

## Is Google Advertising Evil?

### Google is not Google

What kind of company is Google? Ask most people this question and the answer you'll likely get is "search." While it is true that Google is a company focused on search, they don't survive through search. Instead, like all companies, they are judged on their profits. And as John Gruber points out, they don't profit from search, they profit by selling advertisements. [This in turn makes Google an advertising company](#). That's more profound than you might suspect.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let's talk about usability for a second. I'm going to explain that Google's necessary focus on advertising can teach us a lot about playing the usability game. Specifically, this article will characterize a dilemma that is tied to Google's advice to publishers on how to place advertisements. The dilemma is resolved through usability, which in turn will teach us a lot about how to mix business and the user experience.

### Mental Models and Expectation Violation

People develop mental models. As you move and act, and as you live your life, you create your own understanding of the world. Every web site you visit influences you. The benefit is that your mental models help you get things done faster. Life is easier if you can follow the same process. Habits and automaticity yield a decreased cognitive load, which frees you up for things that matter more.

However, there is a downside. Unfortunately, there are times where your mental model doesn't reflect reality. Still other times, your mental model seems to be exactly right but someone has broken the rules. You expect X but you get Y. This disconnect is called expectation violation.

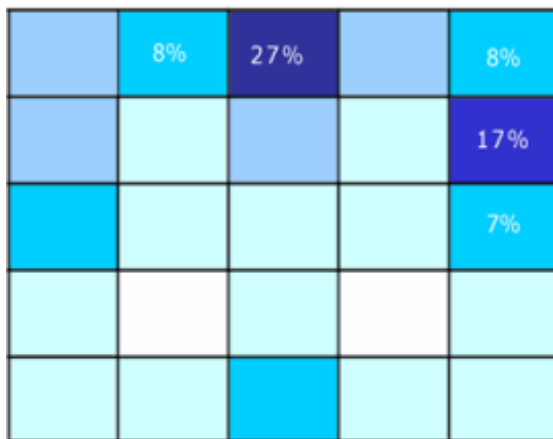
From a usability point of view, expectation violation is troublesome. It yields a poor user experience. We want people to get what they expect and what they want. In the case of games, puzzles, or art, this might not be true but generally we try to minimize expectation violation. It's a thorn we try to remove through testing, analysis, and solid design.

### The Pain of Advertising

Users do not enjoy advertising, Super Bowl advertising notwithstanding. It is an annoyance to reading, learning, acting, clicking, thinking, and everything else tied to web activity. However, to compensate for the annoyances, humans have developed advertising blindness. We ignore it. The catch is that we want to ignore advertising but still let the good stuff through. To make the magic happen, we've developed

mental models to help us separate the wheat from the chaff. In plain terms, we expect advertising in certain places but not in others.

This line of thinking is not new or unique, especially in the world of usability. Shaihk and Lenz (2006) did research demonstrating exactly [where users expect web objects](#) like search and advertising to appear. Not surprisingly, and as you can see from the graphic below, users expect advertisements on the edges of the page, particularly in the right column of the page and top row of the page. At the same time, it is important to note that users do not expect advertising in the left column or, more importantly, the body of the page.



Expected location of advertisements per research, where darker indicates higher expectation

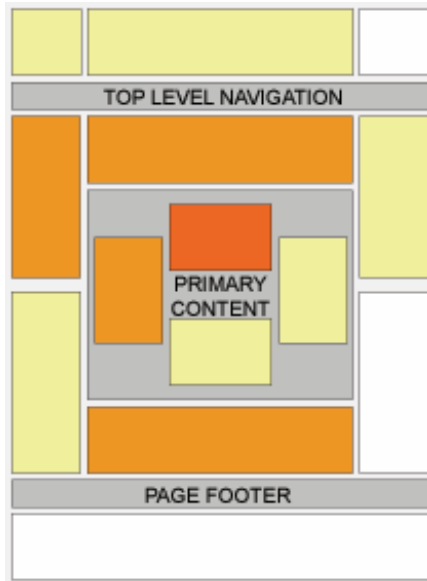
For what it is worth, I've seen similar research outside the user experience world. As you would expect, sales and marketing companies are keenly aware of this information. Unfortunately, most of them seem to want to jump on the bandwagon. They generally work with publishers to place ads at the top and right of pages.

It is also likely that advertisers don't understand advertising blindness or, if they do, maybe they just don't want to upset users by putting ads in the left navigation area or the body. It is also quite likely that advertisers haven't been able to convince content publishers to place advertisements in the middle of the page.

Enter Google.

### **Explicit Guidance from Google on Violating User Expectations?**

Google is keenly aware of the research that I've outlined above. They know what users expect. However, they also care about profits and they don't mind actively encouraging content publishers to (seemingly!) violate user expectations. In fact, they've provided explicit guidance on this.



"Ideal" location of advertisements per Google, where darker indicates "better placement"

That's right folks, [Google actively encourages content providers to place advertising in the middle of the page](#) where users normally expect to see content. At the same time, they actively discourage publishers from putting advertising in the right column where users expect advertising.

For what it is worth, Pete Freitag blogged a webinar where Google stated that [the more you blend in with the site, the less chance that ad blindness will occur](#). This should astonish you because it appears to break the Google mantra of Do No Evil.

Below are two examples to illustrate the points above (i.e., center the advertisements and blend them with the site).



*Example 1: Chris Pirillo's Blog*  
(click for larger image)



*Example 2: WebWord.com*  
(click for larger image)

Where is the public outrage over Google's invasive, disruptive, intrusive advertising? What's going on? Aren't they violating user expectations? In turn, aren't they being evil?

## The Escape, Including the Usability Insights

Google is telling publishers to place advertisements right in the middle of pages, blended with content. This would imply that Google is being evil because they seem to be asking publishers to violate user expectations. Magically, they dodge this bullet. They aren't being evil, publishers are happy, users are happy, and Google makes gobs and gobs of money.

They do it by augmenting the user experience. The advertisements that Google serves up through publishers have high usability. Putting this another way, the advertising is timely, relevant, and meaningful. Users actually appreciate the advertising. To them, Google ads are another type of content on a page with high value.

Instead of violating user expectations, Google has reversed the expected flow. The potential backlash is instead gratitude in the form of satisfied users. Amazing, but at the same time, completely understandable when viewed through the lens of usability.

Most advertising is low value. It is generally not wanted. But, when done well, as with Google advertising, users get exactly what they want in the way of answers, solutions, and ideas. The technology behind Google that matches the current content with available relevant advertising is the usability special sauce. Users and publishers unknowingly rely on this highly usable technology and Google delivers. Brilliant technology, brilliant user experience.

Once again, this demonstrates that Google prays at the altar of usability. They care about users, content providers, and advertisers. Because their technology is focused on delivering relevant results, they profit handsomely while helping all possible users involved. We're all happy with the solution.

This is a one of the most beautiful intersections of technology, business, and the user experience I have ever seen.