



Once You Pop, Orbitz, You Can't Stop

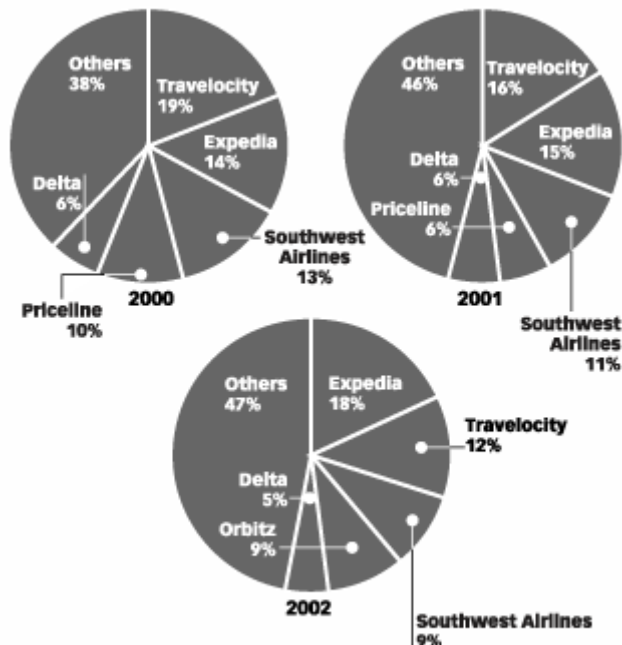
19 September 2003

Orbitz wasn't open for business yet when the bubble burst. In fact, what is now one of the more successful dot-coms premiered in a year when everyone was cutting their losses -- especially Internet and travel companies.

By David Berkowitz

According to Denmark's Centre for Regional and Tourism Research, [Orbitz](#), which launched in June 2001, quickly emerged from the "others" share of the US online travel market that year to a 9% share in 2002, securing its place among the top three comparison fare finder sites.

Breakdown of the Online Travel Market in the US, 2000-2002



Note: 2000=\$12.6 billion; 2001=\$18.6 billion; 2002=\$27.0 billion
Source: Centre for Regional and Tourism Research, April 2003

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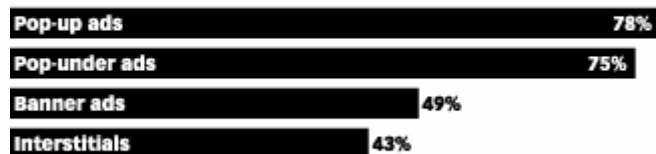
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How did Orbitz become a contender? Extensive media coverage before it even debuted helped. A few months after the site went live, another force emerged: the Orbitz pop-under campaign. Immediately, many readers will have a strong reaction to this, some thinking, "Those ads rock!" while others mutter, "Die, pop-unders, DIE!"

This editor actually made the mistake of, when contacting Orbitz, asking about its *pop-up* campaign, and he was promptly corrected. A spokesperson responded, "Orbitz does not utilize pop-ups, only pop unders. As you probably know, there is a difference between pop-ups and pop unders."

According to a survey conducted by GartnerG2, there is a difference indeed: 3%.

US Internet Users' Opinions Regarding Which Online Ad Formats Are "Very Annoying", 2002 (as a % of respondents)



Source: GartnerG2, December 2002

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Yet Orbitz pop-unders often elicit different reactions. How many online ad campaigns have Web sites singing their praises and collecting the ads like some kids collect Yu-Gi-Oh! cards? Orbitz has several, including one with [oversized versions of the ads](#). [Another fan laments](#) a downside of the Google Toolbar, v2.0: "The new toolbar also has a Popup Blocker, which I love! Although to be quite honest, I really enjoy those Orbitz ads.... They're pretty well done, and I just keep playing with them.... I've hit home runs, bowled strikes, puttied holes-in-one, dove cannonballs and bellyflops, and launched fireworks."

Does such a strong, vocal fanbase (the ads are constantly discussed on blogs) lead to more travel sales?

