A Guide to Better Ad Creative Asset Management

As a thought leader partner with the ANA, we published several pieces in 2018. We’ve compiled them here to help marketers make creative asset workflow a competitive advantage and prepare for whatever media disruption comes next.
Chapter 1

Housing Video Ad Creative Where Everyone Can Get It

“Video ad serving is ad delivery. It’s just different than the process for linear TV delivery,” says Dan Brackett, ER’s CTO. Read this Q&A to understand why the two became siloed and, most importantly, how brands and agencies can benefit from aligning video ad serving and TV ad delivery.

Chapter 2

Take a Ride on the Creative (Workflow) Side

Explore the journey of ad creative, from the moment a master file is ready to when all assets are prepared and formatted for a campaign launch. Learn how to optimize creative asset workflow for speed and efficiency.

Chapter 3

To Fix Video Advertising’s Unnecessary Complexities, Just Look to the Internet

Why do today’s technology-driven efficiencies apply only to the media-buying side of the equation? Dan Brackett, ER’s CTO, explains and shares a simple solution for bridging media and creative.

Chapter 4

When Bad Things Happen to Good Video Ads

Preparing creative assets to activate a single ad campaign across linear TV and IP-based channels (e.g., digital video, video-on-demand, over-the-top content, connected TV, programmatic TV) is a nightmare when siloed solutions are involved. Now there’s a better way. Take a look behind the scenes to understand where the problems lie and how to avoid them.
Housing Video Ad Creative Where Everyone Can Get It

An interview with Dan Brackett, the co-founder and chief technology officer at Extreme Reach

By Melinda McLaughlin

In these marketing times of “you snooze, you lose,” speed to market with fast and flawless execution is paramount. Creative asset workflow efficiency is quickly becoming one of the most critical components to a successful campaign in the cross-screen media ecosystem.

Here, Dan Brackett, co-founder and chief technology officer at Extreme Reach, offers his insight into what can help a brand shorten the time between approving creative and cross-screen campaigns launching exactly as planned.

Q. How is video ad serving different from linear TV delivery, and why do so many brands and agencies choose different solutions for each?

Did you ever see Disney’s The Parent Trap? It’s a story of identical twins separated at birth who find each other years later and realize how much they have in common despite completely different upbringings. This is a perfect metaphor for two disciplines with different beginnings who are increasingly finding each other because they were meant to be united.

Ultimately, advertisers and their agency partners produce great creative. Media strategists devise masterful yet complex communication plans. These two things have to get connected — the creative must be formatted in many formats to even more destination specs and get to all the parties that need them for a campaign to launch. The end goal is campaigns launching on time so that finished creative plays in front of consumers, according to plan. In today’s world, that can mean a commercial for traditional TV or a video ad that will be seen on a laptop or smartphone or in the living room via over-the-top devices. The avenues leading to viewers are multiplying, but the goal is the same regardless of channel.

The pipes, processes, and infrastructure are the means to that end. Video ad serving is ad delivery. It’s just different than the process for linear TV delivery. The age-old discipline of linear TV delivery shoots the formatted assets through the cloud and down into the broadcast infrastructure of the intended destination — network, local stations, etc. For video ad serving, the creative assets are formatted automatically and live on a content delivery network (CDN). When a decisioning engine (DSP) or a site pings it to say, “Alert! We have a prospect! Play the ad!” — it just plays instantly.

But video ad serving was born into a complicated world and grew up bundled in with decisioning. In fact, the term “ad server” itself has multiple meanings across the sell-side, buy-side, and technology intermediaries. Today, we see the uncoupling of the magical part — data driven decisioning, programmatic, etc. — from the mechanical part — the actual delivery of the ad in the moment. Thus, the rise of largely commoditized third-party ad servers and yet another vendor to manage.
Q. What are the implications of selecting different point solutions for standard video ad serving and TV delivery?

