made for advertising (mfa)

definitions and guidance

iab.
australia

introduction

There has been a lot of noise recently about a long standing issue with 'made for advertising' (MFA) sites and as a result we felt compelled to collaboratively create a short document defining what MFA type content is, what the related issues are and provide some practical recommendations and guidance for both buyers and sellers.

iab australia position on mfa sites

We feel very strongly that:

- The Australian industry needs to take this problem more seriously and work collaboratively together to minimise ad spends on these sites and to any of the associated participants.

- These practices harm publishers that invest resources into quality content, result in poor consumer experiences which erodes trust and are simply a blatant waste of investment for any brands that expose their ad campaigns to MFA sites.

- The guidance provided in this document is not exhaustive - but we highly recommend that buyers, sellers and vendors all review and feedback on these recommendations.

- Our goal with this document is to support each part of the ecosystem with guidance that will not only reduce exposure to MFA sites - but as a direct consequence reduce wastage, benefit genuine publishers, ameliorate consumer experiences online and ultimately improve both campaign performance & advertising ROI.

- We intend to follow-up with additional guidance and invite any case studies, analytics based insights or further recommendations which we can include in ant updates we publish.

definition

MFA, an acronym for Made-for-Advertising, epitomises a category of websites built on catchy headlines, clickbait, and controversial content to drive traffic and ad revenue. Often sacrificing content quality, these sites inundate users with intrusive ads and pop-ups in a relentless pursuit of revenue - and will aggressively look to scale through paid traffic whilst profiting from ad arbitrage practices.

Ad arbitrage as a business model is where one seeks to buy advertising space at a low cost and then resell it on for a higher price in order to collect the resulting margins. The result is a misleading ecosystem that benefits no one other than the website owner making money from the ad placements on and around very low quality content.

Vetting MFA sites can be problematic as they aren't technically categorised as fraudulent inventory, and can even often perform quite well against traditional ad metrics, such as viewability (on some of the individual ad units at least) and even click-through-rates (often through accidental or 'forced' clicks). As a result, these sites can initially check a lot of boxes for advertisers when reviewing their verification reports against programmatic buying in particular. For more guidance on ad fraud please see the link at the end of this document to the IAB Australia Ad Fraud Handbook.

However, once a brand's campaign gets stuck in the world of MFA, the main issue becomes clear — MFA websites simply do not drive meaningful results and will lead to wasted ad spend.

characteristics of mfa content

MFA sites contain low quality automated (sometimes AI-generated) content, a high number of ad units relative to the content on the page (often refreshing regularly), low levels of organic traffic (heavy reliance on paid social and native), clickbait headlines, unnecessary slideshows and interlinked websites.

Content may be duplicated verbatim across many various websites. There are also instances where sites, or sections of sites, have a mixture of both MFA and non-MFA content – for example, sites where only a section or a subdomain exhibits genuine MFA characteristics.

The result is a low-quality consumer experience as MFA websites are filled with lots of ads and often have very thin or entirely irrelevant content. This creates a frustrating experience for users who are just bombarded with ads instead of getting what they came for.

For buyers the main issue is wasted ad spend, as users on these sites are typically not very engaged, resulting in the advertiser not getting value for their money. Additionally, since MFA sites often use lowbrow tactics like clickbait headlines, there is a risk to a brand's image being tarnished by being seen alongside low quality content.

Media quality concerns regarding MFA websites are increasingly significant for advertisers. In 2023, the ANA released a report in the US (see link to the report at the end of this document) indicating that 15% of spending in the US via programmatic buying was being wasted on MFA sites. These websites typically rely on attention-grabbing headlines, clickbait, and controversial content to boost page views and ad revenue. MFA sites often provide substandard content and employ tactics such as pop-up ads, auto-play videos, and other intrusive advertising methods in order to maximise revenue.

the core challenges with mfa sites

While MFA sites present a host of issues for advertisers, there are a number of reasons why they stand out as particularly detrimental to campaign success and brand integrity:

1   MFA sites often prioritise quantity over quality when it comes to content. To attract clicks and maximise ad revenue, these websites churn out sensationalist headlines, clickbait articles, and controversial content. Consequently, users are bombarded with shallow or misleading information, eroding trust and credibility in the digital space.

2   User experience takes a backseat on MFA sites, where intrusive ads, pop-ups, and autoplay videos dominate the landscape. These disruptive elements not only detract from the browsing experience but also hinder engagement and interaction with advertised content. As a result, advertisers risk associating their brands with negative user experiences, ultimately impacting brand perception and loyalty.

3   Advertising on MFA sites exacerbates environmental concerns. MFA sites often engage in more instant auctions for ad inventory than websites with typical ad loads, resulting in higher carbon emissions. In fact, there is a 73% decrease in carbon emissions when comparing quality sites to MFA sites. This discrepancy in carbon footprint undermines advertisers' efforts towards carbon reduction goals, highlighting the urgent need for sustainable advertising practices.

