



Publishers Have a QA Blindspot

Publishers have an ad compliance problem.

In these fraught times, publishers have no shortage of problems—platforms siphoning revenue, false news proliferating—but there's one you probably haven't heard about because publishers are so busy with all these other issues. What is that problem? Creative quality assurance (QA), the process that makes sure ads run as they're supposed to, according to the publisher's ad specs and industry standards.

The trouble is, as digital ad products get more complex, they require more and more heavy lifting when it comes to QA. Native integrations, custom video and other rich media products take more resources to process, with some publishers' ad ops teams spending up to 40% of their time just on creative QA. While publishers struggle to perform comprehensive testing on ever-developing ad formats, they're developing an ad compliance blind spot.

What is creative QA?

Often confused with functional testing, quality assurance is really about risk management. The QA process entails getting detailed ad specs upfront, clearly identifying stakeholders and responsibilities and effectively setting expectations for how an ad is supposed to work, whom it is meant to reach and actually meeting those expectations in order to ensure a good user experience.

"What problem?"

Publishers have a blindspot.

"In my opinion, if you hit a certain challenge or a roadblock [with a digital advertisement], it's because you didn't check that [QA] box early on," said Coe Lottis, partner and vp of strategy at digital media agency The Program. "You can account for those types of challenges up front."

Of course, that's what an agency executive would say. While ad performance is an agency's highest priority, for publishers, it's just another (disproportionately) time-consuming task in the ad ops workload. Publisher ad ops teams are getting bogged down in manual QA processes, when they should be focusing their energy on monetization and optimization.

At PopSugar, the account management team handles communications with advertisers about correcting issues with ads that run on their site, said evp of operations Alex McNealy. The account managers are also responsible for putting ad products through the publisher's internal review systems, but they still haven't attained a fully streamlined QA process.

Instead, said McNealy, their QA process ends up being whatever process the client follows: "We're looked upon as a services organization, and we try to provide a consistent approach, because it helps us to be more efficient and helps us to scale. Yet at the end of the day, we recognize that clients have some of their own processes that we need to respect and support and that helps the overall relationship operate more smoothly."

While it's important to respect advertiser and agency processes, publishers without their own bulletproof methods for ensuring ad compliance are open to problems that affect user experience. The Program's Lottis noted that QA is "still new" to publishers and that's reflected in the budgeting process.

At his agency, partners receive total QA budgets at the start of a project, with costs "varying greatly depending on the project details," said Lottis. "We generally take a set percentage of total project hours for a starting point, then modify our QA estimate according to how heavy or light lifting we believe that specific engagement may require of us." This is where agency employees often find themselves fielding the same question from smaller publishers, "What is QA, and is it necessary?"

Publishers focus on
new platforms,
but not QA.

INSTAGRAM STORIES
SNAPCHAT STORIES
FACEBOOK LIVE
INSTAGRAM STORIES
SNAPCHAT STORIES
FACEBOOK LIVE

To make money in today's fast-paced technological world, publishers are constantly chasing the next, big opportunity. Expected to create content—and corresponding ad inventory—for every new platform that pops up (Snapchat Stories! Facebook Live! Instagram Stories!), publishers have less time to spend on QA. Unfortunately, these new ad units are where publishers need QA the most.

The ad integrations that come with new platforms are more complex than publishers are accustomed to, making QA even more laborious.

At PopSugar, McNealy said they sell "native written products, custom video products and our video integration products," all of which require extensive resources. "We'll bring in account management resources, creative resources, video production resources, editing resources—basically all the factors of producing that asset," he said. "Obviously anytime you look at video or written [ad executions], it's a lot more complicated than it is to simply build a 300 by 250 [display unit]." When a complex ad product changes hands among so many different teams, it's easy for errors to slip through the cracks.

Complicated ad ops processes give rise to mistakes.

There's no denying that the ad ops process involves a whole lot of back and forth. It starts with the kick-off call, where account management puts a (let's be real, tenuous) timeline in place. Then production begins, with the asset passing between agencies, advertisers and publishers—not to mention agencies' and publishers' different internal teams—until it's ready for the final launch date. QA is designed to prevent any surprises at launch, but complex projects and tight timelines make less than airtight QA processes go awry. Even the most esteemed publishers can make mistakes.

