



**Client: 24/7 Real Media**



**Publication:**  
**Sunday, February 1, 2004**

## **UNPOPULAR**

**By Kathleen McLaughlin**

*Staff Writer*

Michelle Maher, who sells doll-house accessories on eBay from her home in North Andover, can't think of anything she despises more than pop-up ads on her computer.

"It actually disrupts what you're doing. You're typing and you have to start over. It's literally taking over your screen," she said. "I think that should be illegal, personally."

The ads appear in separate windows on top of the Web pages an Internet user visits, so that the user can't continue browsing until he or she closes the ads. A close cousin of the pop-up ad is the pop-under, which appears behind the pages a user visits. Accumulating pop-under ads can slow browsing, and once a user ends his session, he still has to close the ads that have gathered on his desktop.

Maher's husband recently installed a "pop-up killer" on her computer.

Frustrated Internet users like Maher are driving a technological race between pop-up blockers and technology that allows ads to circumvent them. Already this has resulted in ads that are more difficult to close and new kinds of ads, which one Internet advertising executive said will make Internet users wish for a return to the day of pop-ups.

"There's a chance that the new ideas will become more intrusive," said Michael Cassidy, president of Undertone Networks, a New York firm that creates and sells online ads. "There's a chance that when you click on an article, you'll have to see a commercial first."

Cassidy is talking about the latest technology, what is known as an inter-page ad. Sites are also starting to use "rich media," such as small banner ads that expand when a user scrolls over them, or animated ads that float across a page.

While pop-ups and pop-under ads are becoming more sophisticated, Cassidy said, the basic technology is simple. The firm gives the code, or programming language, for the ad to the hosting Web site. When a visitor passes over a certain portion of the site, an ad pops up, or under.

"This doesn't do anything to the user. It doesn't track who they are," Cassidy said.

Cassidy acknowledged that in the course of rapid browsing, it can be difficult to tell which site served a particular ad.

Sometimes the ads appear because of actions the user took. For example, some software that users download contains other software that sends ads according to their browsing habits.

Maher, for example, has noticed that whenever she types the name of a flower on eBay's site, she gets an ad from a particular florist. She doubts that eBay sold space to that advertiser because it would compete with business on the site itself.

The surreptitious ads are even more troubling to Web-site publishers that can't control them. The Washington Post, New York Times and Dow Jones have sued one of two leading makers of the ad-serving software, Gator. The case was settled early last year, the technology news Web site Cnet.com reported.

But the "adware" companies appear to be winning the battle by arguing that computer users agree to the ads when they download software. U-Haul International sued another company, WhenU.com, for placing competitors' ads over its site, but a federal court sided with WhenU in July, Cnet reports.

Ads themselves and the sites that host them are becoming smarter too, especially as more Internet users turn to pop-up blocking software. Now viewers find themselves waiting for an animation to run its course before they can close an ad. The "x" that allows a close can be elusive, or impossible to find.

Some sites won't show users their content if they detect a pop-up blocker, Cassidy said. The technology companies that actually serve the ads -- the largest in the industry is DoubleClick -- are finding ways to get around blockers. There is even technology that will launch a full-page ad when it detects a blocker.

"It'll be kind of a cat-and-mouse race," said Marc Ryan, director of analysis for [Nielsen/NetRatings](#). "Blockers are rapidly gaining ground."

The Internet service provider Earthlink offers a pop-up blocker. So do search engines Google and Yahoo. Microsoft recently announced that the next version of its browser, Explorer, will come with pop-blocking technology.

Ryan said that development may be the last straw for pop ads. "Pop-ups as we know them today won't be around for a long time."

Online advertisers and Web site publishers embraced pop-ups during hard times, and they want to hang onto the trend that has created a much-needed source of revenue for ad-supported sites and a reportedly effective tool for advertisers. The industry is responding to complaints, mainly by using more pop-unders, which users see as more polite, Ryan said.

Sites also have the ability to limit the number of pop ads any one user will see.

"Quality sites will not show a user more than one pop-up per session," said David Moore, CEO of 24/7 Real Media, which sells ad space for less busy sites. "Advertisers would love to get more, but the publishers realize if they show too many, they're going to lose viewers. It's a balance."

Moore predicts that pop ads, and their image with the online public, will evolve much like commercials and television viewers. "In the early days of TV, a 30-second commercial was real intrusive."

Pop-ups and pop-unders seem ubiquitous, but they account for 6.2 percent of all ads, Ryan said. Aided by a study that showed they boost brand recognition among Web surfers, they have become the most lucrative online ad. Prices range from \$5 per 1,000 impressions, or page views, to \$20 per 1,000, Moore said. The price a site commands depends on the level of its traffic and its degree of specialization, he said. For example, car site Autobytel is going to fetch higher prices for car product ads than an entertainment site, which has a broader audience, he said.

Some of the top pop-up advertisers are companies like Bank One and American Express, and the top pop-under advertisers are Orbitz and Netflix. Those companies are leading the push now, but the whole thing started with computer-accessory dealer X10.

Starting in 1999, when online ad revenue was down, X10 negotiated cheap ad rates on all kinds of sites and used pop-ups featuring bikini-clad women to push its tiny Web camera, Ryan said.

"They started the mass campaign of using pop-ups," he said.

Even X10 is distancing itself from pop-ups. Now the company uses pop-under ads, and its Web site includes a link that users can click to keep the ads away for 30 days.

Maher said she is appalled by the number of ads, and she's surprised at the number of "legitimate companies" that use them.

"Anybody who gives me a pop-up, they're the last person who's getting business from me," she said. "I think they're doing themselves a disservice."

At the same time, Maher might be proving the ad executives right. She recently took an IQ test at Tickle.com, which was offered by a pop-under ad.

"A pop-under is not as invasive. If they want to pop under, I might take a look. If you're bored at the moment, you might just pop into it."