Brand safety and ethical concerns will spur more ad boycotts

ARTICLE | JANUARY 18, 2021

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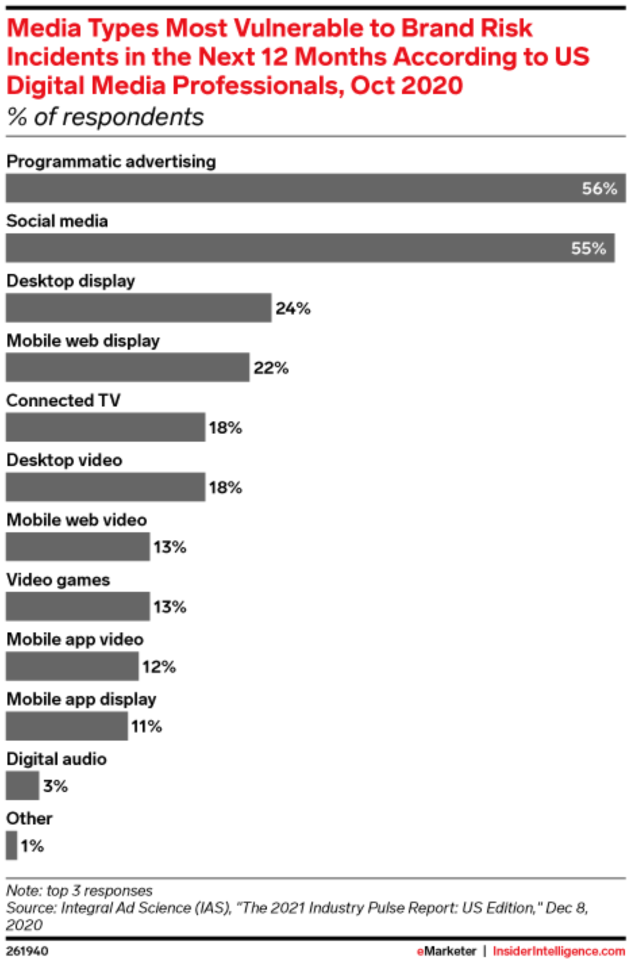
Brand safety was a major topic of discussion across the ad industry in 2020, as the problems of misinformation, disinformation, and other controversial content continued to grow in social media. In 2021, we expect more major marketers will pull or severely restrict their ad spending on social media platforms due to brand safety or ethical concerns.

In fact, we won't be surprised if a company as massive as Procter & Gamble does this. Its chief brand officer, Marc Pritchard, notoriously complained about the platforms' content standards in a September 2020 speech at an Association of National Advertisers event. "Social media is about 5% of P&G's marketing spending, but it's 150% of our problems," he said.

In December, P&G competitor Unilever said it would return to Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter in January after a monthslong hiatus triggered by concerns about how the platforms were managing harmful content. But that doesn't mean all of its worries have been resolved; Luis Di Como, the company's executive vice president for global media, said Unilever will "continue to reassess [its] position as necessary" as the year goes on.

When asked by Integral Ad Science (IAS) to assess various types of digital media in October 2020, 55% of US digital media professionals said that social media was most likely to experience brand risk incidents in the next 12 months—second only to programmatic advertising, cited by 56% of respondents.



Questions of media quality also weigh heavily on marketers as they think about how much to spend on social media advertising. In the same IAS study, 59% of respondents said concerns about insufficient transparency would affect their expenditures, and the majority said that Facebook would be where they'd most likely adjust spend due to insufficient transparency.

The advertiser unrest will be tempered by the fact that social media —Facebook in particular—is a hard habit to give up, due to the effectiveness of its ad products. But we still think that at least one major advertiser, and maybe more, will cut the cord.

What it means for marketers: Marketers should have a clear sense of their tolerance for brand safety risk and be prepared to act if the environment where their ads appear turns too negative. Where that turning point is will be different for every advertiser, however; what's risky for one will be OK for another. And when it comes to what marketers say in social media posts, it's important to do the homework and not contribute to the misinformation problem by resharing or commenting on content that could be fake or untrue.

To learn more about eMarketer's social media predictions for the year ahead, Insider Intelligence subscribers can read our recent report:

Report by Debra Aho Williamson Jan 07, 2021

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