



# Bringing Starch to the Internet

## BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

When it comes to online advertising, marketers consistently ask the same questions about improving the performance of ad creative--what works, what doesn't, and why. To provide insight into creating the most effective online ads possible, GameSpot, a CNET Networks site, partnered with Ignited Minds, a leading independent ad agency, and commissioned the Starch Communications division of NOP World, the leading authority on measuring creative elements in print advertising, to conduct an innovative research study designed to examine a variety of issues related to online advertising execution. This research provides insight into creative elements that work best online, likability of ads, effectiveness of message communication, and ad unit usage for best results.

This groundbreaking study builds on Starch's expertise in print and brings its methodology to the Web for the first time. The foundation of the question areas of this research is based on the Starch readership method.

GameSpot tested the performance of 100 gaming title advertisements online across five ad sizes, including Leaderboards (728x90), Skyscrapers (160x600), MPUs (336x280), Big Screens (458x160), and Wide Screens (620x190). A minimum of 300 interviews were completed for each ad. Rarely have so many ads been tested in one Starch study and received as many completes per ad. For comparison purposes, the typical Starch print readership study measures approximately 70 ads among 100 respondents.

Working with GameSpot and Ignited Minds, Starch modified and expanded the question areas to adapt to the online environment. Visitors to the GameSpot Web site were randomly intercepted via a pop-up and asked to participate in the research. Upon acceptance, visitors were directed to a mock GameSpot Web site and asked to navigate through the site, at which time they were randomly exposed to 10 advertisements. When finished, respondents were directed to click on a link that took them to the survey questionnaire. They were shown the 10 ads they were exposed to on the mock site and asked a series of questions about each.

The GameSpot Starch study was conducted in December 2004.

## FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

### Take full advantage of unique creative unit strengths.

Not all ad units are created equally. The study, which measured five ad sizes, revealed that for each ad unit studied, there are different creative elements that can be used to make the unit more effective. Advertisers should consider the unique attributes of each unit rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach when utilizing different ad sizes. For example, MPUs best showcase visually rich graphics and motion, as they offer the advertiser the ability to present complete images in a larger space, while leaderboards provide an opportunity to communicate vital messages, such as product title, product image, and release date.

### More integration between creative and media teams may improve ad performance.

When designing the study, GameSpot incorporated 100 ad units from 29 campaigns. After careful review of what worked best in each ad unit, such as graphics, motion, benefit statements, and product details, we were able to draw conclusions about overall campaigns. Having a firm understanding of how ad units work separately and how they can contribute to the overall campaign will result in more-impactful campaigns. To make online advertising most effective, creatives and media teams should take a more integrated approach to the media buy and creative development process in order to ensure the best use of each ad type in the campaign. More-effective ad units and campaigns will be the result.

### Online ads can communicate on both a rational and emotional level.

While providing product details, such as release date, platform, and ratings, is effective, we also found that making an emotional connection with the audience proved powerful. Among the top performing ads, one-third focused on the emotional benefits, such as the excitement of playing the game, rather than on the product details. Incorporating both emotional and rational elements in the ad may be the best combination when executed aptly.

### Six general principles emerged.

After careful review of the data and extensive observation of the ads that were tested, six principles emerged. While these principles are not absolutes, they should be used as guidelines. Following them will dramatically increase the probability of creating ads that attract and hold viewers' attention.

- 1. Encourage the visuals to POP:** Online ads, especially those tested on GameSpot, are products of a visual culture. Historically, Starch print research has consistently shown that ads emphasizing the contrast between foreground and background often get the most attention. Specifically, ads with black backgrounds serve to give the graphics within the ad visual drama and a three-dimensional effect. The inverse is also true in that monochromatic ads, which are low in contrast, tend to fare poorly. The results also suggested that ads that present creative elements (words or images) in motion coming toward the viewer, seemingly "in your face," resulted in better scores.
- 2. Avoid exaggerated cartoons and the "Monty Python effect":** The popular British television show, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, employed a creative device where static images, often exaggerated drawings, floated across the screen in what seemed a visually incompatible way. Online ads that employed this device in the study did not fare well. In addition, past print research has shown that ads that feature photographs tend to receive higher scores while drawings (unless very realistic) and cartoons didn't fare as well. Translating this finding to online, this study showed that exaggerated cartoons and drawings received lower scores. Online advertising and gaming ads represent a fascinating hybrid in that they are often drawings, but very realistic ones, and the most realistic representations enjoy particular attraction and appreciation.

- 3. Beat 'em up with the benefits:** In an ad, answering the consumer's most pressing question: "What's in it for me?" is particularly effective. While this is not always the strategy or goal of the ad, when applicable, testimonials or recommendations from third-party sources are powerful. Scores for ads that provided information, such as price, product features, ratings, review scores, awards earned, and release date, were some of the highest. And looping your ad so the viewer can see those benefits again doesn't hurt.
- 4. That old devil, sex, still attracts attention--but it's not always enough:** Knowing your audience is key, especially when it's predominantly young males, such as the audience found on GameSpot. Several ads from the same campaign that communicated the same message earned different scores based on the amount of skin they revealed. However, they weren't the highest-scoring ads in the study, which suggests that while sex helps, product still matters.
- 5. Give them something to look at:** Past studies have shown that ads that do not have a clear focal point to hold the reader's attention tend to score lower. While youth's tolerance of chaos and their ability to simultaneously absorb multiple media has increased over the years, it hasn't changed the fact that a single element presented effectively in an ad yields better results than ads containing no single focal point.
- 6. Keep it simple:** Don't make your viewer work too hard. Ads that were shaking and flashing delivered lower scores. Also, ads that included too many elements only resulted in clutter. Among the top ads in the study, many are remarkable for their simplicity. An eye-filling picture is very often sufficient for the task of attracting and keeping a viewer's attention.

## RESPONDENT PROFILE

Aligning with profile data previously received by GameSpot research studies, the data from the GameSpot Starch study showed that visitors to GameSpot are highly qualified to evaluate gaming ads.

- 94 percent male
- Spent an average of \$959 on games in the last year
- 62 percent age 18 to 34
- Spend nearly 17 hours per week playing video games

GameSpot enjoys remarkably strong affinity from its visitors: 88 percent say GameSpot is a must-visit Web site; 94 percent trust the content; 94 percent say they'd recommend GameSpot; and 94 percent cite the site as one of their favorites.

## SUMMARY

CNET Networks, through studies on GameSpot and CNET and through its partnership with Ignited Minds, continues its commitment to online marketing innovation by bringing the proven Starch method to the Web for the first time. It's interesting to note that principles developed by Starch through decades of research on print translate to online. This study provides additional insight into creative elements that work best online, likability of ads, effectiveness of message communication, and ad unit usage for best results. (Please visit <http://www.gamespot.com/2005/starch> to see examples of the best-performing GameSpot Starch ads.) CNET Networks plans to continue its work in this new frontier of online ad research.