



Quantcast: The Next Generation of Media Research

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By David L. Smith, April 29, 2008

While not a brand-new offering, Quantcast represents the next generation of media research and is worth checking out. I have written about Quantcast in passing over the last year or two (full disclosure, I did some early consulting for them and have a small number of stock options), and I find that many agency-side and publisher-side folks that I talk to are unfamiliar with their services. Quantcast merits attention and today, I'll tell you why.

They call themselves "The World's Only Open Internet Ratings Service." The big departure from history for Quantcast is that they are a "census-based" service rather than sample-based. What does this mean? It means that they are able to go much deeper in number of sites rated than the commercial services such as comScore and NetRatings. In fact, they "see" over 20 million sites as compared to the low 10s of thousands for other services. In the digital world where audiences may be small and we still want to slice and dice them for targeting, census-based sources may be the only way to go.

In a Google-like move, Quantcast at this point is a free service to all, both for publishers and for agency planners and buyers. More about that below.

Quantcast starts with a methodology similar to other rating services in the fielding of a panel with several million self selected respondents. They then use statistical techniques to project to the total U.S. That's when it gets interesting. They also have the capability to put their tags on publisher sites (with publisher permission) that can get much more granularity out of the information. They then combine the two of these methodologies and use their "secret sauce" called a Mass Inference algorithm to produce refined Web audience profiles. These algorithms have been ported over from the finance industry and refined by mathematicians recruited from NASA and other high-end organizations.

As I mentioned above, publishers must put Quantcast tags on their site to "Get Quantified" and ensure that the best possible information about their site is presented. In discussing this process with publishers, I have found that most find that their Quantcast audience to be higher than that reported by either comScore or NetRatings and closer to their log file reports. When publishers ask me if they should do this, my reaction is always, "Why wouldn't you do it?" It's free and Quantcast is going to report on the site anyway. So why not do everything they can do to make the data as representative of their true audience as possible?

Agency planners and buyers are using the tool, too. At Mediasmith, our planners have found it to be a quick way to determine if a site they are not familiar with skews towards a clients' target and is a candidate for further consideration. It also uses Domain Tools thumbnails to assist in getting a quick snapshot of the site. More powerful agency planning tools are on the way shortly. In time, they will be able to provide us information on those engaging with our ads and how those demos differ from the sites those consumers are on.

Their end game is not yet transparent. But it is clear that this is more than just a rating service. Quantcast's ability to measure targets puts them in the position of being a next generation Tacoda, with or without a network attached. They should be able to provide us with much more than behavioral information, given that they have an increasing amount of demographic and sociographic information on consumer web patterns.



To get to the big time, Quantcast needs to achieve greater distribution among top sites in their Quantified Site program. They are making great progress, though, with top sites like Newsweek, People.com, Digg and NBC already participating. They have an active business development program and are in conversation with many top sites.

So check it out today and keep an eye on their progress. This is a tool that will only have greater and greater utility as time goes on.

About the Author

David L. Smith, CEO of Mediasmith, is an internationally known expert in the areas of new media application, media strategy, media planning and metrics, and has a number of awards to his name including an Effie and an ad:tech Individual Achievement award. Trained in the major agency media department environment, he has been in the independent media service field since 1978 when he founded Mediasmith. Smith is a pioneer in the application of computers in media, deployment of interactive advertising and media metrics. His experience ranges from participating in the creation and early usage of the first generation of advertising technology (housekeeping systems, data sources) to the current issues facing the use of metrics in the digital marketplace. He has been at the forefront of new metrics applications, with major involvement on the AAAAs, ARF, OPA and IAB national committees working to establish and refine standards in metrics, business practices and financial issues for interactive advertising. Smith has also contributed his knowledge through articles and interviews in an extensive range of media over the past two decades. He is a regular speaker at Industry events including iMedia, @d:tech, OMMA and others and writes regularly for a number of industry publications and Web sites including iMediaConnection and MediaPost. His advisory board involvement includes OPA, IAB, comScore/Media Metrix, AdEx and a number of start-up private companies. A University of Washington graduate, Smith is married with a seventeen-year-old son; plays guitar; and is a gourmet Chinese cook. You'll find him at the office early most mornings unless he is traveling with his family.

About Mediasmith

Mediasmith is a recognized leader in digital media planning and buying. We specialize in the integration of traditional and digital media, search, emerging technologies. We architect plans across all media, in all markets, in virtually all product categories utilizing the right combination of media options to help our clients grow in the increasingly fractured media environment; from planning and buying, to tracking, optimization, and reporting of ROI on all media efforts. Mediasmith remains dedicated to the evolution and standardization of digital media practices. As committed innovators, we test the latest in metrics and analytics, providing solutions that enable us to act as a catalyst for our clients' media innovations.