement methodology and precision, is to surface issues with MRC.

Working with Advertisers and Agencies

Advertisers/agencies currently (as of late 2015), base business decisions on directional analysis of publisher viewable rates, as provided by their trusted vendors. In some instances, they require guaranteed viewable impression delivery, and this requirement is likely to grow over time. Advertisers may choose vendor(s) who are either not certified or tested by the publisher for viewability measurement.



Thus, publishers would benefit from educating advertisers and agencies on the measurement, latency and industry trends.

Measurement: There are wide variance in viewability rates for vCPM campaigns, due to differences in optimization. vCPM campaigns have very high viewability rates compared to non-vCPM campaigns. Viewability rates when viewed in isolation provide an incomplete picture, if not coupled with measurement rates. Advertisers and agencies would benefit from evaluating both in concert.

Latency: Ad latency impact and correlation to creative weights, particularly when served by an outside vendor, is another factor that can impact performance.

Industry Trends: Industry tech trends, such as Chrome 45 "Power Save," HTML5 versus Flash, secure creative, ad blocking, etc. impact advertiser performance. Awareness of these trends, in addition to the viewable impression measurement standards, and the latest MRC accreditations and/or revisions to standards, will help better guide the spend decisions of advertisers and agencies.

Summary Thoughts

This primer was created with the publishers' needs front and center. To improve viewability, all the key levers of viewability must be addressed: Engaging content, site design, latency, and Ad Tech/Ops strategy & policies.

When publishers create the necessary changes, the marketplace does respond and the rewards do follow. It is absolutely essential that publishers deal with partners in a transparent way. In assessing measurement vendors, transparency on both sides is critical: Know your site level data and know your vendor methodologies, and leverage your understanding of how ads operate on your sites to cross-check vendor data.

From a revenue optimization perspective, partnership across the publisher organization is vital to assessing value for the more viewable inventory, for fostering the education of advertisers and agencies about how viewability works and how to value it, for garnering optimal revenue and for assuring the best possible user experience.

Appendix

IAB LEAN Ads Program: http://www.iab.com/news/lean/

MRC: http://mediaratingcouncil.org/

Ad Blocking: http://digiday.com/publishers/wtf-ad-blocking/

Chrome 45 “Power Save”: http://chrome.blogspot.sg/2015/06/better-battery-life-for-your-laptop.html