


The Fine Art
of The
Flash Banner Ad

by

Karl Peter Gottschalk

A Better Format for Flash Banner Ads.

"Now that I've earned my degree,

"Now that I've earned my degree, gown and cap... 



... I wonder what some other hats might look like?"



Roll your mouse over here to find out.



Figure 1: The Stub.

Write your ad so that it breaks up into two parts. The first part, above, must weigh in at 12K or less in Australia, 15K or less elsewhere in the world, and should invite readers to participate by rolling their mouse over it. That action triggers the rest of the ad, below, to load and play.

If readers don't choose to interact with the ad, then this section keeps looping until it is swapped for another ad.

 **Ever considered a NSW Police hat?** 

 ***Roll your mouse over a hat to learn more about career paths in the Changing Force.*** 

 **Thanks for choosing to learn more about being a female officer in the NSW Police Force.** 



Thanks for choosing to learn more about being a male officer in the NSW Police Force.  

Figure 2: The Body.

The beginnings of the Body. This next section of the ad can weigh up to 85K. That is more than enough room to communicate an in-depth message. It can continue for many more frames than I show above, and can contain plenty more text and images, and sounds. By providing buttons within the ad, you can allow the reader to control the reading process, and provide alternative reading paths with multiple choice options.

Don't forget that you have 85K's worth of weight to play with in the body, and that's a whole lot of extra content if you want to use it. Go ahead, knock yourself out!

Flash Versus Animated GIFs.

The first ads on the World Wide Web were made as animated GIFs, a crude and limited file format that was accidentally found to permit frame-by-frame animation of a stack of still images.

Until the Flash plug-in became so popular that its vendor Macromedia now estimates over 98.3% of web users have it installed on their computers, animated GIFs were the dominant medium for web advertising. Especially banner ads.

Now, Flash is slowly and surely overtaking GIF as the preferred medium of web advertising, as agency creative staff and their clients begin to get to grips with the many advantages Flash offers. Those advantages are legion, and advertisers have barely begun to exploit them.

Although Flash is often widely misapplied on the web, sometimes feared, and mostly used in a manner that shows misunderstanding of its nature, Flash remains *the* ideal medium for web advertising,

Flash has been around in various forms for some years now, and has outlasted other technologies some web commentators define as *rich media*. Advertisers choosing Flash find it gets far better results and stands out well against non-rich media like animated GIFs, more than justifying the extra cost of development.

Flash and Its Versions.

The Flash plug-in is now at version 6. The Flash authoring tool is now called Flash MX. Along with companion products Dreamweaver MX, Fireworks MX and ColdFusion MX, Flash MX is capable of building web applications and web services well beyond what users of Flash 5 or Flash 4 could conceive of.

What that means is that builders of Flash 6 *destination web sites*—web sites that readers elect to visit with the likelihood they will be spending some time there—can now do things they never could before.

A destination web site can have a mechanism built in to its first page that checks whether readers have the latest version of the Flash plug-in, and recommends they download and install that version. Chances are that readers will then do that. Or, if they are using the Windows computer operating system, then the 380K Flash plug-in will download in the background.

That luxury does not exist for advertisers using Flash as their medium. Banner ad hosting services can only serve ads to those computers already set up to handle them.

There are two constraints on which version of Flash advertisers can use. The first is Flash player version penetration amongst your target readership. The second is the version your web advertising hosting service provider supports.

The Australian ad hosting services have just recently upgraded to hosting Flash 5 banner ads. They can still handle ads built in Flash 4. Right now there is no news as to when they will be adding support for Flash 6. Let's hope it's very soon.

Meanwhile, let's design and produce Flash banner ads in Flash 5, and consign Flash 4 to the trash can. Flash 4 was little more than an improved animation file format with simple scripting. Flash 5 takes the web ad into new, more fertile, territory.

Region	Flash 4	Flash 5	Flash 6
US	96.4%	90.3%	3.2%
Europe	97.5%	94.6%	7.7%
Asia	94.7%	90.7%	8.1%

Figure 3: Flash plug-in version penetration figures, as of May 2002. Australia is included in Asia. Survey was conducted by NPD Online. IDC Research estimates that the total number of users online is currently 444 million.

Pleasures and Terrors of File Size.

