



The Efficacy of Pop-ups and the Resulting Effect on Brands – A White Paper by Bunnyfoot Universality

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Executive Summary

Bunnyfoot Universality has conducted extensive research into the role of pop-ups in advertising, attitudes and opinions towards them and the subsequent perception of both the website and the advertiser.

The results of testing 36 individuals conducting tasks on two comparable websites **indicate a strong and intense dislike for pop-up ads**, resulting in a **negative attitude towards the website itself and the brand owner**.

The Internet advertising industry makes a distinction between rich media pop-ups and the original in-frame variety but most users do not consciously differentiate between the two. However, they are more likely to close a frame based pop-up and simply ignore the rich media type. The research was carried out using Bunnyfoot Universality's state of the art, non-invasive eye tracking system which allowed us to definitively know whether an advert was registered (consciously or subconsciously) by our user.

***“There is nothing more annoying than adverts popping up....it's enough to make me leave a site”
– Scott, IT Professional***

The research produced interesting results, the major findings of which include:

- The company name or logo was only physically seen in 2% of all ads
- 50% of ads were closed before the ad finished loading
- 35% of pop-up ads were ignored completely
- The average time from a pop-up ad frame appearing and the clicking of the close button was 2.5 seconds, the average time for a company name or logo to appear in a pop-up is 8.2 seconds
- There were no positive comments about pop-ups from any of the 36 users tested
- Users feel that their intelligence is being insulted because of the suggestion that they cannot find what they are looking for themselves
- Users feel imposed upon because sometimes they have no choice but to act in order to get rid of the advertisement
- Users are particularly irritated by pop-ups which are not related to the site, as there is no real or useful reason for them to be there
- Users are particularly frustrated by adverts which appear in the centre of the screen or obstruct information because they are an unwanted interruption

[pop up ads are like] “...interrupting somebody... [they] ...divert your attention away from what you want to pay your attention to” – Lisa, PA

The efficacy of the pop-up ad format is further called into question by the continuing proliferation of pop-up blockers (e.g. Google toolbar 2.0), and their increasing popularity among users.

The study

Was carried out at Bunnyfoot Universality's user testing lab using a state of the art eye-tracking system combined with attitudinal questionnaires and in-depth interviews. There is currently no better method of demonstrating users' attitudes towards a website, as it brings to the surface both the user's conscious thoughts and feelings and their subconscious mental processes.

Being able to observe another person's subconscious progression through a site is particularly useful in defining "blind spots" and "areas of interest"; both of which are vital to all forms of advertising.

Figure 1 illustrates, by means of a blue dot, the user focusing on a particular aspect of the page.