What’s lost on most people — even those in the industry — is how much brute-force manual grunt work is involved in the workflows that guide the finished creative to where it ultimately plays. Ironically, this is especially true in the digital sphere.

The number of Excel sheets, emails, teams, languages, platforms, and assets that go into non-linear campaigns is mind-boggling. There is a widely felt pain across all the executional facets of the business — from digital video activation teams to talent and rights professionals to AdOps folks on the receiving end of creative assets.

The problem is easy to explain. Everyone needs the creative assets in unique formats and all parties need to know the rights and talent payments are set up for all the different media placements. Above all, the campaign needs to launch on time.

The consequences of separate workflows and the lack of holistic creative asset management have not been pretty. Having multiple content repositories and numerous teams dipping in and out of them introduces so many opportunities for quality and formatting errors, delayed campaign starts, expensive talent and rights violations, and, ultimately, just a lot of chaos where seamless video execution can — and should — reign.

Q. Can you focus in a little more on why the industry finds itself at a breaking point?

We’re all more interested in what the plumbing delivers rather than how it works. So, I think the race to media innovation and using data-driven automation to reach consumers all over the place left the ecosystem focused so much on that aspect that there was no room to think about how the creative assets would need to be sourced and deployed to match the speed of media.

One might think that if the consumer experience, value, and ROI of brand ads on traditional TV versus on IP-based platforms are such wildly different animals, it makes sense to choose different asset-delivery solutions for each. It’s easy to see how the mechanics got swept up in all that.

What makes sense on an intuitive level actually totally fails on the execution front. The idea that video ad serving and TV delivery should be approached differently and handled by siloed teams is actually counterproductive. TV and digital video may be two different media that came of age in different eras, but there are so many parallels in the how creative should be sourced and deployed that the same workflows and proven paradigms should apply to both. That’s why it’s important to demystify video ad serving.

What’s interesting about the digital video world is that media decisions can now be made in fractions of a second, but before a campaign launches, the process to find and format and get all the creative ready is sluggish, manual, and antiquated. Our research shows that it can take weeks between creative being finished and the campaign going live in digital video. Contrast this with linear TV, where a national brand ad can be finished in post-production and on-air in mere hours or minutes.

So, here it’s helpful to think about video ad serving more in the context of what it does rather than what it is.

Q. What does a better path forward look like?

When every aspect of the ad industry today feels harder than ever before, the solution in this area actually makes execution easier, with the double advantage of preparing all sides involved in execution for whatever the future brings.

With all due respect the way video ad serving was “raised,” brands are best served when one partner is accountable for full-lifecycle creative asset management, including all modes of delivery and talent and rights compliance wherever ads play. These functions share common bonds and are interrelated means to the same end-game.

A permissioned-based, safe, and secure centralized ad cloud for all creative assets, which can be tapped by both linear and digital video teams, better supports today’s content-everywhere mandate. It’s a world simpler, smoother, and more accurate than siloed creative distribution approaches can deliver. And sophisticated, automated workflow processes that connect multiple brand and agency teams are required as the media environment balloons beyond what can be handled manually.

There are so many opportunities for advertisers to reach their audiences in creative and compelling ways. Getting bogged down by the mechanics of connecting the creative with the media plan shouldn’t get in the way of making every meaningful connection brands need to drive their businesses. To bring it back to The Parent Trap metaphor, let’s bring our parents back together and reunite the video family.

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Take a Ride on the Creative (Workflow) Side

It looks seamless, but it’s a winding road from the edit suite to the screen

By Melinda McLaughlin

Thanks to technology and the proliferation of screens, devices, and content platforms, today’s marketers live in a world without borders. Advertisers have more avenues for reaching their audiences, and more formats for telling their stories, than ever before. Without skipping a beat, advertisers are quickly and effectively capitalizing on all the new opportunities the market presents.