Web publishers and advertising networks outside Australia have set the maximum weight of 468x60 pixel banner ads, whether made as animated GIFs or in Flash, at 15K. In Australia, publishers and networks have set the maximum at 12K. Nobody has explained why. 15K is too small; 12K is restrictive, to say the least.

When I began making Flash banner ads, just after Flash 5 appeared, I quickly discovered the limitations of the 12K size. I was learning Flash 5 ActionScript, and prompted by the sophisticated user interactions it allowed, visualized a type of Flash banner ad built in two parts—the *stub* and the *body*.

I reasoned that the stub should invite readers to interact with the ad with a mouseover, and that first mouseover should initiate loading and playing the rest of the ad. I proposed that the stub could easily weigh in at 12K or less, as it wouldn't have to hold much content.

The body could then weigh much more than 12K, and provide a richer interactive experience than a straight-through animation.

After showing a dummy of this new approach to the banner ad to local networks and publishers, and receiving their approval, I

sent a description and sample off to the MFAA (Macromedia Flash Advertising Alliance) for distribution and comment. They accepted it.

Audio, Video And More.

I also suggested that streaming and event-driven audio could be initiated on mouseover. Later, third-party developers created tools to turn video into a stream of still frames for import into Flash banner ads.

Now, Flash MX and the Flash 6 plug-in handles video natively. The same combination allows for importing JPEG and MP3 files at run time. In the bargain, a new technology named Flash Remoting is on its way. Things couldn't be better. Roll on Flash 6 plug-in penetration.

Reader Interaction: MouseOver or Click?

The jury is still out on whether it's better to ask readers to interact with web ads by mousing over or clicking on them.

Readers have become accustomed to responding to ads by clicking, or double-clicking if they suffer from that all too common disease of new computer users, *Doubleclickitis*. But, fewer readers now respond to *any* banner ads with a click than at any time in the short history of advertising on the web.

There are several reasons for that. The attraction of animated GIF ads wears thin soon after first exposure to the format. Most banner ads are just plain bad. And readers have become burned too many times by clicking on a banner ad with promise, only to be dumped at the front door of some dire corporate web site that appears to have little to do with the content of the ad that brought them there.

My advice is to build user interaction based on mouseovers into your Flash banner ads, rather than mouse clicks. If your message will benefit by offering to take the reader to a specially-built microsite, or loading an extended interactive web ad within a pop-up window (what I call an *AdBook*), then do that with a clickable button at the end of the banner ad.

Otherwise, reserve navigation within your Flash ads for mouseover actions.

The Web Voice: It's Conversational.

The web is a one-to-one medium. Your reader has invited you into her living room for a polite conversation. If you misbehave and try

to harangue her, yell at her, fail to engage in a dialog, or adopt the impersonal tone of a corporate press release, or marketing shill, then she'll eject you out of the house at once. A mouse click is all it takes.

Unfortunately, few web ads follow these guidelines and far too many are the equivalent of those TV commercials where the male voice-over artist screams his lungs out. Readers are turned off by these things. Imagine how they feel when confronted by a page loaded with them.

The best web ad writing is personal, respectful, quirky, colloquial, conversational, direct. It recognises there are human beings both sides of the equation. Take up reading weblogs to get a feel for the natural language of the web.

Speak and Guide.

The two-part Flash 5 banner ad is a new concept, and most of your readers will be unfamiliar with it.

Assist them in the process of interacting with your ad by suggesting actions. Design your guide text so it's in a different colour and font than the main text of your ad. Consider building user interface elements into your ad that readers are already familiar with, such as tool tips, menus, rollovers, multi-state buttons, radio buttons, check boxes and even help buttons.

Start thinking beyond web ads as just graphics combined with text. Flash MX is the harbinger of new forms of communication, that are applications *as well as* advertisements.

To Animate Or Not.

Early web advertisers began animating text for no other reason than that they discovered they could. Text animation became all the rage when designers found that Flash animated better, faster and flashier than animated GIF. Animating text is generally what you do when you're short of ideas.

I suggest you animate text *only* when it supports and underlines the reading process. You might have a key word that can be illustrated with an animation of the concept it expresses.

If the urge to gratuitous animation is too strong to resist, you can be sure your reader will find it easily resistible.