# FAREWELL, FRICTION:

Why Digitized Ad Sales Are Mission Critical for Future Revenue Growth



# PART ONE

## The state of the digital ad landscape for pubs

n many ways, 2020 was more of an accelerator for the ad industry than a reset, hurling brands and publishers ahead of shifts that analysts had predicted would come a few years later. Ultimately, publishers were forced to dig deeper to differentiate their offerings and adapt to new consumer and buyer behaviors in order to earn ad revenue... but aside from having to do that in the midst of a global pandemic, what else is new?

Glad you asked: In 2021, after a year that threw buyers' best-laid plans out the window, advertisers are looking a little harder at their budgets. Even expected changes, like the more than half of buyers who shifted dollars away from broadcast and cable and to a growing CTV market, were only accelerated by consumer behavior.

All these shifts have made the buy side even more discerning about what they're looking for from publishers—evaluating everything from specific ad products and their respective KPIs, to how campaigns are measured and targeted, to what partners are doing with consumer data.

So even as publishers (and access to their audiences) have become more important to advertisers' success, buyers are still balancing their appetite for impact against a reticence to risk.

One thing hasn't changed: Selling the right ad to the right buyer still depends on more than low rates and flashy products. It's a fine balance to strike, and just keeping all the plates spinning—SEO and editorial, ecommerce and sponsorships, subscriptions and gated content—can make ad-selling feel like an all-out melee. But this brave new world of ad ops gives publishers a greater opportunity to distinguish their content, inventory, and products to be exactly what advertisers are looking for.

## DURING THE PANDEMIC,

every step of the customer journey changed radically. Digital became practically the only way to sell anything. Consumers around the world spent more time and money online:





Advertisers adapted with smarter (and often bigger) budgets; and publishers had to adapt formats and campaigns faster than ever—
sometimes in just minutes.

#### New, smarter players on an increasingly sophisticated field

Because it's driven by consumer behavior, the digital ad space isn't getting simpler for publishers anytime soon. The trends of recent years are only expected to accelerate over the next few—and that's before we even consider the multiple elephants in the room, like global and regional consumer privacy compliance, and of course, the demise of the third-party cookie.

Bottom line: The ad product arms race just got a huge booster shot, and publishers everywhere are jockeying for a piece of the pie.

While budgets rise across the board, specific advertiser spending trends put a finer point on the challenge and opportunity before publishers. MediaRadar reports that legacy direct-to-consumer (DTC) brands are moving spend from programmatic to alternative channels, and that firsttime spenders made up 12% of all programmatic spend in the direct-to-consumer (DTC) space in Q1 2021.[4]

Performance marketers are still leveraging a diverse array of channels to support long-term strategies. 80% of advertisers and 84% of publishers run affiliate marketing programs, [5] warming up both buyers and publishers to a future in content that directly drives commerce.

Before the pandemic, 78% of CMOs responding to a Gartner survey said they were likely to increase digital advertising in 2020. [6] By May 2020—when positive cases were climbing and uncertainty ran rampant—the same percentage of B2C marketing execs told eMarketer they'd be increasing digital advertising spend in 2021.[7] Gartner's next Annual CMO Spend Survey bore it out: 72.2% of the mean marketing budget is allocated to pure digital channels in 2021.[8]



It's safe to say the pandemic hit the gas pedal on a years-long trend of shifting budgets away from traditional channels. eMarketer reports that even as overall ad media spend hit a slump in 2020, digital ad spend grew 12.7% worldwide, [9] which puts digital on track to take 60% of worldwide media ad spend for the first time ever in 2021. Analysts predict that'll keep climbing over the next few years, claiming almost 70% by the end of 2025.

THE PANDEMIC PROVED DIGITAL IS RESILIENT

Digital spend remained consistent with predictions despite the pandemic while print was volatile



Print spend dropped 15.7% against a predicted drop of 0.2%



# **EVEN THE B2B SPACE**,

the slow-moving ocean liner segment of the marketing & advertising world, is getting in on the digital ad action in a bigger way than ever before. The B2B digital ad market grew

+32.5% IN 2020<sub>m</sub>

in the US alone, and estimates predict it will grow another

+24.9% IN 2021

By 2023, that continuing trend line could put another

\$14.57 BILLION on the table.

That matters to publishers not just because they're prospective buyers, but because in many cases, the hands who hold the B2B purse strings need someone to guide them. The B2B buy-side is traditionally slower to adapt to change, so this segment will prioritize publishers and sellers they can trust, understand and work seamlessly with.