To wit, since 2014, year-over-year video ad spend has been increasing by double digits as advertisers work to get their messages to audiences everywhere and anywhere. The results of that activity? More ads, in more shapes and sizes, and in more places.

The way great video creative gets spread everywhere in today’s evolving and increasingly fragmented media market might seem easy, but it’s highly complex from a workflow standpoint, and it’s getting more so by the day. In fact, when Extreme Reach took a deep dive into its customer database to get a by-the-numbers view of the proliferating workflow challenges resulting from the new advertising mandates, it opened more than a few eyes.

What is clear is the creative asset workflow — the steps, processes, and paths from the moment a master file is ready to when all assets are prepared and formatted for campaign launch — must be optimized for speed and efficiency.

It Takes More Than a Village

Marrying finished creative with today’s all-screen media plans takes an entire metropolis of teams to prepare the assets, set the flight plans, secure the rights for usage, and deliver the ads in the right format to every entity so that campaigns happen as planned.

Every single advertiser has a unique approach to its roster of trusted partners. Regardless of the complexion of that portfolio, there are many different functional teams that all play a vital role along the journey of readying assets for deployment.

FIGURE 1
EXTREME REACH SEES RISE IN NUMBER OF TEAMS NEEDING ACCESS TO A BRAND’S CREATIVE ASSETS TO LAUNCH CAMPAIGNS

The average size of an advertiser’s partner portfolio is 35 external teams, going as high as 153 for larger companies.

Note: This is an analysis of 200 Extreme Reach customers over the first three quarters of 2018.

source: 2018 Extreme Reach internal data
When Extreme Reach looked across a 200-plus sample of customer portfolios, it found that the average marketer today supports six brands with advertising and taps 10 creative agencies, eight media teams, and 17 post-production houses to source, manage, and deploy ad creative. The number of teams balloons to more than 150 for companies with roughly 30 different advertised brands. That means hundreds of people, likely within different companies in different locations, need access to creative assets so they can get to market fast and execute flawlessly according to plan.

**Big Bang of Assets**

For all the expert hands required along the asset conveyor belt in the modern media landscape, those numbers pale in comparison to the actual assets needed for just one campaign. Sometimes a single ad needs to be transcoded into hundreds of formats so that it can run on any screen or device.

Extreme Reach data shows that in 2015, on average, brands were holding 4,646 active assets in their creative portals. This year, that number spiked to 13,264 — a 185 percent increase. And for smaller companies — those that in 2015 only had 400 or so active assets — increases of 250 percent and more are the norm. It’s not just a result of the proliferation of screens but the ability to better target and personalize ads to local markets.

In addition, Extreme Reach’s examination of its customers’ workflows revealed that brands and their partners produced almost as many document and data files to accompany the creative as the creative itself. In the average creative asset portal, 50 percent of the files include print images, traffic instructions, scripts, storyboards, and other administrative documentation that safeguard and shepherd the video ad creative from its finished format to its many destinations, and finally, to its safe and secure archive storage.
Short(er) Stories

Contributing to the asset explosion is the trend toward shorter stories. As brands generate more video creative to reach consumers across screens, they are also creating smaller packages to keep pace with consumer viewing habits. Extreme Reach data reveals how the triple threat of corporate budgets, consumer attention spans, and technologies that enable ad skipping are coming together to influence the length of video ads. Among the company’s client base, an increasing number of brands are running more 15-second variations and exploring the super-short realm of the six-second ad. It’s a trend reflective of consumer tastes, but also one that necessitates more formatting than ever before.

Not surprisingly, Extreme Reach sees this “short is better” trend playing out even more so in fiercely competitive, impulse-purchase categories like CPG-beverage, fast food, and quick service restaurants where frequency is key.

Taking Care of the Talent

And then there are talent rights to consider — the strict guidelines and processes for compensating the people who make the sight, sound, and motion of ads come to life.

Every advertiser and agency has experts in this complex arena because it involves big bucks and leaves no room for error.