4   These sites do not often classify as being fraudulent as they do not meet the IVT (invalid traffic) requirements but deliver a low quality experience for consumers whilst syphoning ad spend away from premium publishers and providing very little value for advertisers and brands. Furthermore, there is brand association risk to consumers seeing ads on these sites due to the extremely low quality of the overall experience.

practices of mfa sites

1   Traffic Acquisition and Monetisation: MFA sites engage in ad arbitrage by purchasing traffic and monetising it through excessive advertising. This practice often leads to a poor user experience due to the overwhelming number of ads.

2   Clickbait Headlines: These sites often use sensational or misleading headlines to promote articles, driving more traffic to their sites and increasing ad revenue.

3   Leveraging Social and Content Recommendation Platforms: To attract a broad audience, MFA sites serve ads on social media platforms and content recommendation networks, further amplifying their reach and traffic.

4   High ad-to-content ratio: Per the ANA report, more than twice the internet average (e.g., ad-to-content ratio of 30+ percent for desktop). Vendors will measure the percentage of pixels that are editorial content vs. advertising content and consider all non-ad areas of the page to be content - and any native ad units are treated as advertising content.

5   The presence of auto-refresh ads with high refresh rate and presence of autoplay video ads, often with sound already on.

As MFA sites are not typically easily detected pre-bid, they do result in poor performance for advertisers, highlighting the need for continuous monitoring and advanced detection techniques to maintain media quality and effectiveness in advertising campaigns. MFA sites will be brand safe and contextually relevant, however, they are still a blatant waste of ad spend.

Designed to intentionally fool advertisers, MFA sites exhibit **high measurability rates**, **good viewability rates**, **low levels of invalid traffic**, and usually have **brand-safe environments**

MFA publishers create this inventory to take advantage of **ad-arbitrage** with the goal of advertising revenue exceeding the cost of acquiring traffic

This can be an explicit strategy to misrepresent how inventory is valued in comparison to higher value inventory from the same publisher

Made-For-Advertising Sites Burn 15% of Your Ad Budget

theTradeDesk

image source: The Trade Desk

recommendations for buyers

Whilst MFA sites contain low quality content, they are not considered fraudulent based upon the parameters for media quality for many buyers and DSPs. Hence this content appears to be brand safe and is very cheap, making it difficult for programmatic buyers to avoid. Any resulting clicks from ads on MFA sites very rarely translate into quantifiable business outcomes. MFA sites also have issues with sustainability as they generate high carbon emissions due to higher numbers of ad requests per impression to SSPs and resellers, which increases waste.

Based upon these insights the core recommendations for buyers are to:

- Leverage Private Marketplaces (PMPs) with trusted sellers, particularly those committed to lower emissions (a.k.a. 'Green PMPs'.)

- Utilise supply path optimisation (SPO) strategies so as to reduce intermediaries and have closer relationships more directly with publisher partners.

- Review inclusion & exclusion lists, quality controls and contextual settings for open market buys.

- Optimise delivery via frequency-capping to limit exposure and monitor the results on an ongoing basis.

- Monitor post-click results via analytics to filter out sites that generate cheap clicks that rarely convert.

- Work with vendor partners to create an updated MFA exclusion list, or partner with a company that already provides this service.

- Audit your digital advertising activity to determine the percent of impressions and ad spend that is attributed to MFA sites. Verification vendors can offer this even if MFA categories are not yet selected in a buyer's profile, including a list of MFA domains activity ran on.

- Independently assess whether MFA sites fit with their brand suitability standards for content and user experience.

- Clarify your tolerance for the inclusion of MFA inventory in campaigns. Consider eliminating the most severe or highest risk content first to ensure there are no shocks to bidding algorithms, campaign pacing and media CPMs.

- Don't rely solely on static site lists to protect their investments from MFA. Rather, they should leverage solutions that are AI-powered and can dynamically detect and block MFA at scale, enabling them to take control over their campaigns and drive results.

- Review post-bid reporting before enabling pre-bid avoidance. This applies to both MFA and high ad-clutter sites.

- Use a scalpel approach as opposed to an all-or-nothing approach to effectively identify MFA at the subdomain level.

- Avoiding MFA sites will not disrupt DSP bidding algorithms or campaign delivery.

- Look to combine both domain-level analysis and real-time page-level insights to get a true and complete picture by assessing ad quality signals in real time to mitigate any risks.

- Leverage publicly available industry standards to ensure the mitigation of MFA publishers on every campaign.

- As well as utilising domain exclusion lists, leverage sellers.json to build allow lists with credible publishers. Exclusion block lists do not prevent the same MFA entity from simply creating a new domain.

image source: Pixalate

recommendations for sellers

The 2023 ANA study showed that buyers in the US are typically wasting more than 15% of their programmatic display ad budgets on Made-For-Advertising (MFA) websites which diverts spend away from premium publishers that are running news rooms and creating higher quality content.

In trying to protect these spends, it is recommended that publishers:

- Rethink how you source web traffic: Sites that buy traffic and monetise the traffic via excessive advertising may be classified as MFA. While some advertisers may not mind these types of impressions, others see this as a waste of ad spend.

- Review all content partnerships: Thoroughly vet your monetisation partners and avoid working with monetisation partners that specialise in MFA content arbitrage.

- Decrease the quantity of your ads on your site: Focus on quality over quantity. Consider stronger, high-impact placements, like above-the-fold ads, that don't impact visitors' ability to view your content. We recommend testing and verifying different ad placements to see what's the most effective.

- Limit auto-refresh ads and refresh rate: An ad that's seen for a longer amount of time has the potential to be more impactful. Limiting ad refreshing helps with loading times, leading to a better experience for your site visitors, too.

- Limit autoplay videos: Video ads that autoplay can disrupt your visitors' experience, causing them to leave your site or close out of the window, which means you'll lose out on potential ad revenue. Limiting these ads can boost impressions, driving more revenue for you and greater return for advertisers.

- Beware MFA Subdomains: It can be tempting for under pressure publishers to establish relationships with third-party content partners to provide additional content sources & traffic and share the resulting ad revenues. Review these attractive turnkey solutions very carefully and the content being delivered into your primary domain. MFA subdomains want to be associated with legitimate top level publisher domains, so that they can surreptitiously inject their low quality content into programmatic campaigns and benefit. Media buyers will eventually flag this content as a poor ad and content experience that is laundering an entirely different property under the cloak of a respectable, well-known media property - but the impact will also impact the top level domain, as it will see less demand as a result.

- Invest in verification solutions: It's important for advertisers and publishers to up the ante against MFA and work with verification partners that have MFA segments advertisers can utilise to target away from this inventory. It's also important to partner with providers that have both buy and sell side capabilities, support and reporting on MFA to mitigate the waste of ad spend on these sites that drive no outcomes for brands.

- Traffic irregularities: Be prepared to dig deeper into the details of any unexpected spikes in social/referral/paid/display ad traffic and their sources.

further reading

How Marketers Can Detect and Avoid Made For Advertising Sites (Integral Ad Science)

https://integralads.com/insider/detect-avoid-made-for-advertising-sites/

DoubleVerify Says Classifying MFA Means Considering Shades Of Gray (Feb 2024)

https://www.adexchanger.com/brand-safety/doubleverify-says-classifying-mfa-means-considering-shades-of-gray/

ANA Releases Part 2 of its US Programmatic Media Buying Study (Dec 2023)

https://www.ana.net/content/show/id/83522

Using OpenRTB Signals to Identify Made for Advertising

https://iabtechlab.com/using-openrtb-signals-to-identify-made-for-advertising/

Detecting Resold MFA Subdomains at Scale (Sincera)

https://www.sincera.io/blog/detecting-resold-mfa-subdomains-at-scale

Introduction to Rewarded Traffic (Deepsee.io)

https://deepsee.io/blog/rewarded-traffic-incentivized-traffic-in-a-top-hat

We All Have A Role To Play In Ending MFA (Kargo, May 2024)

https://www.adexchanger.com/data-driven-thinking/we-all-have-a-role-to-play-in-ending-mfa/

IAB Australia Ad Fraud Handbook (June 2023)

https://iabaustralia.com.au/resource/digital-ad-fraud-handbook/

addendum

from the recent mrc ivt interim update - april 2024:

MFA's have long been discussed in the media industry with various definitions as low-quality properties with very little to no content and high ad density. These properties also often include incentivized or purchased traffic, manipulated activity, hidden or stacked ads, adware/malware and misappropriated content, which are invalid activities as defined by MRC, but may also have a degree of valid traffic.

In addition to IVT filtration requirements at an impression level, SIVT measurement organisations should consider including properties exhibiting high degrees of SIVT as well as those with a high degree of incentivized or purchased traffic, manipulated activity, hidden or stacked ads, adware/malware and misappropriated content as part of possible known dangerous or fraudulent sources, to enable specifically identified blocking or inclusion lists where available at a user's discretion. To facilitate this, measurement organisations must report the percentage of invalid activity of total activity where an IVT decision can be made along with the IVT decision rate for reported metrics on a property (domain, sub-domain and App ID) subject to minimum thresholds of activity defined and empirically supported by measurement vendors to prevent reverse engineering, in addition to reporting impression level filtration to enable measurement users to use this information to make decisions about what properties ads are served to (through exclusion or inclusion thresholds or lists).

These requirements pertain only to IVT as defined by MRC and should be delineated by GIVT vs. SIVT when reported at an impression level. These requirements do not include that more subjective aspects of site or content quality/design are included in the above consideration, nor do they mandate blocking at a property level for IVT or suspected MFAs without user specification. Further, it is encouraged that measurement organisations contribute to and make use of commonly available industry lists of known dangerous or fraudulent sources or MFAs based on IVT definitions where available or if they become available in the future, for consistency and comparability.

This may also involve processes to notify or warn publishers or other entities being reported as having high IVT (as part of MFA designations or otherwise) where appropriate or where a relationship between the measurement organisation and these entities exist in order to allow these entities to enable signals where permissible with privacy requirements.

Link to this report is here:

https://mediaratingcouncil.org/sites/default/files/News/2024_IVT_Interim_Updates_FINAL.pdf