

AB TESTING A WEB AD – A CASE STUDY

By Robert Blakeley, Director of Internet Development
The Direct Marketing Association

Choosing your link labels carefully will increase click-thru. It may well be that the more your ad looks like an ad, the fewer clicks it will generate.

Recently we had the opportunity to do some AB testing on an ad for our Job Bank. The results were somewhat surprising and certainly illuminating. They illustrate how understanding the customer's behavior on the Web could be critical to your success as a marketer.

Our ad ran on our site's home page in a section we call the "home page feature". This space is designed to highlight an important DMA activity. In this case, we were allowed a number of non-consecutive days to highlight our online Job Bank.

We devised two very different ads that would run alternately in the same spot. For visitors to our home page, half would see first ad (the "A" ad), half would see the second ad (the "B" ad).

We looked at the initial results of this test and were intrigued. Because of the results, we modified each ad and tested again. This paper presents the results of both tests and some thoughts about what the results might mean.

The First Test

Our "A" ad was in a style that The DMA typically uses. It was text heavy, emphasizing the benefit and call to action statements. It used a button (an image) to call attention to the copy. (See figure 1). The ad contained three links. We tracked the click-thru for each link.

Our "B" ad was highly "styled" using the creative to create interest. Copy was kept to a minimum. There was less visual "clutter" relative to our more complex home page. (See figure 2). Again, we tracked three links, roughly equivalent to the links in the A ad.



Figure 1. Ad “A”, first test.



Figure 2. Ad “B”, first test

The text oriented ad (“A”) pulled 13% better than the styled ad (“B”). The A ad got a total of 807 clicks or 56.39% of the total click-thru. The B ad got a total of 624 clicks or 43.61% of click-thru.

The text ad did quite a bit better. But why did A do better? Was it creative, copy or something else? We took a closer look at the click-thru for the individual links in each ad.

In the A ad, there were three links: The image button, the “DMA Job Bank” and “click here” at the end of the ad.

“A” Ad Link	Clicks	% Clicks
Image	193	23.92%
“Job Bank”	425	52.66%
“Click here”	189	23.42%

The Job Bank link took 53% of the total and is clearly the more effective link. It was more than twice as effective as either of the other two links.

Usability studies suggest that people don’t read on the Web. They scan and are action based, looking for a link to click on. The click-thru for this ad seems to be consistent with that behavior. It suggests that they perceived a clearly labeled text link before the image or the less defined “click here”.

The B ad also had three links: The image of the man, the “Get A Great Marketer” title, and “The DMA Job Bank” at the end of the ad.

“B” Ad Link	Clicks	% Clicks
Image	159	25.48%
“Great Marketer”	189	30.29%
“Job Bank”	276	44.23%

The Job Bank link took 44% of the total and is clearly the more effective link. This is not surprising because it was the only link that was underlined and so clearly identified as a link. What is surprising is the other two got as many clicks as they did, particularly the image. They did not look “clickable”.

It appears that our click-thru numbers are telling us that a text link works better than an image or button. It also seems a link that is also a clear label pulls better than a less descriptive “click here”.

However, why one ad pulled better than the other was still not clear.

The A ad contained benefit and action oriented copy. Was it the copy that worked better? However, much has been written about how people have trained themselves to ignore banner ads. If the B ad were perceived as a banner, then that might suggest the cause of its lower click-thru. Did the creative of the A ad work better because it did not look like a banner?

We decided to find out by testing again. We swapped the copy on the ads, retaining the original creative. The A ad would now have the minimal copy of the B ad. The B ad would contain the benefit and call to action copy of the A ad. If the B ad began to pull

better, the reason would probably be the copy. If the A ad continued to pull better, the reason would probably be the creative.

The Second Test

Figures 3 and 4 show the two modified ads:



Figure 3. Ad "A", second test.



Figure 4. Ad "B", second test.

The new A ad, with the minimal copy, got a total of 1,292 clicks or 54.72% of the total click-thru. That's 1.67% less than the first test, but still better than the B ad. The B ad, with all the new copy, got 1,096 clicks or 45.28% of click-thru.

The A ad pulled only 9% better this time. (In the first test it was 13% better). This suggests that the benefit copy was an advantage to the ad's click-thru, but a limited advantage. It created a 1.67% differential. It was not enough to fully offset the apparent advantage of the creative. If we factor out the copy, the creative produced an additional 11% click-thru for the A ad.

This result tends to support the notion that the B ad looked too much like a banner ad and was therefore ignored by a portion of the audience. If this is true, this might also explain how the B ad's "secret links" in the first test got their unexpected click-thru rate. People understand that for a banner ad, the whole ad is clickable. This would suggest, in turn, it was part luck that they hit a clickable part on the image or "Great Marketer" text. They were just clicking the ad, not a link.

But lets look at the click-thru detail for the second test.

"A" Ad Link	Clicks	% Clicks
Image	362	28.01%
"Great Marketer"	279	21.59%
"Job Bank"	651	50.39%

"B" Ad Link	Clicks	% Clicks
Image	311	28.38%
"Job Bank"	439	40.05%
"Click Here"	346	31.57%

In the A ad, the link with the most clicks is the job bank link. It is the most clearly identified link. This was also the case in the first test when used with the other creative. The image and the title got half as many clicks.

In our B ad, the ad title received the most links. It had an underline identifying it as a link. The less specific "click here" was less productive once again. The results from both ads are what we would expect if our notion about clearly labeled links is correct.

Conclusions

This was a relatively simple test. It is not comprehensive enough to be a definitive study. However, the results suggest three propositions that should be tested further.

1. Text links produce better click-thru than images or icons. The text link should look like a link. That is, it should be underlined and in a color that people expect to be a link color. People are scanning the page. It is easier to understand an obvious link.
2. The labels used for the link matter. A descriptive title works better than a Web site address or "click here".

3. The more an ad looks like an advertisement, the less effective it may be. With all the marketing clutter on the Web, people have learned to “tune out” ads in favor of content. If the ad looks informational, it will have a higher click-thru.

By understanding behaviors, we can increase the productivity of our ads. Our test showed that this increase can be substantial. But to see the behavior we need to test. We would not have been able to see how our ads really behaved without this testing.

Robert Blakeley is Director of Internet Development for the Direct Marketing Association in New York City. Mr. Blakeley has worked in the Internet industry for 10 years and has worked with many companies and government agencies. These include the International Council of Shopping Centers, Atlantic City and the City University of New York. He can be reached at rblakeley@the-dma.org. More articles by Robert Blakeley can be found at www.rblakeley.com/webwork/articles.shtml. © 2004 Robert Blakeley.