Extreme Reach estimates that the average brand advertiser spends close to $30 million annually for all aspects of commercial talent and rights. That figure rises exponentially for the roughly one in two companies that make use of popular music or tap celebrities or known figures who get “guarantees” as part of their contract.

This is all to say that the underbelly of ad execution is not only complex but a major cost and resource drain when each aspect is done in a silo and with a dependency on manual hand-offs.

The technology exists today to integrate the interrelated and co-dependent functions of the creative asset workflow into one seamless platform. Every team, anywhere, still performs their very precise and essential step in the dance. But with synchronicity, they get to market faster, execute better, and future-proof their workflow for every tomorrow.

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To Fix Video Advertising’s Unnecessary Complexities, Just Look to the Internet

By Dan Brackett

Over the past 30 years, digital advertising’s evolution has been astonishing. At one time online advertising was limited to static banner ads that — much like a physical billboard — sat in the same place for a fixed amount of time. Now, in milliseconds, programmatic exchanges place precisely targeted ads for a fraction of what the old banner ads cost.

Of course, there’s been more change than just sending those pricey old-school banner ads the way of the dinosaur. Broadband infrastructure has matured and reached a point of high-speed ubiquity, leading to an explosion of digital video. Now, the medium once confined to the living room is everywhere: in hands, on the road, at the checkout counter, at the gas pump, even on the sides of buildings. In fact, according to Cisco, internet protocol (IP) video traffic will be 82 percent of all consumer internet traffic by 2021.

The video boom, especially when combined with programmatic media buying and precise targeting, offers advertisers incredible opportunities to engage audiences and tell compelling, relevant brand stories. Unfortunately, when it comes to video advertising, today’s technology-driven efficiencies only apply to the media-buying side of the equation. The act of filling that impression with creative remains slow, error-prone, and unnecessarily costly. While the video advertising media buy is executed in milliseconds, it can take hours, days, or even weeks to fulfill with corresponding creative. Fortunately for advertisers, the internet that created such a remarkable way to connect with consumers also offers a solution for the creative asset supply chain.

The Current Plight of the Digital Ad Supply Chain

The current digital supply chain has a problem with how it keeps track of creative assets. The process can involve multiple agencies and a lot of back and forth. Consider, as an example, a scenario in which agency A needs to contact another agency to get the creative that was originally used for TV. That sounds easy enough, but when there are thousands and thousands of spots, identifying the right one is often a back-and-forth process. The issue is compounded by the lack of widespread adoption of a standardized ad identification system, such as Ad-ID, to uniquely label each and every advertising asset — even versions of the same ad. Instead, in some cases, ads are referenced using descriptions like “the one with the kid and the lady in the blue dress.”

The scenario becomes even more complicated if there are multiple agencies involved. Agencies A and B may go back and forth for days, when it’s really agency C that has the video. After days of phone calls and emails, agency A finally knows it can get the creative from agency C. Now it just has to get a copy of the file in the right format for the ad server or media properties where the ad will be used. This process may involve yet another agency, D, the creative agency, to step in.

Agency D will contact its TV ad delivery vendor, which will generate copies of the video ad transcoded to the needed formats. (Of course, the vendor won’t know the correct format without first coordinating with agency A.) Once done, the vendor is able to convert the asset to the appropriate format and from there the video ad file gets manually delivered via FTP to agency A. Finally, agency A can then upload the asset to an ad server and possibly to a new media vendor, which would have to transcode the file again to work with its system — a process that often degrades the file’s quality.

The whole process is overly complicated and time consuming, and it’s completely unnecessary.
**Finding a Solution Online**

The internet works as a solution to the circuitous creative asset supply chain scenario described above because it has standard means for identifying, authorizing, accessing, and delivering resources no matter the form those resources take. If the advertising industry could apply the same type of workflows and information-exchange protocols specifically to video ads, advertisers’ campaigns could be executed in a way that’s just as automated and streamlined as the media buy.

