

THE STRAIGHT DOPE

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What's up with popup ads?

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Dear Cecil:

What's up with popups? I don't mean the thing that happens when a batter gets too far under a fastball, I mean those maddening advertising windows that crowd your computer screen when you surf the Web. It can take several minutes to swat down the lot of them, giving that animated bimbo--you know the one--a chance to launch into her nails-on-a-blackboard spiel about did-you-ever-wonder-why-your-computer-runs-faster-etc. How can infuriating potential customers in this manner possibly sell product? More to the point, why can't I turn these goddamn things off?--Mike Sharrock, Saint Paul, Minnesota



Cecil replies:

Mike. Take a deep breath. Although you evidently haven't noticed it, the era of the popup may be coming to an end. I say "may" because one can never underestimate the ingenuity of Web marketers and the evil programming wizards in their employ. For now, though, downtrodden users such as yourself are getting a break, mainly because popups (not to mention popovers, popunders, and other variants) have ticked off so many people that the heavy hitters in the business have come to their aid. We'll get to that in a bit. First, the basics:

1. Some definitions: A *popup* is a new browser window, usually with ad content, that opens over your current one. A *popunder*, which is supposedly less annoying, is a new browser window that opens (duh) under the current one. A *popover* (also known as an *overlay*)--in my book more fiendish than either of the preceding--is an animated graphic that doesn't have a window in the usual sense but rather materializes on top of the current window. Sometimes popovers have a click-the-X box that enables you to get rid of them; others don't (or carefully disguise it) and you have to wait till they go away on their

own. *Interstitial ads* appear after you click on a hyperlink, but before you get to the page you actually want. *Rich media* refers to fancy, often interactive, animated graphics that move around the page, etc. Rich media is the hot trend in online advertising since it's difficult to ignore; it typically makes use of a technology aptly called Flash. Flash is often used for popovers.

2. Popups and such are made possible by JavaScript, a programming language used to write code that's embedded in the HTML code automatically downloaded to your computer when you open a Web page. JavaScript is relatively elementary but can invoke much more sophisticated technology such as the aforementioned Flash. The capability to run JavaScript was built into browsers because Web designers wanted to be able to make their pages do cool things, and one suspects at least a few people realized it would facilitate commercialization of the Internet.

3. Popups became popular because the original mainstay of online advertising, the banner ad, wasn't working as a marketing tool. The "click through rate" on banners was dismal, and many marketers were skeptical that the Web would ever become a viable advertising medium. Partly for that reason, online ad spending declined from \$8.1 billion in 2000 to \$6 billion in 2002. That year, however, intrusive online ads began to catch on in a big way. How well they work is debatable; the main thing is, marketers thought they worked, and online spending increased to \$7.3 billion in 2003 and a projected \$9.1 billion in 2004.

4. Intrusive ads are perhaps second only to telemarketing on the list of loathed marketing techniques, and some well-heeled players have gone to great lengths to defeat them. The most recent and in some ways most surprising is Microsoft, which till not long ago had been lax not only about ads but about online security in general. In August, Microsoft released Service Pack 2 for Windows XP, which makes it possible to suppress most popups and in addition greatly strengthens XP's online security features. SP2 is a free and for many users automatic download; click on the System icon in the Control Panel to make sure you've got it. Not using XP? Many swear by the popup-killing ability of the Google Toolbar, also available online for free. You've got SP2 but still get popups? Marketing snakes have probably surreptitiously installed ad-grabbing "malware" on your computer. I recently ran Lavasoft's Ad-Aware SE Personal Edition, yet another free download, and eliminated 1,690 "critical [i.e., wicked] objects"; now I'm largely popup free.

We haven't seen the last of the marketers, though--at least we'd better hope not. We just want the marketing to be a little less obnoxious. But Cecil, you say, these guys are unscrupulous hyenas who deserve to have their internal organs roasted on sticks! Not arguing, compadre. However, let's not forget that these unscrupulous hyenas have money. If we can't abstract the wherewithal for the Web from their pockets, it'll have to come out of ours.

--CECIL ADAMS

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