This rapid growth in digital ads is creating new chances for publishers to siphon some of those B2B dollars—if, that is, they can follow through with better, smarter ad sales and ad-buying experiences.

But it's more than bigger budgets and chunkier allocations turning up the heat on publishers. Somewhere between the

end of third-party cookies (the lifeblood of programmatic), increasing regulatory pressure on platforms to handle consumers' personally identifiable information (PII) responsibly, publishers are realizing the value of their own data.

Buyers need to find new ways to meaningfully target and connect with audiences, and they need tools to measure those efforts. Publishers who have a finger on the pulse of their readership communities are the perfectly shaped puzzle piece to fill that need. Data insights and a centralized tech stack let publishers stand out as a buyer's 'single source of truth'—and without that, publishers risk losing ground in the increasingly saturated media market.

# **PART TWO**

## Addressing the ecosystem's growing pains

ew devices and ways of consuming content mean digital advertising is still growing. Global Industry Analysts Inc., (GIA) reports digital advertising and marketing will grow to \$786.2B globally by 2026, including a huge \$521.5B portion for display. You simply don't get that big without a whole bunch of new problems.

For publishers, it's dealing with bigger players in a field that shrinks with each acquisition; it's playing catch-up with consumer behavior and then leading buyers to them; and it's rediscovering the value of your own first-party data after decades of operating in a paradigm that valued everyone else's. But no pressure, right?

And while some of the biggest media groups sell off properties to increase profitability, sophisticated publishing groups tell AdMonsters they've moved instead to increase efficiencies in ad revenue ops. Centralizing their tech stacks and unifying sales operations lets them increase profitability so they can focus on the universal driver of value: great content.

During the pandemic, publishers also learned they need to become more than a service provider for advertisers. [14] Their role is quickly shifting to one of consultation and relationship-building, unearthing new learnings, creating advertiser-focused guidance, and walking them through platform configurations.

## SO LET'S GET SPECIFIC:

Four main factors will shape how are going to change how publishers survive and thrive in the coming years:

- 1. Mergers & Acquisitions
- 2. Changing Consumer Behavior
- 3. Shifts In Buyer Behavior
- 4. All Things Privacy & Identity

## 1. MERGERS AND ACQUISITIONS

Fox buys Tubi. Comcast buys Xumo. THR-Billboard acquires Spin, Stereogum, and more. Viacom buys Pluto TV. Even small- to mid-sized publishers are scooping up ad and gaming platforms. It's part power play (diversifying to increase revenue streams) and part survival tactic, (bolstering their first-party data as we say goodbye to cookies).

"A uniform platform that deals with all aspects of ad sales is hugely important in publisher M&A," said CloudSense's Matt Cusack. "Having a solution like CloudSense built on top of Salesforce lets publishers quickly onboard salespeople to make their ad sales more efficient than the organization they've acquired. It helps them easily adopt and onboard new users and realize operational efficiency with a unified process."

TWO OF THE THREE BIGGEST MEDIA M&A DEALS of Q1 2021 were in the broadcasting segment.[13]

For all publishers—those looking to buy, sell, grow or just survive—that means a long, hard look at not just your bottom lines and your overheads, but the systems that would need to integrate in the weeks and months following a deal. Publishers can set themselves apart—or make themselves more attractive to buyers—by being smarter about their own data, cultivating high-value audiences, and making easier, more attractive ad products. That approach will serve publishers well for building value today and in the first-party future.

## 2. CHANGING CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Consumers are always kind of the tail that wags the dog of the advertising world. But in 2020, a pandemic was the hand wagging the tail that wagged the dog. (How's that for a belabored analogy?) By keeping us locked to our screens more than ever—adding 58 minutes of average media consumption by US adults to a new high of 13 hours and 21 minutes per day<sup>[15]</sup>—COVID-19 pushed consumers closer to brands and the publishers they partner with.

#### A stratospheric rise for streaming

We really hope it doesn't surprise you to find out that more and more of that time is spent streaming. Leichtman Research Group reports that 82% of American households have at least one Internet-connected TV device in 2021<sup>[16]</sup>—up more than 50% since 2011. In the third quarter of 2020, the average US adult spent more than an hour in front of their CTV devices every day. The growth of CTV ad spend in the US outpaced eMarketer's already lofty projections, raking in over \$9B in 2020 and projected to claim \$13.41B in 2021. While the growth rate stabilizes over the next few years, it's expected to hit almost \$25B by 2025.

