In Blog Bonanza, Some See Fringe Benefits

Despite small audience, the Net medium is turning the heads of some advertisers

BY DEANNA ZAMMIT

NEW YORK Everybody Loves Raymond they're not. Weblogs, still a fringe medium with an insider cred and a distaste for self-censorship, reach just 2 percent of some 70 million online households, according to Forrester Research. But it's who they're reaching, not how many, that is whetting the appetites of a few intrepid advertisers.

Upscale, urbane and media-savvy trend-setters with money to burn—most between 26-35 and male—are online and reading blogs, which deal with everything from gossip (Quentin Tarantino’s recent fistfight with French bouncers was a recent favorite) to informal product reviews. “We have a very clear idea of our audience, and they're the kind of people who decide whether things are going to be hip,” said Nick Denton, publisher of six blog titles under the banner Gawker Media.

ON TARGET: Rockstar Games has taken to blogs.

A few advertisers, including Absolut, Take 2 Interactive Software’s Rockstar Games and Match.com, are paying $400-600 per week to place ads on Denton’s sites. Smaller blogs such as The Gothamist charge $375-400 weekly.

“Your viewers have a higher chance of being the right people, if you can find a dozen of the right people, I’ll pay for it,” said Jeff Lanctot, vp of media at aQuantive’s Avenue A in Seattle, adding that the content appeals to “influential consumers.” Still, he said, “I don’t think blogs today represent a scalable opportunity,” as advertisers in general seek a mass audience.

“They are obviously very in vogue at the moment, but their importance is slightly overstated,” said Paul Woolmington, chairman and CEO of Media Kitchen, part of MDG-backed Kirshenbaum Bond + Partners in New York. Though professionally published blogs, known as pro-blogs, attract 30,000-50,000 users daily, those numbers are too low to tempt most major advertisers, he said.

Pro-blogs earn their reputation as no-ropes forums with heaping doses of independent opinion, attitude and the occasional raunchy remark. Their uncensored nature, however, has prevented them from catching on as vehicles for mainstream online ads, said Forrester Research vp Chris Charron. “Advertisers don’t know the context they’re getting for their money,” said Charron. “Their ad might be next to an inflammatory view, or somebody might be swearing.”

Recently, Denton lost a Microsoft ad deal after running content the company deemed distasteful—a link to another blog referencing a sex toy. But compromising would ruin the blog’s credibility and lose the audience advertisers are after, he said. “If you’re trying to advertise to Middle America, then Gawker is not for you,” said Den ton, a former Financial Times journalist who launched his first title, Gizmodo, in 2002.

The question is, “How much of a risk do we want to take here?” said Katie Shields, an executive senior producer at independent Wieden + Kennedy in Portland, Ore. “Certain brands out there, like Nike, will take a risk and be a little provocative.”

One way advertisers can assume more control is to sponsor their own blogs. Denton said he is working with an apparel brand to create a blog that speaks to its niche, he said. The content will address a lifestyle consistent with the brand’s message. Although it will be sponsored, the blog will maintain “editorial independence,” said Denton.