Take Forbes, who made a major advertising faux pas in 2016 when it released its 30 Under 30 list. Like most publishers starved for ad dollars, Forbes requested that those looking to view the list disable their ad blockers. Dutiful readers did just that only to open themselves up to malware ready to steal personal data, drain bank accounts and hold passwords hostage. With [56 million monthly](#) unique visitors, this Forbes oversight was no small slip up.

Malware is a common problem, having [affected billions](#) of innocent online readers in 2015. And it's what can happen to advertisements when publishers' QA processes are too soft. Without solid QA in place, regardless of whether the campaigns are direct sold or programmatic, as in Forbes's case, problems that range from simple user experience slip-ups to malvertising can harm publishers and their readership.

The QA process takes some time, and for agencies it should start right after the insertion order (IO) for a campaign is signed, in time for the planning—also known as the requirements—phase, which outlines edit needs and other specs. Then comes product design, programming, and lastly the testing phase.

The agency then sends the product to the publisher, whose ad ops or trafficking team then has to start their internal QA process, which includes dimensions, file size, compliance to the publisher's specs—the list goes on. If there's a problem, the campaign has to go back to the agency to fix and then get retested by the publisher. Some campaigns ping pong back and forth so many times that it results in even more problems, like a missed launch date.

Research has shown that [56 percent of problems](#) with digital projects take place during the requirements phase, while 27 percent occur during design, all without getting caught. This means that most bugs are essentially born before programming even starts. A detrimental requirement will lay silently in wait throughout the production process, unbeknownst to programmers who implement it only to lose time and incur costs later.

Problems found just before launch (during the testing phase) cost 10 times more to fix than problems discovered earlier on, during the requirements period.

Kate Clough, vp, engagement planning director at MRM//McCann, described her agency's QA process as having several steps, focusing on “the point that the creative team believes the assets to be ready, to the time those are handed off to my team and ad ops, to the time those go to the publisher.” The next few days consist of “many little steps” to account for “human error” or “glitches in systems.”

Today's methods of QA have consequences.

Ironically, the larger and more complex ad campaigns are, the more publishers tend to rush through quality tests. "Because the QA is the backend of the process, if anything is going to get compressed, it's invariably going to be that QA," said PopSugar's McNealy. PopSugar never sacrifices the process altogether, he said, but they do sometimes find themselves rushing through it. This can strain relationships between advertisers, agencies and publishers and result in functionality issues.

Relationship issues

There's often a lack of transparency in the ad ops process, especially when publishers and advertisers don't adequately communicate what's happening when. This lack of understanding can strain business relationships.

As MRM//McCann's Clough put it, "The only reason [publishers] should have to rush is if there are bandwidth issues on their own side," she said. To keep the relationship strong, the agency "tries not to push them because that's when errors can happen." By offering increased transparency, an automated QA process can make it so that agencies don't need to tiptoe around publishers' drawn out testing phases.

Functionality and UX issues

The companies buying, running and making the ads aren't the only ones affected by non-comprehensive QA processes. The intended audience can suffer the consequences, too—slow load time or ads overlapping content.

"A lot of the times what we're realizing when something's actually already gone to market, problems that we experience

are more on the functionality side or the localization side," said The Program's Lottis. "Certain content and languages may not be reading right, things may not be functioning correctly across different devices."

Other functionality issues Lottis has encountered with publishers include bandwidth and load issues, which occur when the client or the publisher underestimate how much traffic an ad would be getting.

Clough encountered similar functionality issues during the mass transition from Flash to HTML5. "That required more QA because the HTML5 didn't always render the way the Flash was supposed to," she said. Though on the agency side Clough was aware of this shift well enough in advance to come up with preemptive solutions, clients and publishers weren't necessarily on the same page.