Add in the addressability factor and you get an incredible penetration point for brands and publishers alike: Better ad relevance led 46% of respondents to a 2021 Valassis survey to say they'd be more inclined to research a product or service they saw while streaming than while watching traditional linear TV (LTV).[19] In 2020, 71% of survey respondents indicated they'd be more likely to spread the love by telling a friend about a CTV ad instead of an LTV ad.[20]

#### A STRATOSPHERIC RISE FOR STREAMING

**82**%

of American households have at least one internet-connected TV device in 2021

**+50**% since 2011,

**+8%** since 2019, and

**+2%** since 2020 alone.



\$\frac{\\$9 \ BILLION}{\\$9 \ BILLION}\$
in 2020 and is projected to claim
\$\frac{\\$13.41 \ BILLION}{\\$in 2021, hitting}\$
\$\frac{\\$25 \ BILLION}{\\$by 2025.}\$

## ONE MAJOR PUBLISHER TOLD ADMONSTERS

they've expanded their distribution through CTV "at an insane rate" with no signs of slowing.

## Making ads that work for buyers & consumers

The increased interest, spend, and engagement with CTV streaming is going to mean two things for publishers. Two things will be valued more than anything else while the CTV space develops:

- Faster innovation of ad products that drive results for buyers.
- Consumer-centric strategies built from strong publisher/buyer relationships.

In a 2020 AdMonsters Think Tank forum on post-pandemic evolution, publishers shared how they used the pandemic learnings to **make ad products perform better** for advertisers AND the consumers they reach.<sup>[21]</sup> Site speed, Core Web Vitals, supply path optimization, and more were on the tips of their tongues—but so were meaningful partnerships with advertisers.<sup>[22]</sup> Publishers feel that collaboration, where product and ad are part of the same experience with the consumer at the center, is the future of advertising across channels.

The accordion will likely bellow back out on some of these trends (most of the way, anyway) and we'll be looking at a more predictable pace of change—but when it does, we'll already be on the other side of it. By then, all the new products and practices publishers came up with—like custom content, which one major publisher told AdMonsters has been "a huge success" for their ad sales—will be standard fare.

Publishers helped usher in a digital advertising paradigm where it's easier than ever for consumers to take action—to buy, to subscribe, to share. You don't rev that engine and take your foot off the gas right when you start moving.

## 3. SHIFTING BUYER BEHAVIOR

The changes of the past few years—the rise of header bidding, the fall of traditional identification metrics, the dawn of CTV ad fraud<sup>[23]</sup>—have brought trust to the forefront of advertisers' concerns over the past few years. In the IAB's Video Ad Spend 2020 & Outlook for 2021 report, 60% of advertisers rated CTV highly on providing a 'trusted, brand safe environment'—the most important criterion for buyers when selecting video publishers (86%).<sup>[24]</sup> It's a publisher's responsibility to cultivate and handle that trust going into the future.



alike squeezed to get by in 2020, but some pandemic trends could be here to stay.

More than half-

**51**%

-of respondents to IAB's 2021 video ad spend survey expect contract flexibility to continue into the future;

45%
feel like just-in-time buying will stick
around;

**43**% expect adjustment of in-flight creative to be a mainstay of video publishing. [25]

In 2019, nearly three out of four buyers planned to increase their digital video ad spend within 12 months.<sup>[26]</sup> Now, with CTV programmatic inventory way up,<sup>[27]</sup> they're realizing they need guaranteed programmatic deals to fill out their CTV ad buys—to the tune of \$6.7B of 2021's expected \$13.4B total CTV ad spend.

#### 4. ALL THINGS PRIVACY & IDENTITY

Here's a thing: 41% of advertisers<sup>[28]</sup> don't think their whole team really understands what the loss of third-party data means for their advertising. But you can't really blame them: There's Google, dangling the carrot of Chrome cookie deprecation further and further in front of them, promising they'll get to it eventually before yanking it into the future by another year or so.<sup>[29]</sup>

Sure, the changing nature of consumer identity is upending programmatic and setting everyone's hair on fire. But it's also putting a big red 'X' on the next big driver of value: First-party data. IAB reports that 37% of ad-buyers think they don't have enough of their own first-party data—meaning publishers who have a handle on theirs can become indispensable.

"When publishers own their data—and I mean really own it—it becomes very powerful," said Ian Chick, Customer Success Director at CloudSense. It's a matter of packaging it for sale in a way that can give more insight to your buyers, matching data sets to product types for greater value.