Indicates where they are looking in real time

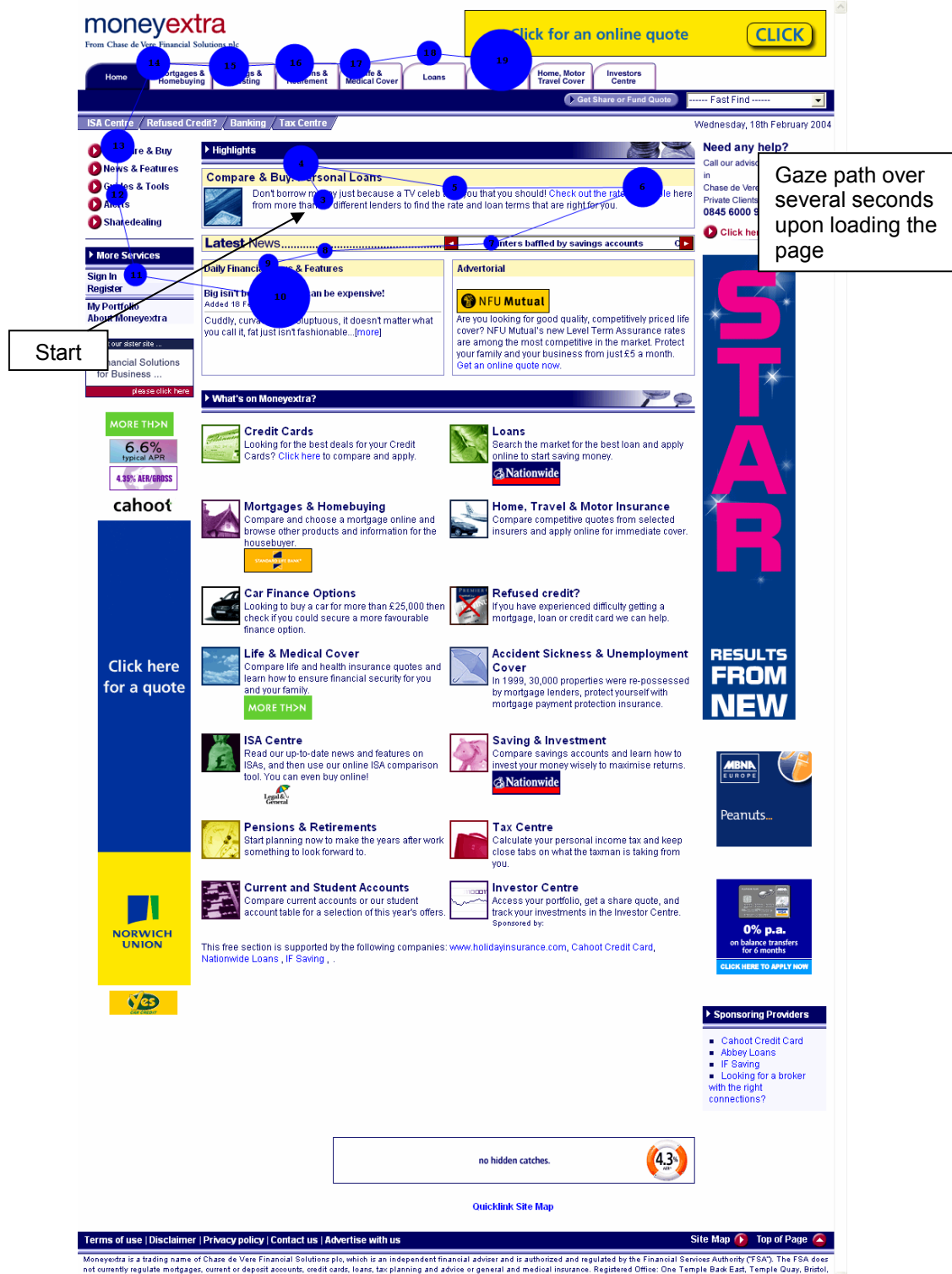
Video of person performing the test overlaid over the screen they are looking at.

Order	Product	Intro Rate	Intro period	Standard APR%	Int. Free days	Additional Features	Apply Online
(x)	h2v	0.00%	3 mths	9.90%	59 days	Manage account online	Details APPLY
ie	Platinum	0.00%	3 mths	10.90%	59 days	Fixed rate of 4.90% on balance transfers until repaid	Details APPLY
rd	Platinum	0.00%	Until repaid	11.90%	56 days	2% cashback until December 2004 providing there is a balance on account.	Details APPLY
(b)	Barclaycard (a)	0.00%	Until repaid	11.90%	56 days	2% cashback until December 2004 providing there is a balance on account.	Details APPLY
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(b)	Barclaycard (b)	0.00%	Until repaid	11.90%	56 days	2% cashback until December 2004 providing there is a balance on account.	Details APPLY
(a)	Halifax plc	0.00%	3 mths	12.90%	59 days	Special offer, September only	Details APPLY
(a)	AccuCard	0.00%	6 mths	12.90%	51 days	Only pay for features used	Details APPLY
(x)	LloydsTSS	0.00%	6 mths	12.90%	55 days	Only pay for features used	Details APPLY
(x)	Evo	0.00%	01/04/2004	13.90%	45 days	Cashback on any transaction	Details APPLY

a - Intro rate applies to balance transfers only.
b - Intro rate applies until balance transfer is repaid.

"I never click through pop-ups...I regard them as an irritation"
— Jack, Architect

Figure 2 illustrates the overall scan path of a user; where they looked, for how long and in what order. This level of user perception can only be measured with the sophistication of a non-invasive eye-tracking system. (Note how the user started in the centre of the screen at point 3, moved through central screen real estate up through the left hand navigation and on to the global navigation until reaching point 19 – the credit card tab, where they then moved onto the next screen).

