

Who Really is the Publisher's Friend?

iMedia Connection

By [David B. Hills](#)

LookSmart's David Hills examines the current and future needs of publishers.

Anyone who knows me knows that I generally am able to find humor in almost anything -- especially in regards to the vast number of people and companies staking their space by planting a flag identifying who they are and what they are about. Consequently, I'm really enjoying the debate about which company is the publisher's "friend." I've been a publisher and have provided all sorts of services to publishers and I'll now take a stab at pinpointing the current and future needs of today's and tomorrow's publishers.

Ready readers? Here we go. The publisher needs two things: more audience and more revenue opportunities. How's that for stark clarity and moving past all the clutter of booths, parties and endless megabytes of PowerPoint?

Let's drill into each of these topics for a minute. We need to understand what services should be provided to accomplish the laudable goal of increasing opportunities for advertisers to spend more money with a publisher.

More Audience

We are all running a pretty flush hand right now. Demand is growing at a level faster than most companies can absorb. That's a fancy way of saying many publishers are nearing -- or are at -- high sell-out levels on their sites. Any publisher who has dealt with buying its way into higher audience knows this is not an economically viable alternative. Publishers really need to increase frequency and consumption of existing audience to create stability between supply and demand.

More Revenue Opportunities

At the same time, we are also meeting and creating new customers daily now -- folks with money to spend and who know what they want their money to accomplish. Specifically, our advertisers want to find new customers, create product or service awareness or influence them in some way for later purchase. Publishers can afford to chase, via personal sales contacts, some of these opportunities. But we all find it vexing to reach as far into the market as we would like since it is expensive to acquire a customer, especially small ones.

More audience and more revenue opportunities are what publishers are seeking. They are not looking for buddies. If they were looking for a new friend they could go to a pet store. This is all about what tools need to be provided in order for publishers to grow audience and revenue.

What are those critical services that benefit a publisher, you ask? (Or, at least I ask.) Here's my take on it.

Better Site Search

Most publishers have not executed on a great, (yet), search experience that bubbles up content the audience might not otherwise find. What's that experience? The kind of search that motivates a consumer to use that site over and over again since they find some valuable information, that promotional space cannot provide to them. Better site search creates that experience and is simple as well. All it means is helping the publisher organize their content better to allow site search that motivates the audience to try it, find what they want and consume that extra page view. Oh, and one more thing. It has to have little or no attribution of the provider. This means it cannot have the provider's branding on or near the search box or results.

Better Revenues

Most publishers want balance in their revenues. They don't mind using ad networks as a way to fill in sell-out and category focus that they cannot get to themselves due to resource constraints. But the days of any sort of network dominating an entire revenue stream, such as search, are coming to a close. Publishers want and should be able to service advertisers of all sizes

using automated or human assisted technologies and be able to fill in around the edges. This means a transparent system where the publisher chooses what to sell and how much to sell it for and backfill with whomever they wish to use without that relationship pre-empting the publisher's advertisers via de-duping the list in the ad network's favor.

These two concepts have one critical aspect in common and that is control. The publisher can better control audience and increase consumption and better control advertising of all types and customers of all sizes.

Now, go to one of those "publisher friendly" companies and tell them you want control. See what they say. If they try and hand you a puppy, tell them you don't want a friend, you want results.

[David B. Hills](#) is CEO of LookSmart, Ltd. (NASDAQ: LOOK), an online media and technology company specializing in vertical search.

Hills joined LookSmart in 2004. He has nearly 25 years of experience in media sales and operations, with extensive interactive media experience in online advertising, search marketing, paid listings and subscriptions. Before joining LookSmart, Hills served as president of Media Solutions for 24/7 Real Media, overseeing all domestic media, search and technology businesses for the company. Prior to joining 24/7 Real Media, Hills was COO and president of sales for About, Inc., which owned About.com and Sprinks, the pay-per-click service.