The truth is that advertisers are looking to publishers to sort out this whole cookie mess. Survey respondents told eMarketer that in the future, they need these key things from their publishers to help them thrive in a cookieless world:<sup>[30]</sup>

- Transparency in measurement (48%)
- Locked-down privacy/consent models (42%)
- First-party data and the tools to activate it (41%)
- Cross-channel accuracy (39%) and scale (36%)

It's almost funny how perfectly those overlap with characteristics of strong publisher partners, right? Of course, the window of opportunity will close on those differentiators: By the time the ad ecosystem is fully acclimated to this cookieless, identity-driven model of targeting where first-party data is king, every publisher will be doing some version of it. That means speed and efficiency are paramount in establishing yourself as a valuable partner to buyers.

# **PART THREE**

## How publishers can position themselves ahead of the curve

or all the ways the pandemic left publishers holding the bag, it also uniquely prepared them for the challenges of the new phase of programmatic. Larger publishers will need to become more flexible to affect change; smaller publishers will need to overcome any remaining hesitation to invest in the tools that let them do their jobs more efficiently.

With the initiative and tools, publishers can fill the gap for all things programmatic, becoming the resident SME for buyers who are still catching up. Consider the fact that 28% of buyers say they still haven't figured out cross-media measurement. [31] In the meantime, they're wasting money trying to get there. In a post-cookie world where attribution will rely on closed environments, publishers who have a handle on their entire ecosystem (including data, order management, and measurement) will have a leg up.

The things holding back larger publishers from mastering the new phase of programmatic are structures that prevent innovation, natural siloes between departments, inflexibility at a decision-making level, and a lack of corporation motion and will to get things done. In smaller publishers, nervousness about managing changes to the business itself while driving transformation of IT infrastructure can lead to hesitation to invest in tools that can help them get ahead."

lan Chick, Customer Success Director, CloudSense

#### Master the new phase of programmatic

To meet changing expectations from the buy side (like accountability, visibility and flexibility), publishers are diversifying their offerings to more than ad space. Think of it like publishers offering quasi-agency services: They're taking on creative, web hosting and design, editorial content—basically helping buyers figure out how to actually build advertising campaigns. It's a far cry from what most publishers are used to doing.

Publishers need to match that new (or, for larger players, evolved) suite of services with a sophisticated go-to-market model for each product. How do you sell a solution that's fit for specifically that buyer? Some publishers are looking at more channels (like newsletters, native video and editorial content, and even live shopping), and some are partnering with advertisers to drum up premium offerings. No matter how they get there, though, the value proposition is in customizing and optimizing offerings for advertisers.

#### Become a single source of truth for your customers

Buyers expect relevant, up-to-date visibility on the fly. But publishers find themselves in an environment that makes it impossible to build a single view of anything, with new products, workflows, custom offerings and premium services popping up all the time. Disparate systems mean disparate reporting, sales visibility and order management.

Without that visibility, it's hard to see upticks in spend or performance, let alone underperformance and how to improve. It all adds up to less revenue in the door, unreliable forecasts and unhappy customers.

Providing the best value to customers depends on having real time visibility of inventory and operations. With this in place, we've seen publishers accelerate their ability to capture opportunity and increase sales."

Neil Milne, VP Product Management, CloudSense

From an operational perspective, being a single source of truth lets you maximize revenue and reconcile billing actuals. Organizationally, it shows you how to sell your portfolio more effectively right now and where to focus in the future. Tools that let you coordinate and correlate can help you build campaigns or show you where to optimize, whether it's in your inventory, product mix, creative, testing or channels.

#### Set up a self-serve component

Self-serve doesn't have to be just for micro-campaigns or text ads anymore. Buyers want to feel empowered by publishers. They don't want to have to worry about brand placement or whether or not they can trust the data publishers give them—and at the same time, they want the convenience of self-serve.

Maybe they don't want to try programmatic, or they have some uncertainty around brand image—the point is to have the correct way of engaging with buyers, whether it's an all-hands-on-deck campaign build or a self-serve ad buy. Pulling it back into your OMS lets you fulfill orders through a standard process, even when they engage in a non-standard way. Providing a self-service component to your ad sales removes friction from the publisher/buyer relationship.

DPG Online Services set up an ecommerce portal using CloudSense to give its customers the option to self-serve online. Marvin Walstra, Manager of Back Office Systems Support for DPG Online Services, had this to say about the value of the solution: "The whole engine behind the [self-service] product catalog and the pricing is the same CloudSense catalog that we use for direct sales. So now we have two different sales channels making use of the same underlying media platform and product catalog and prices. Before the CloudSense integration with the eCommerce portal, all web shop orders had to be processed manually. Now, that's no longer necessary... The same goes for the crediting with invoices, in particular installment invoices. This again was a manual process that is now fully automated... It has saved a lot of time."

#### **Streamline your operations**

Flexible campaigns that need manual management are useless—and unfortunately, innovation often leads to seams between systems and processes. Today, publishers are going through many different fulfillment platforms to build campaigns, create products, sell ad space, and track performance. As a publisher, you want to diversify your products, but each separate tool, practice or platform adds inefficiencies and drives up cost.

"We've seen lots of innovation in the adtech space," Chick said, "but publishers are still going through many fulfillment platforms to build campaigns, package products, segment them, reconcile pricing, and then marry it all up at the end."

Think about the human effort it takes to drive those campaigns. Are those tools really giving you the ability to streamline the quoting, offering, fulfilling and activating process? Making your systems and processes communicate with one another creates a better experience for publishers and advertisers alike. OMS automation simplifies your sales operations, letting your team spend more time selling and less on admin and setup.

#### **Build out your first-party data strategy**

Everyone in programmatic is feeling the heat over the deprecation of third-party cookies, IDFA, and increasing regulatory pressure to be transparent with the use of data—and like it or not, everyone's looking to publishers to pick up the pieces. In a 2021 eMarketer survey, 49% of digital media pros said cookie deprecation was their biggest concern for 2021.[32]

Advertisers are looking to publishers to pave the way forward. IAB reports that 77% of advertisers think robust first-party data is an important factor in their choice of digital video partners. [33] Increasingly scrupulous buyers want publishing partners who can lean into their first-party data to package valuable inventory—and they want it in a way that doesn't interrupt their expected level of service.

Only publishers can get them thinking less about a "cookieless world" and more about the "first-party future". By increasing efficiency, publishers can consider more closely the defining characteristics of their own audiences, like what they'll engage with, why they engage with you, how they engage with you, and so on—demonstrating value to advertisers who will increasingly rely on your first party data to guide them.

#### One Solution to Unify Them All

For publishers, the pandemic-tinged world is both a land of milk and honey and a deadly minefield. There's a huge opportunity for those who lean into their data, create ad products that work for their buyers, and integrate them into a smooth, streamlined sales process—and by the same token, it's easier than ever to let inefficiency and friction slow down innovation, gunk up ad sales, and sink your forecasts.

Publishers who want to thrive in 2022 and beyond have to be in a mode of constant introspection and innovation—furthermore, they have to check their appetite for innovation against the labor required to realize it. CloudSense Founder and Chief Technology Officer Alex Fuller said, "While there is a wide selection of digital tech in the ecosystem, this actually presents something of a challenge to publishers who need to operate across many different tech platforms and are fundamentally finding it's actually driven by a lot of manual process on their side."

To gain access to revenue through new offerings and channels, you need to be able to consider what buyers want, how you sell it, and how to price it in one place, without introducing more friction.

Contact ben.cirksena@cloudsense.com to learn more about removing barriers, reducing friction, streamlining operations, and getting the full value of your ad sales with CloudSense.

# **END NOTES**

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# **ABOUT US**



CloudSense for Media Ad Sales and Subscription Management powers increased productivity and profits for ambitious media companies allowing them to launch new offerings faster, sell more and fulfill orders faultlessly. Its growing global community of customers span B2B as well as B2C markets and include leading brands such as Spotify, Informa Group, DPG Online and NewsCorp. With offices in the Americas, Europe and Asia Pacific, CloudSense is a recognised as a leader driving the end to end digitalisation of revenue operations, enabling its customers to grow their business efficiently while providing a better customer experience.

To find out more, visit CloudSense.com.



The global leader in strategic insight on the future of digital media and advertising technology. Through our conferences, website, and original research, we offer unparalleled in-person experiences and unique, high-quality content focused on media operations, monetization, technology, strategy, platforms and trends. We provide a forum to share best practices, explore new technology platforms and build relationships.

AdMonsters has built its reputation on providing objective editorial leadership based on deep, real-world expertise. We have continued to evolve our editorial strategy to address the changing needs of the market and, as a result, AdMonsters has attracted a highly focused audience who are at the forefront of the industry, and leading marketing partners have found AdMonsters to be a powerful channel to reach these decision makers. Today, our portfolio of integrated media solutions includes industry-leading live events, our innovative Connect content solutions, email marketing programs, and more.

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