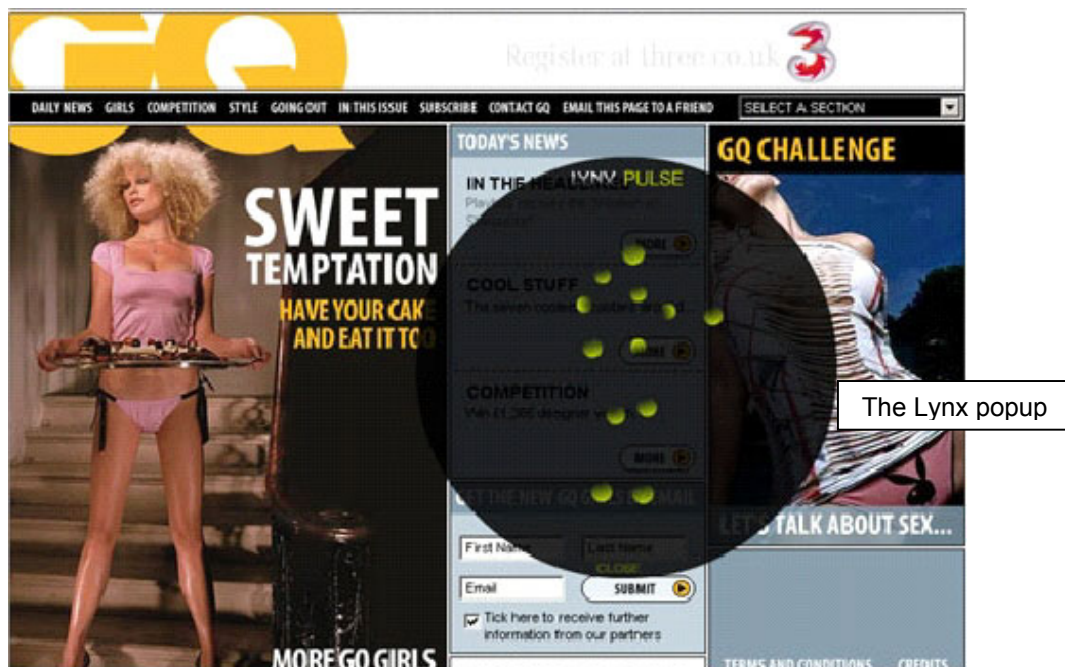


Background

Advertising brings essential revenue to the internet, financing content and resources; it is essential to the continuing success of the Internet. As with all new media there is an iterative learning process we must go through as we learn to be more effective and deliver better ROI. Just think of the 'point and smile' TV adverts of the 50's compared with today's sophisticated, targeted and campaigns.

That said, sometimes it does all come together; Tango Zebra's Lynx Pulse is a fantastic example of creative idea meets right media in right space **meets right brand!** Other reasons for its success include its simplicity, prominent positioning of the Lynx logo and user previous positive experience of being entertained by Lynx numerous successful TV campaigns.

Figure 3 Tango Zebra's Lynx Pulse



However the success of the Lynx Pulse ad is hard to manufacture on a consistent basis. In carrying out this and other research, Bunnyfoot Universality are able to deliver greater ROI to our clients by providing better online experiences for their users.

Bunnyfoot Universality have conducted two main bodies of research to understand how to maximise the ROI of advertising spend online:

1. Efficacy of pop-up ads and their resulting affect on brands
2. Efficacy of banner ads and their resulting affect on brands

This white paper is concerned only with the first; however our banner advertising results will be available as a white paper from March 2004.

“I find pop-ups generally annoying because they come into my life whether I want them or not. I almost ignore what they are about...most times I kill it before it has delivered its message”

– Mark, Student

Previous research investigating pop-ups has been contradictory; some declaring they are unpopular with internet users while others believe this is not the case and that pop-ups do have a competitive role in marketing.

