

# Brand safety: A matter of conscious partnership

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Every business knows that their brand equity is as valuable as their bottom line. While businesses can carefully curate certain aspects of their brand through their advertising and marketing efforts, the dominance of digital as a medium has added a layer of unpredictability to protecting brand reputation. Thankfully, through constant awareness and strategic partnership, marketers, agencies and publishers can play a proactive role in the way their brand is portrayed online.

IAB SA defines brand safety as keeping a brand's reputation safe when brands advertise online. In practice this means avoiding placing ads next to the content listed in the following categories: military conflict, obscenity, illegal drugs, adultery, arms, crime, death/injury, online piracy, hate speech/terrorism, spam and tobacco. We also expand this definition to the provision of a safe environment for ad trading.

Audrey Naidoo, head of digital marketing for Absa and member of the Brand Council for the IAB SA says, "We view brand safety as an evolving strategy which needs to be carefully crafted to ensure that a brand's reputation is protected in the digital world. In practice this means actively using the brand safety tools when buying media but also investing in third party services like Moat, leading to improved ad placement and fraud protection. Brand safety cannot be viewed in isolation but rather needs to be considered holistically together with viewability and ad fraud. Transparency in the media value chain is required to ensure all stakeholders are invested in providing quality ad placements to brands in order to drive return on investment and create a brand safe environment."

If brand safety is prioritised, the result is a reduced risk of ad misplacement. A brand's reputation remains unharmed while the funding of content and services which infringe copyright is eliminated. While the process or the technology behind programmatic ad buying is often blamed, it is critical that we foster awareness of the risks at hand, and acknowledge our role in our brand's safety.

"There are conscious, human decisions we make that impact the health of our brands online. It starts with the goals we set for our brand, as well as the measures we put in place to evaluate the success of our goals. It then extends to the way in which we continue to audit and analyse the success of digital ad campaigns to optimise campaigns and affect real change," says Paul Stemmet, founder and CEO of Shinka and member of the IAB SA Tech Lab committee.

The rapid evolution of programmatic media buying, although great in many instances, has resulted in people taking advantage of brands and advertisers with click bait, the theft of content and repurposing this into fake news, using unsavoury content to try and generate revenue from the exchanges etc.

"This is where constructive partnerships between agencies, brands and publishers can become fruitful", says Chris Borain, chair of the IAB SA, "In the era of fake news and sites created specifically to target unsuspecting advertisers, it's imperative that both advertisers and publishers ensure that a safe and trusted environment is created for our audience to interact with brands. Not only does this ensure that a brand is never placed next to unsafe content, but also that local publishers help brands achieve their marketing objectives in a measured trusted environment."

Brad Page, head of agency council at the IAB SA and partner at NEO, Ogilvy says, "When buying digital media across an increasingly fragmented supply chain, agency buyers need to be critical and vigilant when assessing the Brand Safety parameters and measures which the supply side provide. These measures are often tech-led but whitelisting is one ongoing exercise which limits the risk of exposure to unfavourable web environments. Although the industry has moved on somewhat, spawning an entirely new industry focused on combatting ad fraud, fake news, brand safety, viewability and transparency, it's still up to us using these platforms to take responsibility where digital media buying is concerned."

The IAB has set up a brand safety committee with the intention of developing a white paper focused on collaborative education around how SA advertisers and brands are dealing with brand safety. In the white paper we unpack;

- How to keep your brand safe in a digital advertising space
- How SA advertisers and brands are dealing with brand safety and what measurements are in place
- What criteria determine an unsafe environment.

The IAB SA will also focus on the areas that can be worked on in order to help eliminate brand safety concerns, some of which are listed below:

- Brands, CMO's, CEO's, Publishers and agencies need to take more responsibility.
- AI and machine learning are great tools for the industry but they are not the be all and end all when it comes to media buying.
- Look to premium as a channel.
- Use data to track the efficacy of your campaigns.
- Adopt an omni-channel approach
- Work with brand safety partners

Daniel Courtenay, CEO of MaxAxiom, MD of AdJoin, member of the IAB SA Publishing Council and IAB SA Brand Safety Committee lead says, "The issue of brand safety is real and as a responsible brand owner and custodian it's up to you to take more responsibility. We can no longer simply mandate buying partners to get the best performance based on antiquated metrics and digital has to be held accountable at the same time."

The IAB SA is not suggesting that members stop buying from these exchanges, but the time has come to empower ourselves in the process. At the heart of this lies a focus on partnership and a prioritisation of brand equity in a tumultuous digital media and buying environment.

We will be providing our members with every resource they need to safely navigate through digital advertising platforms, starting with our white paper. As always, we appreciate your input and personal experience of the South African landscape. This is an important moment in our digital history, where brands assert themselves online and refuse to be aligned with unsavoury content. By joining hands and partnering in all our varying capacities in the digital advertising industry, we can make it a safe space for all of us.

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