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To Build a Brand, Colleges Try Ads That Follow Browsers Across the Web

By Beckie Supiano

When Mary E. Chase noticed an ad for Hawaiian Airlines on Omaha.com several years ago, she was perplexed. Ms. Chase, associate vice president for enrollment at Creighton University, in Nebraska's largest city, frequently travels to recruit students in Hawaii. In fact, she had just booked a trip on Hawaiian Airlines. She knew the airline didn't fly out of Omaha, so why would it advertise on the city's local news site?

Ms. Chase didn't know it at the time, but the airline had followed her across the Internet in a form of advertising called retargeting. In all likelihood, Hawaiian's Web site, like many others, buys advertising through a pool of sites called an exchange. Visiting the airline's site tagged Ms. Chase's browser. When a person with a tagged browser visits other sites, any that belong to the exchange may display an ad from the initial site.

This all became clear to Ms. Chase a few years ago, when she met Owen Landon at a conference. At the time, Mr. Landon was dabbling in retargeting in his work at a marketing firm. He has since started his own company, Echo-Interactive.

For many advertisers, retargeting is a way to "close the deal," Mr. Landon explains. Online retailers often use it when somebody puts an item in a virtual shopping cart but never checks out. Suddenly the would-be buyer sees repeated reminders on unrelated Web sites of the shoes or book left behind.

For-profit colleges have used retargeting for a while now, and some nonprofit institutions are starting to try it out, too, says Melissa M. Rekos, vice president for digital sales at Alloy Education, a marketing agency. About 75 of her company's 500 nonprofit-college clients are experimenting with retargeting, she says. Just a handful of marketing firms, she adds, are selling this type of advertising to colleges.

Buying ads through an exchange is relatively cheap, and colleges

can control their costs by limiting how many total ads are displayed over a given period. Depending on the size of the Web audience, a college might pay \$3 to \$6 per 1,000 displays of its ad, Mr. Landon says.

That's part of what intrigued Ms. Chase. "This is really an inexpensive way to develop a brand," she says.

Ms. Chase began working with Echo-Interactive last year to set up retargeting ads for Creighton. At first the effort focused on undergraduate admissions, but it has since expanded, with ads designed to promote the law, business, and health-science and pharmacy schools, as well as programs for graduate and adult students at the Roman Catholic institution.

When people visit particular pages on the university's site, their browsers are tagged, and they are exposed to corresponding ads on certain other Web sites. Mr. Landon's company uses an exchange of more than two million Web sites across every category, except those with inappropriate content, he says. A tagged browser might bring up ads on any of the participating sites, some of which, like *The New York Times's*, might normally be too pricey for Creighton.

The university gets monthly reports from Echo-Interactive on the number and location of people who see the ads, and on which Web sites. In April, for example, some 160,000 browsers were tagged on Creighton's site, and about 865,000 of its ads were then displayed on other sites. Those have included YouTube, Rate My Professors, and SparkNotes—"the ones you would expect that kids go to," says Ms. Chase. She takes that as a sign that potential students are, in fact, viewing the ads.

Because today's prospective students tend to research colleges on their own terms, online, some first appear on a college's radar as "stealth applicants," having had no prior contact. Retargeting ads let colleges subtly reach students in the virtual places where they already spend their time, Ms. Chase says.

Still, she is careful to say that she sees retargeting ads not as a means of generating leads, but as a way to raise brand awareness. In other words, she cares more about the number of ads people see than about the number of people who click through for more information.

Out Ahead

Sold on retargeting, Ms. Chase thought the type of advertising could be useful in promoting Catholic higher education in general. As a board member of the National Catholic College Admission

Association, she suggested a pilot program to test retargeting with a subset of its institutions. It could be a nice member benefit, she thought.

The idea was to reach students and families interested in Catholic education but unfamiliar with all of the colleges providing it. So the page of the association's Web site geared toward prospective students was tagged, and ads for the association or any of its participating member colleges—20 in two rounds of the pilot—were set to appear elsewhere on the Web as a result.

The premise of the pilot program, which started last year, was that the students who visit the association's Web site are already interested in Catholic higher education. So member colleges, Mr. Landon says, would do well to capture that audience.

The University of San Diego, part of the pilot program, liked the strategy enough to pursue retargeting for itself. The university is now using the ads to highlight its undergraduate programs, and it may add some graduate programs, too, says Stephen Pultz, assistant vice president for enrollment management.


Mr. Pultz has wondered how prospective students would feel when they realized that San Diego's ads were following them across the Internet. "The creepiness factor is something we talked about," he says.

But he decided that the risk of alienating some potential students was worth cheap advertising with a broad reach. Besides, he says, teenagers are pretty familiar with online advertising, and comfortable with how it works.

While Creighton and San Diego can track how many visitors see and click on their ads, the impact on brand is hard to quantify. But Ms. Chase thinks that a college gains something by trying a new form of advertising before it becomes widespread.

The effects of retargeting and how many colleges will use it remain to be seen. Mr. Landon, of course, is optimistic. Kids spend a lot of time online, he says, and there is plenty of advertising space to go around.

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