Don't take AdTech claims at face value

Incredible capability claims made by many AdTech platforms seem too good to be true. Sadly, most are, says **Vicinity Media Co-Founder and CEO Daryl van Arkel.**

Here, he explains why agencies and clients need to take a closer look at what AdTech vendors are really bringing to the table...

With all the shiny dashboards that land on South African shores, it can be daunting and extremely challenging for agencies and their clients to evaluate the claims that a myriad platforms offer versus the actual capabilities they can deliver.

Localisation is crucial

In the age of globalisation it may seem like localisation is dead but, in fact, it is more critical than ever, especially in a fragmented media landscape. **It's no longer sufficient to implement a technology into the local market off the back of a stamp of approval in another market.**

Some may disagree with this sentiment, but in our time of growing marketing complexity, I insist that doing your homework and paying attention to our very specific local conditions is how you'll ensure your client is not put at risk due to a lack of real evaluation.

Platform capabilities differ widely by market due to different or incomplete data sources, different market conditions, unique legal requirements, and distinctive user behaviour.

To illustrate this point, let's look at the mobile web dominance in African markets versus the app dominance in developed markets. This seemingly small distinction is actually a huge divide, because data collection is like night and day on mobile web versus via apps. For example, an app can access background location if it has permission and has access to the device ID, while mobile allows neither.

Understanding local audiences and conditions

All marketers agree that understanding audiences is the cornerstone of effective marketing.

Marketers are also on the same page when acknowledging that 18-20 year olds in South Africa are not the same as 18-20 year olds in Spain, the UK, or the US. Furthermore, audiences within SA's 18-20 year old bracket will differ widely across locales, race, religious and socio-economic groupings. In fact, **SA is one of the most diverse countries in the world, meaning no imported technology can be 'plug and play'. If it says it is, then it's time to examine how it works in our market, instead of simply accepting that it does.**

Aside from demographics, specific buying behaviours are also different across groupings and need to be understood to ensure campaign performance.

Can media agencies fill this role?

There is a growing need for media agencies to evaluate the technology they're offering clients, but do they have the capacity to do this, and is their know-how sufficient in an extremely complex technical environment?

Some agencies have begun adding "technical leads or heads" to their staff to fulfil this role, but most haven't and, in many cases, technology platforms remain untested and never scored because there is little incentive or in-house knowledge on how to do this.

A good starting point would be to **implement a scorecard, against which the variety of claims that AdTech platforms make can be measured**. With some simple tools and pointers, many claims could be delved into, opening everyone's eyes to the real capabilities of a platform.

Digital location is a complex area when it comes to AdTech, and that's where Vicinity Media's expertise lie. We have intimate knowledge of this space, and have built our technology to solve its unique problems for our specific markets in South Africa and the rest of Africa – we believe that off-the-shelf tech from foreign vendors isn't fit for purpose in this unique market, otherwise more of these vendors would have come and quickly conquered.

Our immersion in digital location means we can spot a false claim a mile off. There's nothing we love more than asking the hard questions to get to the bottom of wild AdTech claims. For example: **"How are you getting 1st party location data from a user on a mobile site if you aren't integrated with that site and are unable to ask the user?"** The answer is: you can't, it's not technically possible due to browser blocking of such requests through iframes. Despite this, the sales organisations punting AdTech platforms take clients' budgets while making promises like these that they simply can't keep or simply have no knowledge of because they never tested or built the technology themselves. Sadly, the black box nature of these platforms – along with little transparency about where campaigns serve – means it's all too easy for claims to go unchecked.

Could this problem rival ad fraud in its size and scope?

Ad fraud is estimated to be a $100m problem. Can false claims by 'black box' ad vendors be seen in the same light, and possibly fuel as much lost revenue? Is this the white collar ad fraud we aren't reporting or measuring as an industry?

With the constant need for 3rd party verification, it's obvious that the digital advertising industry suffers from a lack of transparency. The problem is, 3rd party verification can't solve all transparency issues; not to mention that the costs of trying are fast becoming (or are already) prohibitive to both clients and industry vendors in the current economic slump.

Unfortunately, in the ad industry, transparency doesn't seem to be the norm. Just look at the lack of transparency from one of the world's largest DSPs – the type of location data being pulled from users and the level of granularity the user is being targeted at are facts that are never disclosed. Ad buyers are left to assume it's targeted and in the geofence, and that a "fine look up"/GPS coordinate was sourced when, in truth, that's far from the case.

Bottom line?

Don't take AdTech claims at face value: only looking at a fancy dashboard versus real-world testing is like sitting on the front seat of a car, but never starting the engine. I would stop short of saying let's get under the hood to examine the engine, because that requires extreme technical knowledge. Instead, ask for tangible, measurable proof – the equivalent of taking it for a test drive around the block. **Ask for a real-life demo** that clearly shows how the capabilities you've been promised are actually delivered on in the real world. If the vendor starts avoiding this and making excuses, then perhaps

this is proof that something is amiss.

After offering more clarity on the issues I've raised, I hope to see a movement of enquiring minds; of disciplined and attentive professionals who won't blindly accept vendor promises – not only for the good of their clients, but to better the industry as a whole.

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