Given the lack of impartiality in some of the available research Bunnyfoot Universality were keen to ascertain which of the two standpoints were more pertinent in today's society, where:

- Internet advertising spend is considered vital to the Internet's continuing success.
- Spend is increasing quarter on quarter; the IAB revealed in December 2003 that 2% of all advertising spend is now online, a figure they had hoped to reach by Autumn 2004.
- There is a real danger of damaging customers' perceptions of a brand by providing a poor online experience.

“Pop-ups I find obtrusive so I have to take action. I've got to click them off because they annoy me and get in the way”

- Simon, Analyst Programmer

In order to investigate the kind of impact pop-ups ads have on internet users Bunnyfoot Universality launched a research project, completely self-funded, in which 36 user tests employing Bunnyfoot's state of the art, non-invasive eye-tracking equipment were carried out on the MoneyNet and MoneyExtra sites.

Both of these sites contained different forms of advertisements, including pop-up ads. Users were asked to complete a series of tasks which involved navigating each site, leading to pop-up exposure.

Why did we choose MoneyExtra.co.uk and MoneyNet.co.uk?

Each site offers a comparison of financial products online. We asked our users to select a credit card based on a criteria set by us. By doing this we ensured that the same credit card featured predominantly throughout the testing.

Both sites employ pop-up advertising, however on MoneyNet there is a far greater exposure rate, allowing us to measure the effect of pop-ups on two otherwise similar sites.

None of the research participants had ever visited either of the two sites to avoid any bias due to prior experience influencing the results. The two sites were chosen over some of the more recognisable brands for this reason.

Findings

The major findings include:

- The company name or logo was only physically seen in 2% of all ads
- 50% of ads were closed before the ad finished loading
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- The average time from a pop-up ad frame appearing and the clicking of the close button was 2.5 seconds, the average time for a company name or logo to appear in a pop-up is 8.2 seconds
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Conclusions

Pop-ups do not provide good ROI for organisations looking to build long term value into their brands:

- i. Pop-ups can damage brands by creating a poor online user experience and this can have a detrimental effect on the entire brand.
- ii. Users have learned to almost completely ignore the existence of pop-up ads in their various forms.
- iii. There is a high probability of pop-ups being closed before the opportunity to observe the offer/message or even logo has occurred.
- iv. Pop-up blockers will probably continue to be employed by users further diminishing their ability to deliver effective ROI.

“I always go straight to the X on pop ups, I never know what they are, because although I clicked on a couple I couldn't tell you what they were”

- Jason, Designer

Recommendations

- Websites that currently allow pop-ups can stop brand rot and improve their users' experience by simply banning them.
- Advertisers can attain a better ROI by switching from pop-up ad formats to more effective alternatives.

Bunnyfoot has carried out a considerable piece of research into the efficacy of banner advertising and how to make better brand-building banner ads (see p.37 Marketing Week 29 January 2004). This will be available as a white paper from March 2004.

"I just get rid of them automatically...almost like a Pavlovian reaction"

– Daniel, Senior Buyer Retail

More Information

Is available on a CD that accompanies this white paper. The CD contains nine edited highlights taken from the 36 user tests undertaken in this study. To obtain a copy please contact Sam Gilbert at Bunnyfoot Universality on sam@bunnyfoot.com or call her on 0845 644 0650.

About Bunnyfoot Universality

Founded in 1999, Bunnyfoot Universality is a business focussed behavioural consultancy operating primarily in interactive media such as the web, mobile devices and interactive TV.

We are used to being first:

We were the first UK consultancy to offer professional accessibility consulting services in addition to usability services and have consolidated this leading position ever since.

- We developed the UK 's first internet enabled car as a concept piece designed to demonstrate the wider advantages of usability and accessibility good practice. This is the future of the Internet.
- We were the first (and still the only) usability consultancy in the UK to offer eye tracking as standard on all our user testing. This is the future of usability testing.
- Bunnyfoot employees are first class; we currently employ 8 full time members of staff and have no plans to grow much more than this. All of our consultants hold at least one relevant advanced degree and have extensive practical experience of the Internet industry. We think of ourselves as a high class boutique rather than a department store – our clients get bespoke and personal service, not rolled out wisdom from juniors. This is the future of behavioural consultancy.

Some recent clients:

Contact us and we will be happy to send references and case histories pertinent to the solutions you require.

Cue usual logo splash:

