

A Viewability & Brand Safety Checklist for Buying Digital Media



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Introduction

Regardless of media channel, the onus is on the advertising community at large, to maximize the benefits of the digital media supply chain while protecting the integrity of our brands and ensuring our investments are smart. Over the past two decades, online investment has grown exponentially which has led to important conversations around quality and value.

Since the original release of this document, there have been significant efforts made by industry to deliver frameworks and tools to ensure advertisers stay clear of unsafe digital ad inventory. With emerging trends in the use of social media and an array of difficult news stories arising over the past few years, the industry has been kept on its toes. Brand safety for example, has seen a shift in its definition and continues to create challenges for advertisers. This updated paper will cover off some important developments, as well as the industry's responses to date.

Digital advertisers continue to focus on three core supply chain issues:

1. Brand Safety - brands must be protected from misalignment to inappropriate content
2. Ad Fraud - investments must be protected from all fraudulent activity
3. Viewability - ads must have the technical opportunity to be seen by a human

In digital media, the reality is that there is a constant race between the technologies designed to protect brands and those who want to profit through criminal methods. As such, risk will always be a factor when advertising digitally. As a buyer, it is important not only to stay informed but also to demand that partners are on the right side of a safe media supply chain.

In 2017, the IAB Canada Agency Council authored this document to outline current best practices to help minimize the risk to brands and their budgets through careful execution of media buys via various technologies. It is meant to be used as an easy-to-use guide that when followed, will help overall with the continued improvement to the quality of our digital supply chain.

Key Questions and Topics for Digital Media Buyers

Before any transaction takes place, digital media buyers should have a clear understanding from their partners and the extended ad tech supply chain, whether they are able to deliver across three core areas of sensitivity. The following is a summary of considerations for discussion under each category:

BRAND SAFETY

- Should the Buyer go beyond the standard safety filters and mechanisms to ensure Brand Safety?
- Are selected vendors or publishers committed to a Brand Safety agenda?

AD FRAUD

- Is the advertiser promoting a clean, non-fraudulent supply chain?
- Do the advertiser and publisher have a good understanding of the tools and programs available to combat fraud?

VIEWABILITY

- What Is the current definition of Viewability? Is there alignment?
- What Is the publisher's or vendor's approach to Viewability? Do they observe industry standards like MRC?
- What are some tactics/next steps for implementing Viewability?

The following expands on each of the questions.

Brand Safety

For media planners, buyers and other brand stewards, protecting the brands they represent is fundamental to the job. In today's climate of scaled reach investments coupled with a complex ecosystem, it is critical to understand not only the risks associated with buying media using various methods, but also the resources, processes and technologies that are available to ensure brand messages are legitimately seen in the right environments.



Should buyers go beyond the standard safety filters and mechanisms to ensure Brand Safety?

While there have always been safety measures provided by vendors to avoid content misalignment, one cannot solely rely on automated processes to ensure 100% safety. Each brand will have its own risk aversion levels and these may change over time. Over the past years we have seen a significant increase in brand safety concerns arising out of news cycles related to elections, civil rights issues and most recently, the Covid-19 pandemic coverage.

In 2020, while many brands chose to avoid the entire news category to eliminate exposure to negative content, research began to suggest that supporting reliable content regardless of its level of positivity, was good for brands. This called for an overhaul in the way advertisers looked at their brand safety strategies. It was clear that allow/block lists required careful review and refinements to ensure their decisions were strategically sound.

The first step towards brand safety planning, is to assess the brand's level of risk aversion across various content categories. The Global Alliance for Responsible Media (GARM) an industry effort that unites marketers, media agencies, media platforms, and industry associations was established in 2019 to help safeguard digital media by reducing the availability and monetization of harmful content online. Some progress has been made since the formation of this alliance.

