The (Un)usual Suspects

Finding and fixing problems in digital marketing technologies

by FIONA SOLTES

Knowing your numbers is an essential part of personal health. As it turns out, it's the same for the wellbeing of your e-commerce operation.

Beyond basket size, conversion rates, abandonment and other figures, technology company Ghostery is asking retailers whether they can state the digits of their marketing cloud: the number of digital technologies used to measure, power, optimize and otherwise influence their online presence.

The role these technologies play in a company's success is undeniable. The challenge is that all of these may be impacting a website in other ways, too — including slowing it down, creating monitoring chaos and generating "security blind spots."

> Ghostery's TrackerMap shows how marketing technology vendors gain access to a website's data, as well as whether they are creating gaps in the site's security.

One solution is Ghostery's Marketing Cloud Management, a software-as-a-service platform which promises to "pinpoint problems before they take hold." Ghostery MCM is based on data shared anonymously by a large percentage of the more than 40 million users of Ghostery's popular browser ad-blocking plug-in and mobile app. The tool can compile the data across any retailer's site to provide a real-time model of what's going on — and then guide the owner of the site on what to do about it.

At the center of Ghostery MCM is the TrackerMap, which shows in real-time how marketing technology vendors are gaining access to a web-

site's data, as well as whether they are creating gaps in the site's security. Ghostery MCM also provides real-time alerts when new vendors show up, when blacklisted vendors sneak through, when the site is running slow and when data may be leaking out to competitors.

Ghostery has also created the Ghostscore — a rating across the key measurements of MCM that evaluates a site's security, how fast it loads and how well it controls vendor access to website data.

"Consumers and retailers actually have the same challenges," says Scott Meyer, Ghostery co-founder and

CEO. "While consumers have had this level of transparency and control for years via our Ghostery browser plug-in and mobile app, retailers are rapidly gaining the same capabilities from our MCM service." Companies also are keen on discovering and/or blocking vendors collecting data on their sites.

"No matter what size retailer you are, the data generated off of your website

is one of the most essential pieces of intellectual property — the most valuable pieces of customer information — that you've got," Meyer says.

"Unless you have total control over who has access to it, you can have real issues … . For starters, you're spending millions of dollars on your site, and if this is out of control, you're not getting your money's worth."

INCREASED COMPLEXITY, INTENSIFIED CONVERSATIONS

Companies rely on Ghostery for several things, Meyer says: data governance, performance, privacy and security. When vendors don't operate securely, it can end up hurting the brand in a number of ways — including the possibility of warnings sent to consumers and lower search engine rankings. Though some vendors have been attached to sites to drive traffic, retailers often are unaware of what happens further down the line with third- or fourth-party associations.

"With retailers, usually 70 to 80 percent of the vendors on the site are

coming indirectly," he says. Retailers are finding that their TrackerMaps are increasingly complex, and the conversations between marketing and IT personnel about what's on their sites have intensified.

"Web performance is increasingly difficult in a world where customers expect individually tailored, mobile-optimized content, so retailers are leveraging a new set of services from cloud providers to help tackle these challenges," says Mark Grannan, an analyst with Forrester Research who serves application development and delivery professionals.

"Empowered by these technologies, marketers run campaigns and inject content outside of IT's 'guardrails,' which unfortunately opens the door for slow sites and unsecured content. Solutions like Ghostery help re-establish those guardrails to make sure you're still delivering the fast and secure experience that's expected."

Ghostery, which has its roots in advertising self-regulation (the company powers the AdChoices program globally), now boasts some of the largest names in e-commerce on its client roster, though few are willing to go on the record to say so.

"I can see multiple reasons why a retailer would be hesitant to talk about their need for this solution," Grannan says. "E-commerce is quite cutthroat right now, so any competitive advantage is probably being held pretty close to the vest. In addition, there have been so many security blunders by large-scale e-commerce providers … that the need for a security monitoring capability like Ghostery's is almost a black eye for the industry in general. Companies may not want to admit that their solution is not as secure as you may want to think it is as a consumer."

InterContinental Hotels Group used MCM to increase both its digital return on investment and performance. With a portfolio of 11 different hotel brands including Holiday Inn and Crowne Plaza, IHG averages 1.8 million monthly visitors to its site. It also works with roughly 80 digital marketing vendors. Chad Westfall, IHG's director of web delivery, noticed slow website response times across a number of the company's domains. He believed it was from unauthorized digital vendors, and enlisted Ghostery to help.

IHG now has a set of measurements that pinpoint where digital vendors are causing problems. "MCM also helped bridge the divide between IT, marketing, legal and security by enforcing cross-department communication and alignment of our website strategies," Westfall says. From there, he plans to develop a vendor questionnaire to ensure all parties understand and agree to IHG's data collection and sharing policies.

STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE?

Meyer believes the day is coming when the use of a service like Ghostery will be standard operating procedure for retailers. He still comes across potential retail clients who don't believe that their websites have any such issues — or if they do, that there's anything they can do about them. But the TrackerMap, created on demand, can be a powerful conversation-starter.

Once clients work with Ghostery to determine what's there and what shouldn't be there, retailers can set up ongoing monitoring, tag blacklists and the like. That's followed by "moving forward even further into a culture of data governance," with specific performance metrics in future vendor contracts, as is the case with IHG.

In the meantime, says Grannan, retailers might be asking themselves whether the type of service Ghostery provides should already be available through core solutions.

"In theory, yes," he says. "But the reality is that your systems and processes are simply too fragmented. You need a macro set of monitoring capabilities to ensure performance and security goals are met. That's not to say that this type of technology won't become more common within core programs going forward. But Ghostery and some other competitors have an early jump on the market."
STORES

DCWCREATION / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Fiona Soltes, a freelancer based near Nashville, Tenn., loves a good bargain almost as much as she loves a good story.