Orbitz declined to comment, so eMarketer went right to the source -- [Otherwise, Inc.](#), the interactive agency responsible for one of the most visible and talked about online ad campaigns. eMarketer spoke with Otherwise Creative Director Mark Rattin.

eMarketer: Has Otherwise been doing Orbitz pop-unders from the start?

Mark Rattin: Yes, we've been their e-marketing agency of record since shortly after inception, and we worked with them before they had actually launched as a public company and helped develop some e-marketing strategy and initial, introductory campaigns for them.

eMarketer: Orbitz is probably best known from an advertising perspective for its big pop-under campaign, but before we get into more specifics there, what does the entire e-marketing campaign look like for Orbitz?

MR: Clearly, banner advertising of all sorts -- pop-unders, as well as a myriad of other banner size units -- is a part of the campaign. Keyword or search self-directed advertisements, that's another huge part. E-mail marketing is a big part of the campaign as well. There are offline activities that take place too. There are promotions that are being done, and there's traditional advertising that is done by a different advertising

group. The things we work on are anything related to how Orbitz communicates with their customers electronically online.

eMarketer: With the pop-unders, how did that strategy come about, and why is it still so pervasive?

MR: The idea to use pop-unders was born out of a change in the entire marketplace. Actually, it was shortly after 9/11, almost two years ago. I think the travel space didn't really understand the true impact that event had on the market, and I think as a lot of other advertisers did, Orbitz retrenched, withdrew a lot of their traditional ads, pulled all their TV, and stopped advertising altogether pretty much for just a couple weeks where we could think about what was appropriate. Clearly, Orbitz has a business and they're in the business to sell travel, but it seemed like at that point in time, the last thing anyone wanted to do was travel anywhere.

There was a new ad unit created by another group that was a larger size pop-under unit, and at the time, what we were seeing were a lot of pop-overs -- things that would pop up and interrupt your experience and sort of be an annoying thing that you'd have to click through in order to continue to do what you wanted to do originally. We liked the idea that, if it was going to be intrusive, for it to pop over for a moment and then slip behind the work that you were actually intending to use the Web to do.

We initially started some things for the Red Cross and other things that were designed to stimulate not only an awareness of the Orbitz brand but also an awareness of the cause. It seemed more appropriate for the national attitude at that point in time. Then, as we started to see things start to change on the Web site itself -- we started to see our volume was going up again, which seemed to indicate businesses were interested in getting back to normal -- we used that ad unit as a means to broadcast travel deals.

At that point in time, we had more Web-only fares than other advertisers had, so we used that as a position for driving a lot of awareness for that particular thing on our Web site. We saw numbers trending slightly higher than what normal banner ads were doing, which was good because we were looking for a way to drive more traffic to the Web site. Incrementally, we found across the board that our completion rates, or the number of times someone would visit the site versus someone visiting and purchasing, relatively stayed the same. So we found that the more traffic we could drive to the site, the higher that number would be because that percentage number would always maintain a baseline and not dramatically increase or decrease one way or the other.

The more we started doing these fare-pair related ads where we were putting actual prices for different destinations in the ads, we tried something that was more fun and spirited. We had been working on these things as a team and we were a little bored, so we tried something called "Click the Fish," with a fish in a fishbowl. We were doing so many ads that a lot of people were writing us saying, "We hate your ads. Your ads are everywhere. We hate your ads." We came to the realization that the nature of our approach to advertising is to make contact with as many consumers as possible.

Now we also realize when doing that, you're not going to be in the mind to travel every time we talk to you. At least what we want to do is make sure that we're entertaining you. If we're interrupting you, we'll make sure we're going to surprise you. If we're

going to step between you and completing something, we'll make it as un-annoying and as fun as possible. This also underscores the aspects of what we feel travel is, and for the most part, it should be a fun, pleasurable experience. We're trying to equate those things with the ad strategy, and it seems to work out well.

eMarketer: In terms of ad favorability -- consumers' reactions to the ads, have you measured that in any real depth, or has it been mostly anecdotal in terms of the responses you receive?

MR: The really interesting and challenging thing about online advertising is every single day, you can get a report on how effective your ads are. We have really, really great analytical systems on the backside of everything tracking performance. Our goals are to drive as much traffic to Orbitz as possible, and also to drive qualified traffic to Orbitz.