In 2020, GARM partnered with IAB Tech Lab to update the existing [Content Taxonomy Guidelines](#) for the programmatic media landscape by producing a content matrix that would provide the ability to map context to standard taxonomy to help avoid ad placements in areas signaling higher probability of risks:

The GARM [context matrix](#) serves as a starting point for brands to assess their areas of sensitivity as it tackles the following key areas:

1. A common understanding of what harmful and sensitive content is via content categories.

2. A common understanding of where ads should not appear, as expressed in a Brand Safety Floor.
3. A common way of delineating different risk levels for sensitive content, as expressed in a Brand Suitability.

Industry is responding positively by implementing the IAB Tech Lab's Content Taxonomy into the supply chain and platforms have incorporated the standards into their internal auditing and brand safety management efforts. With standards in place, the industry is better equipped to certify as brand safe environments given that they are now able to map back to a list of marketer expectations.

Once a brand has undergone a risk assessment either internally or in partnership with their media agencies, the brand safety strategy can be documented and shared more broadly with external partners.

Following are some additional questions a media buyer should ask of their vendors to help keep their brands safe:

- Is there clarity on the definition of brand safety?

Brands, agencies and publishers need to work together to communicate acceptable vs. non-acceptable brand alignments in order to develop strategies online. The level of risk aversion will often dictate whether an allow list strategy is more appropriate than block listing questionable content.

- Is the vendor using fresh data to ensure block lists and omissions are up to date?

This can be tricky as context matters. There has been significant movement by the major media providers to add definitions of inappropriateness including hate speech towards various groups and political extremism. As described above, the updated IAB Tech Lab Content Taxonomy goes a long way towards addressing this challenge and is updated on a regular basis to ensure that emerging risks and definitions are captured.

- Does the partner have access to Semantic or Keyword analysis tools?

Keywords are a powerful tool to help avoid placement in inappropriate areas. As with broader listings, it's important to understand that context really matters when developing those lists.

- What measures/remedies exist for content that is pushed live (or added to a network) that was previously deemed safe but is objectionable to a particular brand?

Publishers need to keep on top of this in the context of their advertisers.

- Are there pre-bid technologies they could employ that exist in their advertising technology stack?

This provides added transparency.

Should buyers go beyond the standard safety filters and mechanisms to ensure Brand Safety?

- Understand level of risk in ad expenditures

It is important to have a good understanding of how much exposure your brand is receiving on the open exchange (riskier) vs. the private market places. Most brands still incorporate the open exchange for scale and cost efficiency but it is critical to be informed about the risks of broader market places.

- Assess the impact of using of metrics like cost per acquisition and cost per click on exposing brands to riskier placements

Avoid easily gamed metrics like clicks as the only measure of success to minimize exposure to opaque ad inventory. Acquisition or engagement metrics allow advertisers to make optimizations that are based on real results.

- Look out for new third party technologies like verification services to test. Perhaps those that allow for insight into previously closed eco-systems?

Working with verification systems is a great way to gain insight into your brands' high-risk exposure. These tools allow you to set parameters and get reporting on in-campaign activity. Some of these tools allow advertisers to preemptively block the content while others simply report on having been exposed. Stay informed on the emerging solutions and ensure that your teams are aware of what is available.

- Domain Spoofing Protection - Ads.txt Implementation

Ads.txt is a global IAB initiative that helps to secure the supply chain by only allowing authorized buyers to access the inventory. It also prevents domain spoofing where a brand may be diverted from a legitimate domain to one that is unsafe. More on this to come.

These steps along with internal protocols within the buying teams and brand stewards are essential to keeping brands safe. The onus is on the buy-side to stay vigilant on behalf of the brands they represent.

Is the vendor or publisher committed to a Brand Safety agenda?

By asking the questions listed in the previous section, advertisers will have a good understanding of whether partners have sufficient knowledge and training around brand safety. Answers to the questions will reveal their ability to provide a brand safe environment. Where responses are insufficient, it may prompt further exploration to determine whether they are willing to work towards meeting required standards.

Some advertisers feel that it is important to work with vendors that have demonstrated their commitment to brand safety through certification programs like TAG.



Trustworthy Accountability Group (TAG) has gained a lot of traction over the past years as a global solution to combatting fraud and promoting brand safety. It is a cross-industry accountability program that is heavily supported by IAB Canada and globally to create transparency in business relationships and transactions that support the digital industry, while continuing to enable innovation.

TAG focuses on four core areas: eliminating fraudulent digital advertising traffic, combating malware, fighting ad-supported Internet piracy to promote brand integrity, and promoting brand safety through greater transparency.

TAG certification can take a few months to complete but demonstrates a clear commitment towards participating in a safe supply chain. Ask your publisher or vendor whether they are certified or whether they are working with alternative solutions that may provide a certain level of adequacy.

For more information, visit: [Trustworthy Accountability Group](#)

Misinformation – Emerging Definitions of Brand Safe Content

Since the original release of this paper, there has been a significant increase in misinformation across the web. Misinformation comes in various forms and can be difficult to identify.

Following are three variants of misinformation that brands should be aware of and avoid:

Deep Fakes

Technologies have emerged that allow the hijacking of likenesses with remarkable accuracy. There are many examples of political figures and celebrities being “deep faked” across social media platforms. There are many use cases for deep fake technology that are legitimate including the use of sight, sound and motion for educational purposes.

Unfortunately, there can be serious repercussions when this type of misinformation is used for nefarious purposes. Brands should steer clear of content that has higher risks of being subject to being “faked”.

Technology exists that is able to identify whether image, sound and video files have been altered. While the broad deployment of this technology is not currently integrated into the ad ecosystem, solutions are on the way.

Conspiracy Theories

Over the past year, we have seen a significant increase in conspiracy theories that range from political fictions to serious misinformation about the Covid-19 crisis. The content can be challenging to identify and avoid as it is often produced quite convincingly and is attached to broader networks that signal content validity like high engagement, links and pervasiveness.

New AI technology is in beta testing that crawls content and quickly analyzes the “strength” of a story online. In the future, we will see rapid identification of probable conspiracy content that can automatically be de-monetized.

Leveraging reputable publisher sites to offset risks is highly recommended if this an area of high risk for a brand.

Hyperbole, Omission of Facts & “Alternative” Facts

This form of misinformation can be difficult to detect because it tends to blend into legitimate content environments. Alternative facts are often portrayed in infographics, research excerpts and other content that is designed to be informative in nature. The content is portrayed in the form of charts, numbers, and headline facts and figures.

Given the diminishment of audience attention and the tendency to only read headlines and skim information, the risks in this area are quite substantial.

Here again, it is important for brands to align with partners that are credible and known to fact check.

Brand Safety in a Cookieless World

As the digital advertising industry re-architects its technical eco-system, the current global efforts indicate that there will be three core methods to reaching addressable audiences:

- **Authenticated Audiences** – Leveraging de-identified, consented User IDs.
- **Cohort-Based Advertising** – Using dynamic clusters of relevant audience segments that map back to an advertiser’s first party data signals.
- **Contextual Advertising** – Highly granular and dynamic AI-based contextual ad placements based on matching first party data requirement into a signal-based eco-system.

In terms of Brand Safety, the three approaches will continue to incorporate the best practices we have outlined in this guide. We also anticipate enhanced protections to come online as some advanced tools, particularly in the area of contextual signalling, will incorporate video recognition capabilities that allow analysis of each frame of video content, the identification of logos or products coupled with audio transcript information.



Ad Fraud

Ad fraud (also referred to as Invalid Traffic) refers to the practice of fraudulently representing online advertisement impressions, clicks, conversion or data events in order to generate revenue.

Promoting a clean, non-fraudulent supply chain

The only solution to cleaning up the supply chain is to choke out the bad actors and insist on working with legitimate media suppliers. This requires commitment and vigilance as well as a thorough assessment of a brand or agency's media supply chain.

Following are some important considerations to maintain a transparent and fraud-proofed partner network:

- Is the partner TAG certified?

TAG is especially focused on fraudulent activity. Certified businesses receive a payment ID that can be prioritized in the buy cycle. It acts as a deterrent to fraudsters as they will eventually be cut out of the chain.

- Is the partner PIPEDA compliant?

Are you managing data according to PIPEDA requirements? If not, this illegal activity can by association implicate a brand. Ensure partners take privacy seriously.

Privacy laws are becoming more stringent and citizens around the world are demanding increased transparency and respect. In Canada, we are anticipating major reform to our Privacy Legislation through the CPPA making it imperative for all stakeholders in the supply chain to implement modernized consent tools. Brands using first party data collection methods must demonstrate compliance with privacy laws by confirming adequate privacy policies, the implementation of a valid consent management platform (IAB TCF compliant or Ad Choices compliant) or participation in other recognized accountability programs.

- Has the partner implemented Ads.txt?

Ads.txt is an IAB program that works globally to eliminate domain spoofing and to cut out unauthorized resellers from the supply chain. The implementation is extremely easy and effective.

- How will the partner resolve invalid traffic reporting?

Much like viewability, any agreements on make-goods must be discussed prior to commencing a campaign. Ensure the vendor is using an accredited third-party verification system or that it will accept third party verification system as the true measure of valid vs. Invalid traffic.

More on Ads.txt

The ads.txt project aims to prevent various types of counterfeit inventory across the ecosystem by improving transparency in the digital programmatic supply chain.

When a brand advertiser buys media programmatically, they rely on the fact that the URLs they purchase were legitimately sold by those publishers. The problem is, there is currently no way for a buyer to confirm who is responsible for selling those impressions across exchanges, and there are many different scenarios when the URL passed may not be an accurate representation of what the impression actually is or who is selling it. While every impression already includes publisher information from the OpenRTB protocol, including the page URL and Publisher.ID, there is no record or information confirming who owns each Publisher.ID, nor any way to confirm the validity of the information sent in the RTB bid request, leaving the door open to counterfeit inventory.

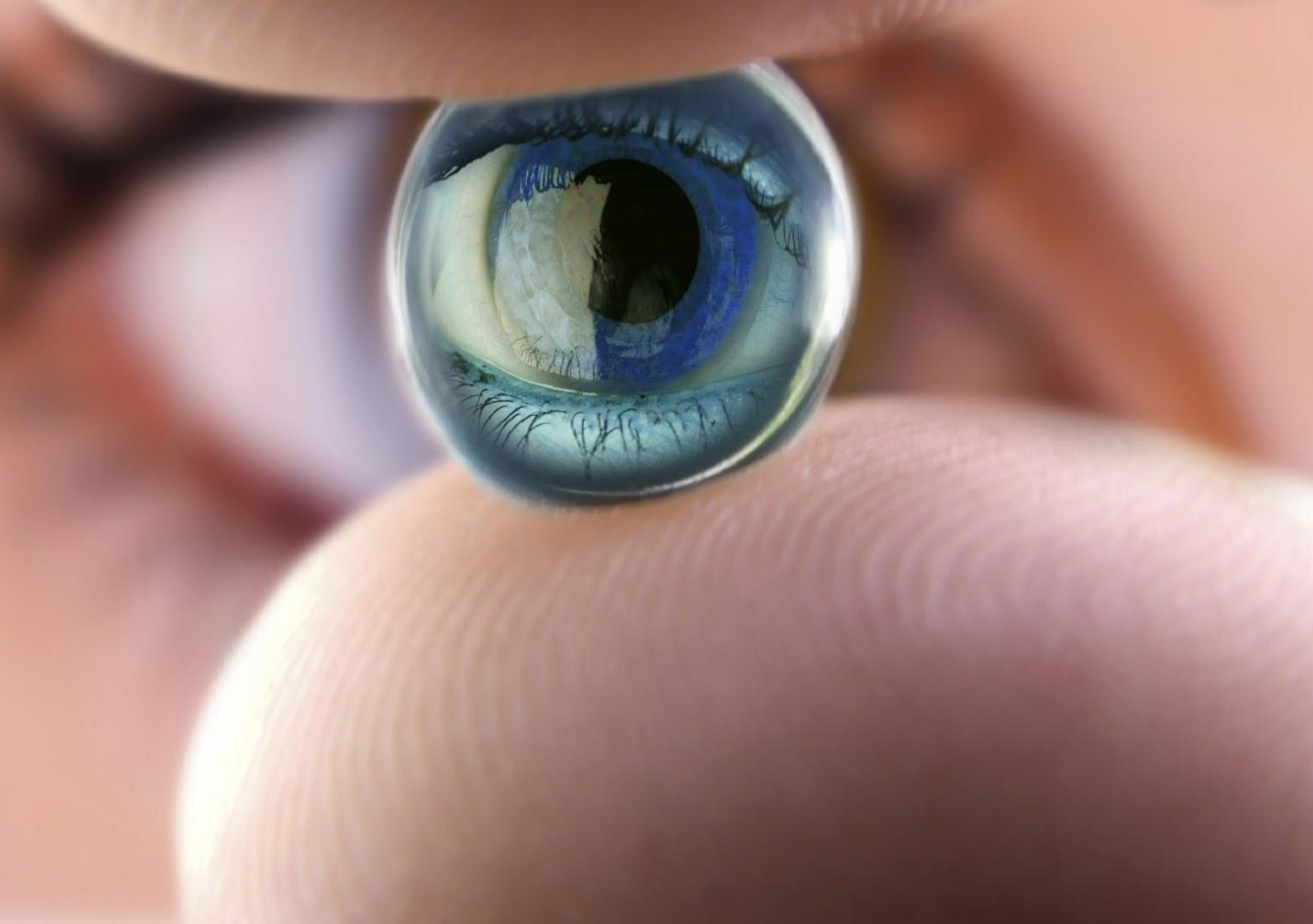
Ads.txt is a simple, flexible, and secure method for publishers and distributors to declare who is authorized to sell their inventory, improving transparency for programmatic buyers.

Ads.txt supports transparent programmatic digital media transactions and can remove the financial incentive from selling counterfeit and misrepresented media. Similar to robots.txt, ads.txt can only be posted to a domain by a publisher's webmaster, making it valid and authentic. As a text file, ads.txt is easy to update, making it flexible. The data required to populate the file is readily available in the OpenRTB protocol, making it simple to gather and target. And because publishers sell their inventory through a variety of sales channels, ads.txt supports the following types of supplier relationships:

- Domain owners who sell on exchanges through their own accounts
- Networks and sales houses who programmatically sell on behalf of domain owners
- Content syndication partnerships where multiple authorized sellers represent the same inventory

Currently, the vast majority of the supply chain's domains are registered globally to the program. Most major Canadian publishers have implemented the program. It is important to confirm this with all media partners.

Source: <https://iabtechlab.com/ads-txt-about/>



Viewability

A **Viewable Impression** refers to an ad that was actually viewable when served (in part, entirely or based on other conditional parameters). This metric addresses the need for an ad to have had the technical opportunity to be seen.

What is the current industry definition of viewability?

The Media Ratings Council (MRC) and IAB Canada have overall general requirements when it comes to counting of viewable ad impressions.

Counting viewable ad impressions should be done using existing key concepts as detailed in previously issued IAB Measurement Guidelines. These include:

- Client-Side Counting
- Filtration of Non-Human Activity and Invalid Activity
- Cache Busting Techniques

- Differentiate Significant Auto-Refresh versus Human-Initiated Activity
- Differentiate Impressions Served in Situations of Out-Of-Focus or Obstruction
- Disclosing Material Internal Traffic
- Full Disclosure by Publishers, Portals, Ad-Servers, Ad Networks and Exchanges
- In the context of viewable ad impressions, this principle of transparency of measurement processes to data users should apply to all measurers of viewable impressions, including 3rd party Measurers.

In addition to the above requirements, **Viewable Display Ad** Impressions are counted when the following criteria are met:

- Pixel Requirement: Greater than or equal to 50% of the pixels in the advertisement (30% if large format defined as 242,500 pixels or over), were on an in-focus browser tab on the viewable space of the browser page, and...
- Time Requirement: The time the pixel requirement is met was greater than or equal to one continuous second, post ad render



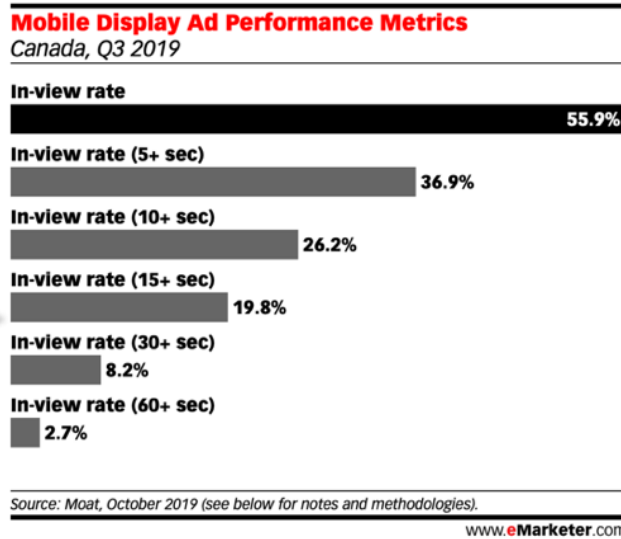
What about Video and Mobile?

The Requirements for **Viewable Video Advertising Impressions** is as follows:

A Video Ad:

- 1) That meets the criteria of 50% of the ad's pixels
- 2) On an in-focus browser tab in the viewable space of the browser page can be counted as a Viewable Video Ad Impression if it meets the following time criterion:
 - a. Video Time Requirement: To qualify for counting as a viewable video ad impression, it is required that 2 continuous seconds of the video advertisement is played, meeting the same Pixel Requirement necessary for a viewable display ad.

- b. This required time is not necessarily the first 2 seconds of the video ad; any unduplicated content of the ad comprising 2 continuous seconds qualifies in this regard.



Mobile Viewable Display Ad Impressions are counted when the following criteria are met:

- Pixel Requirement: Greater than or equal to 50% of the pixels (Density Independent) in the advertisement were on an in-focus browser or a fully downloaded, opened, initialized application, on the viewable space of the device, and
- Time Requirement: The time the pixel requirement is met was greater than or equal to one continuous second, post ad render. This time requirement applies equally to News Feed and non-News Feed environments.

A detailed overview of the definitions can be found [here](#) – (pg. 12)

What is the publisher’s or vendor’s approach to Viewability?

With a baseline established on the industry standard definition of viewable inventory, the next step to securing the agreed upon definition is to understand the supplier’s approach to delivering on it. This conversation needs to happen before completing a buy.

The same measurement body that has worked with the industry to develop the original definition of viewable impressions also accredits inventory suppliers for using acceptable measurement practices.

Does The Vendor Use Its Own Measurement Tool? If So, Is It Credible And Recognized By MRC Standards?

Media Ratings Council (MRC), is a U.S. based organization dedicated to securing audience measurement that is valid, reliable, and effective to the industry.



The MRC accomplishes its objective by setting standards and conducting audits performed by an independent CPA firm to verify compliance with those Standards. Approved measurement tools have the ability to use the logo and claim to be "Accredited by Media Ratings Council".

A list of approved vendors can be found here:

[MRC Accredited Digital Vendors \(As of 3/9/21\)](#)

How does the vendor plan to transact on viewability?

The buyer must work with the vendor to determine if they are transacting on viewable impressions (i.e. VCPM) or is the vendor transacting on impressions only and optimizing to a viewable performance goal.

When transacting on viewability, can the definition of viewability be changed?

The original goal the industry set to achieve in 2015 was to deliver 100% viewable inventory by 2017. Setting the MRC standards was the first step towards realistically achieving this goal. In 2021, while the industry has made significant strides towards achieving higher levels of viewability, there is still work to be done.

The implications of delivering 100% have been enormous to publishers. It required entire property redesigns incorporating responsive designs and new standards of rendering content. The vast majority of premium publishers have made significant progress on this front.

As advertisers waited for higher viewability levels to become mainstream, many marketers and agencies began to use their own definitions or benchmarks. In the broader supply chain, there may have been very little change in costs. In the private exchanges and direct buys, there may have been a more noticeable increase as pressure was more likely to be felt on supply.

IAB Canada's best practice on this matter is to work with your partners to ensure that there is clear agreement on the definition of viewability for new campaigns. This will not only impact costs, but the metrics used to deliver and evaluate the performance of the campaign. Document it!

For more information on the MRC or Viewability please visit: [Mediaratingscouncil.org](https://mediaratingscouncil.org)



What are next Steps for implementing Viewability?

Once a buyer has reached an agreement on the definition and method used to calculate and deliver viewable inventory, the next step is for the buyer to understand how the agreed upon volume targets will be actioned and reported. It is also important for the vendor and buyer to agree on a minimum threshold of measurable impressions to validate the results of viewability levels. Keep in mind, the combination of environment and creative can affect the measurability.

Be aware that scale may be impacted according to parameters set to define viewability. In some circumstances, viewable inventory can max out below target impression levels. It is up to the buyer and the vendor to agree on acceptable approaches to reaching the targets. One might consider loosening demographic parameters or if appropriate, adjusting the frequency settings.

The following questions can be helpful in this process:

- Does the marketer, publisher, vendor or agency have a preferred viewability technology and is it accredited by the MRC (see previous page for list of accredited technology)?
- What will be the central source of reporting truth? The publisher's internal tools or the agreed upon third party measurement system?
 - In some cases, there will be a discrepancy in delivery between the vendor's internal measurement tools and the advertiser's measurement system. Prior to finalizing a transaction, both the buyer and vendor must agree to which measurement platform will act as the central core of truth.
- Who is responsible for ensuring the creative is tagged properly?
- All necessary parties must have access to the reporting interface.
- Do you understand the cost implications of your decisions? Trading currency? Ad Serving Costs?



What are Some Tactics to Help Improve Viewability?

Fundamentally, viewability is a design challenge. While publishers work hard to re-design their properties and implement responsive templates for mobile to help get to that 100% goal, there are some things a buyer can do to optimize for viewability:

- Follow the [IAB LEAN/CBA](#) Ad principals to eliminate the impact of creative that is slow to load.
- Leverage Pre-bid filtering. For example, you can remove non-VAST, non-MRAID (optimized) inventory from your buy parameters.
- Positioning matters. Above the fold placements have proven to provide better viewability results.
- Reporting vigilance - keep on top of automated reporting and look for drops in view ability - optimize the campaigns according to these metrics where possible.
- Post-bid Optimization - Analyze your results. Create allow/block lists based on your performance.

Work towards the development and maintenance of Private Market Places. If you identify publishers who consistently deliver strong viewability scores (and the right audiences), you can create a trusted private market place.



Conclusion

As the industry pushes on into its third decade of incredible innovation, we are keenly aware of the critical role that brand safety and security represent. The good news is that we are able to develop technology that can help de-monetize fraud and inappropriate content with some certainty.

It is important for all participants in the media supply chain to lean in and participate in securing of the supply chain. Take inventory of partners and ensure that they believe and support the highest standards.

In closing, one truth will remain as we work towards a better advertising environment. Buyers have choices. With that, the buyers must insist on quality and transparency or understand the risks associated with inventory with ambiguous sourcing attached to it.

5 Key Takeaways

- Brands must establish their risk levels and develop a brand safety strategy that can easily be mapped into the supply chain.
- Media buyers must understand the risks associated with various buying methods. This includes decisions concerning open marketplaces vs. private marketplaces as well as metrics associated with the buy.
- The industry has developed several tools and technologies to enable brand safety, fraud prevention and viewability measurement. Brands must familiarize themselves with the current resources available to demand the highest, most current standards from the digital media supply chain.
- Compliance with privacy laws will become increasingly important in order to legally transact online. Ensure that the brand has implemented the most advanced frameworks available and that all partners have done the same.
- Brand safety continues to present challenges to media investors. Advancements in technology are underway and will eventually integrate to make the digital media ecosystem even safer than it is today.

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