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## A cure for banner blindness? Maximizing ad potential without impairing usability

Most users do not look at banner ads and even fewer click on them. This statement should not surprise UX professionals or even online advertisers. Time and again, usability studies have demonstrated that “banner blindness,” a phenomenon first described in the late 1990s, is in fact real and that there are few, if any, ironclad solutions for getting users to notice and react to ads on a website.

### Conceptualize users as aware, not blind

When we describe reluctance to view ads as “blindness” or “[obliviousness](#),” we minimize the users’ active role in using a website. Several studies have found that users are not really “blind” to banners or similar advertisements, but are quite aware of their presence and actively choose not to view them. A 2011 [study by Ownes, Chaparro, and Palmer](#) (PDF) concluded that people will look at banners if they think it is not an advertisement.

“The perception of whether a region is perceived as advertising affects how web pages are searched. When a region is seen as advertisements, users will scan the area if it necessitates completing their task and will likely do so only after scanning other content areas. However, if the region is perceived as content, users will integrate the area into their

search strategy, possibly as an expected location for their search goal or a location covered by a heuristic.”

Their findings are consistent with reports by [Sun et al.](#), [Jakob Nielsen](#), and [Donald Norman](#), which lead us to conclude that users ignore rather than miss advertisements. In other words, [users’ disengagement](#) with advertisements is more purposeful than a blindness-based rationale suggests. Users are displaying a form of efficiency that is reinforced by consistency in web design. Maybe “banner awareness” or “banner intelligence” is a more apt way to think of it. From the user’s perspective clicking on an advertisement may be a task failure, a likely scenario since very few people visits sites for their advertisements.

Creating effective advertisements that minimize a negative impact on the UX requires a thoughtful coordination of advertising and site content. There are at least two ways to be mindful of how your content mixes with advertising.

1. In some situations, creating a strong visual differentiation between advertisements and site content improves usability and avoids diminishing both the advertiser’s brand and the site brand.
2. In other instances, a thoughtful, and explicit (but not sneaky) integration of advertisements with site content can be used to achieve a site’s dual goal of maximizing revenue while maintaining usability.

Whatever solution you opt for, the choice should not be between making money and having a usable site. Active users are savvy enough to know the difference between content and advertising; approaching them as such can help you maximize ad potential without driving visitors away.