The first step in establishing an internet-inspired supply chain is creating a consistent way to identify resources. For that, there’s something to be learned from the internet’s Uniform Resource Locators (URLs). No matter how many times a resource is accessed, it is sourced from that same location. No need to make copies. The IP address, a part of the URL, is what specifies the exact location of the resource, and this IP address is usually aliased using a unique domain name, managed by the Domain Name System (DNS).

Such a system for video ad assets is within reach, as some of the pieces, like centralized ad identification registries, already exist. For example, Ad-ID (a joint venture of the ANA and 4A’s) provides unique ad codes using a standard approach. Much like the DNS provides unique domains to identify resource hosts, Ad-ID registries use well-known “prefixes” that are tied to individual advertisers, brands, agencies, etc.

The second step is to implement better workflows. Here, key lessons can be learned from how streaming services like YouTube deliver content. When a video from the site or app is shared, it doesn’t need to be downloaded, compressed, and sent by email. It’s much easier than that — one simply sends the link. When the recipient clicks on the link, they’re taken to the same centralized asset repository where the sender found the video in the first place.

There’s no reason video ad assets can’t be treated the same way, with management and access through “ad clouds,” a centralized, permission-based online location and clearinghouse, wherein brands’ creative assets are made accessible in the same way resources are available through a typical website or FTP site. Physical video assets (i.e., digital video files) would be uploaded directly from post-production in the highest-fidelity master format, and all other renditions and formats would be taken from these originals, thereby preventing the loss of quality caused by repeated transcoding. Also attached to those originals is all of the necessary metadata, indexed by the unique ad code.

Once assets are housed in an ad cloud, with associated metadata and, optionally, talent and rights information for performers who appear in the ad, the assets may be readily accessed using a URL scheme that, much like internet URLs incorporate IP addresses, would include the unique Ad-ID identification code.

Advertisers can take another step toward solving the video ad problem by looking at how the internet specifies the desired format for different file types (e.g., HTML, XML, PDF, or JSON). An advanced ad cloud can incorporate the target format and even host and maintain a registry of common format requirements of network endpoints. For example, the formats needed by all TV, digital video, mobile, and out-of-home endpoints can be maintained in the ad cloud, reducing what needs to be specified in the URL to the target network endpoint and the Ad-ID code. Upon receiving such a request, the correct rendition of the ad will be transcoded directly from the master origin file.

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**LEGAL BRIEF**

**On Solid Ground**

Among the benefits of a centralized streaming model is greater control for the advertiser and its agency team responsible for the campaign. If, for example, an issue arises where an ad needs to be removed quickly for brand safety reasons, the advertiser can immediately remove the ad via the ad cloud. This is a vast improvement over current processes, which require the agency to search out all possible copies of all of the files at every single endpoint and request removal. Similarly, centralized streaming of assets makes it easier to track talent- and rights-compliance to ensure that using the assets is possible without violating performer contracts.

— D.B.

**Putting the Infrastructure In Place**

Video advertising is both powerful and persuasive, and in a video-everywhere world, it’s certain to grow in even greater volumes. But the processes advertisers use to deliver those ads is too complicated, costly, and error prone and are holding back advertisers’ ability to leverage highly engaged audiences on IP-based platforms.

Advertisers need a better way to deploy video ads. Thankfully, one exists. The internet is a proven model of effectively automating complex systems on a global basis. If the industry simply applies these principles to the handling of video ad assets through the use of ad clouds, it will realize dramatic improvements in the efficiency of video ad campaign execution.