"I don't think any of our clients came to us having caught wind of this, asking for a plan before we were ready with one." This sort of client oversight can set back publishers who aren't adequately testing their ads.

QA Checklists: Agencies vs. Publishers

Robust QA [means lengthy checklists](#) that cover both the creative and technical aspects of a digital product. On the creative side, agency QA checklists cover appearance and how users experience the ad, with items like “file formats that support your ad server” and, with ads that include audio, “visible volume/mute button.” Does the ad disrupt other content on the publisher’s site? Does it damage the user experience in any way? Is the sizing correct?

Meanwhile, the technical QA checklist speaks more to functionality. Are the ads loading at a manageable rate? Are the campaign tags correct and working? What’s going on with third party pixels in the ad?

MRM//McCann uses two checklists for QA. “If it were one, it would have too many rows and columns,” said engagement planning director Clough.

One is the “trafficking spreadsheet,” which includes items like publisher site placement, all the specs and click through URLs. This spec sheet goes to creative upon IO. Once creative is done, proofreaders go through their own checklist. They look over “every single version of each creative” and “review the data feeds.” Their checklist also includes copy edits, like grammar and spelling.



PHASE ONE:

Credibility check



PHASE TWO:

Creative materials



PHASE THREE:

Technical parameters

Automation can fix publishers' QA problem.

Publishers have so much on their plate that incorporating QA into their ad ops team's workload hurts their bottom line. To avoid this, they can opt for an automated QA process instead.

Automation addresses the three main aspects of the ad ops process that QA should touch. First, there's the publisher's testing phase, in which they have to run checks of the ad product across multiple devices and various user experience cases. Then, there's the back and forth between agency and publisher. Lastly, there's follow-up for after the campaign goes live.

Publisher testing phase

Publishers need help getting through the pre-launch testing phase without straining resources to manually check the many, many permutations of an ad product. For example, splitting HTML5 into elements and checking the amount of ad requests and range of Z-index are manual, time-consuming processes. Enter automation, which can generate all of the possible variations of an ad and run deeper versions of the tests that publishers usually perform by hand. Automated tools can look at ads on different browsers, check the CPU load and more, and do it all in a matter of minutes.

Agency/Publisher back-and-forth

The seemingly endless feedback loop between advertisers and publishers can end with a single platform for project sharing. Instead of having to send over every file—in different formats, while inevitably forgetting some piece of the puzzle along the way—agencies and publishers can use one platform to work on a project, with automatic updates flowing both ways to keep

everyone abreast of continuous progress. This eliminates issues that arise from publishers taking too long to email agencies about problems as they occur. Even if publishers aren't paying attention or forget to send that email, agencies will get a heads up that something isn't working. This provides a level of transparency that benefits both the publisher and the agency.

Post-launch followup

After launch, advertisers almost always require publishers to send over screenshots showing that the campaign actually delivered. Again, since these products often live across many platforms and browsers, taking screenshots of all these permutations can make for wasteful busywork. With the right tools, this post-launch process can happen without publisher employees lifting a finger (okay, they might literally have to lift one finger), as those tools automatically capture and send screenshots to advertisers.

Recall checking your blind spot before making a right turn or merging into another lane? An automated QA tool is the mirror and the autopilot for publishers' ad ops teams. Using a tool that is customized to specific ad specs will free up publishers to focus on new digital growth opportunities. Meanwhile, the QA process will run itself.



About Us

GeoEdge is the premier provider of ad security and verification solutions for the online and mobile advertising ecosystem. With malvertising protection, ad quality monitoring and creative QA automation solutions, GeoEdge ensures high ad quality and control for both programmatic and direct-sold campaigns. GeoEdge guards against non-compliance, malware (malvertising), inappropriate content, data leakage, and operational and performance issues across all technologies including header bidding, open RTB, in-app and native ads.

Leading publishers, ad platforms, exchanges, and networks rely on GeoEdge's automated ad verification solutions to ensure their sites and apps offer a clean, safe, and engaging user experience. To find out how GeoEdge can enhance your quality assurance and verify your online, mobile and video ad campaigns, head to www.geoedge.com.

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