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When Bad Things Happen to Good Video Ads

Late starts, compromised quality, talent and rights infractions? It’s the workflow

By Melinda McLaughlin

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Today, the best media strategies are screen agnostic and audience centric. That means ad assets — the creative itself — need to be formatted and ready to play on many different screens and devices, and always in compliance with talent and rights contracts. Unfortunately, the harsh reality is that preparing the creative to activate a single ad campaign across linear TV and IP-based channels (e.g., digital video, video-on-demand, over-the-top content, connected TV, programmatic TV) is a nightmare. While the industry has come far in its ability to use data and technology in media for precision targeting, it did not anticipate the amount of work that would then be required to source and prepare creative assets for video campaigns across many screens.

Simply stated, despite massive innovation in media planning and buying, the creative workflow for adequately supplying assets for media plans is lagging. In fact, it is actually faster and much more straightforward to get an ad live on linear TV today than on digital video platforms.

The problems occur when the media plan is approved and media teams begin the process of finding and formatting creative assets required for the various entities in the plan. It’s hard to comprehend that this could be the case in an industry so driven by technological advancement that media can be bought and sold in mere fractions of a second.

FIGURE 1
THE CREATIVE ASSET SUPPLY CHAIN

The complexity of the delivery process for creative assets varies depending on the medium. Linear TV, for example, has a much more direct path than non-linear video. Puppy, Anastasiia Cherniavskai/Shutterstock.com
That rapidly growing disconnect between the creative asset and media fulfillment process means bad things for video campaigns. In order to better understand what that means for marketers, Extreme Reach recently commissioned the business intelligence firm Advertiser Perceptions to research this inefficient step in the asset supply chain. The results are alarming. Ninety-three percent of ad ops professionals cite issues with sourcing and preparing all the assets required to launch a video campaign, the study found. If given the opportunity, 70 percent said they would reinvent the process from scratch. Showing their frustration with the entire process, 85 percent noted they would feel more satisfied with their jobs if workflow was improved.

In the absence of a widely adopted system for securing and preparing creative to launch media plans across linear and non-linear channels, teams are navigating complexity to make it happen, the study finds. But it’s not a good situation and it’s definitely not in the best interest of advertisers.

For Advertisers the Fix Is in the Cloud

The largely manual creative asset workflow that characterizes non-linear ad delivery processes is ill equipped to address the growing complexity of today’s tech-driven video campaigns. In order to make meaningful change, advertisers will need to set up their agencies and in-house teams to succeed by selecting a single creative workflow platform that integrates dependent functions together — traffic, linear TV ad delivery, non-linear video ad delivery, and talent and rights compliance — for every kind of screen.

Most marketers team with a growing list of agencies and vendors, all of whom must work together to launch campaigns. A good solution for teams inside a company and those across the brand’s agency portfolio is to centralize work in a single ad cloud.

Recently, the IAB published its first comprehensive guide to digital video, which addresses the issues surrounding the sourcing and preparation of creative assets. “Securing and executing the right creative asset to serve on the right device is still an extraordinarily manual process that contradicts the entire premise of technology-driven digital advertising,” the guide says. “For years, TV has used purpose-built platforms to provide efficient management and distribution of video creative assets, while digital video is typically handled with manual email chains, phone calls, FTP file transfers, and manual transcodes.”

A better solution, the guide argues, are metadata-related efforts, like Ad-ID, coupled with “the concept of centralized ‘ad clouds’ whereby creative assets are accessed via the ad tag and then streamed to the device in the same way that content is streamed to end users.”

The benefits of a centralized, secure source for ad creative like an ad cloud are both numerous and widespread. For campaigns it means launching on time, stopping on a dime, and pristine quality on every screen. For advertisers it means better control over creative assets, better collaboration among all teams, and talent and rights management in one place. For agencies it means easy access to creative that’s perfectly formatted for every device and no campaign delays.

At a time when speed-to-market is paramount, it’s never been more difficult to execute complex cross-screen media strategies. Brands must remain nimble, and a quality viewer experience is essential. In looking for a solution that cuts through that complexity, marketers should consider the widespread benefits of providing their agencies and in-house teams with one integrated platform for ad asset workflow.

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