What we've found is, also through data analysis, the way people shop for travel is a comparative or multi-threaded search. They'll have a Travelocity open, an Expedia open at the same time, an Orbitz open, they'll have carrier sites open. You have the potential to go across four or five different searches for the exact same fare to get your best fare. What we want to do is be a part of that shopping list. We want to be one of those people that you recall, and clearly with a favorable association. If it's purely, "Orbitz is the travel site with those weird games," at least we're on that list.

At the point of someone making contact with the Orbitz site either through our banners or through a self-directed search, the brand experience is going to be really had on the site itself. Our site is one of the most user-friendly and also has one of the best backends of any travel site, and it usually gives you the lowest fare. We can back up what we say by driving people to the site and let the site prove its point for itself.

We do have quantifiable data, and what we've seen is that the more games that we introduce, and the higher frequency we're able to change these games out, the more consistently we're able to drive very, very high levels of traffic to the site. We get, generally speaking, double what the industry average is, on a pop-under click-through, from a percentage standpoint. It's understandable, especially when we're really very well managed in terms of the amount of money we have to spend for the media that we're buying, so we have to make that work really well for us.

eMarketer: Are there any fears of oversaturation, that there are too many pop-unders out there, that people are getting them too often?

MR: Yes, clearly we're sensitive to the fact that people see a lot of Orbitz ads and pop-unders in general. That's also the nature of how the Internet in terms of advertising is maturing. We try a lot of things on. Things work, things stick around, a lot of people jump on board quickly because there's a very low cost of entry. It's not like doing a TV commercial. On the Web, a lot of different companies can afford to do that, and a lot of them don't spend time thinking about how they're communicating to customers online.

I think the problem with the medium is not that there's an oversaturation, but there's a lot of real crap out there. If the advertising was a little bit more thoughtful, it wouldn't be so annoying to encounter. Clearly, TV commercials are things that we don't always

like to see, but the format is the same, and you can count on seeing at least 12 to 14 commercials for every half hour of entertainment on TV. I think the Internet is sort of going through a similar thing, where we're figuring out the models that work and the models that are going to stick around. From an Orbitz perspective, we want to try and be there and try and own the model.

eMarketer: You mention "Click the Fish" came out of internal boredom. How are these latest ads developed?

MR: There are pop-unders that we do that aren't games, but the majority of the pop-unders that are designed to drive traffic to the Web site, what we have found works really well is an interesting and weird competitive experience where someone gets to interact very simply, but almost competitively, and it stimulates a desire to beat the game or get the high score. What we do is plan a wave of advertising, and in that wave, we come up with certain kinds of games that are themed in certain ways. Some might be sports-oriented for the sites that have largely sports-related content, some may be more kid-like, some may be more general game-like things that have a travel theme associated with them -- such as camping, or click on a boat in San Francisco harbor and some weird stuff happens. Those sorts of things are based on what we know works from an interaction standpoint.

We're finding that people are usually interacting an average of four or five clicks, and what that means is that after the first click, we'll launch the Web site. That's the only time you'll get the Orbitz Web site, so they'll have to keep that banner open and go back to the banner and interact with it to get those rates of clicks. We have a blimp banner game, and that one has been really surprising with the amount of time people are spending on it. We do small tests that are totally anonymous so we don't know who's doing what, but we do know people are spending, on average, five minutes playing that thing. I think that's an amazing idea that someone will choose to interact with something that is very heavily branded with a travel site's personality, and they'll interact with it for five minutes. We get tons of really great e-mails from people saying, "Where can we play this thing?"

eMarketer: It's tough too. I've yet to get to level three.

MR: You haven't played it enough.

We were testing that for a long time here. It blew the productivity of the office for about three days because all of the developers were playing it and trying to outdo the other. Some guys were playing it for four hours, and I thought, maybe this is just a little too easy, so we made it a little harder.

eMarketer: I know your ads do have a following. A co-worker told me someone at his old company has a competition with colleagues to e-mail each other when new Orbitz ads come out.

MR: I've read a lot of the bad press that we get. I've heard it called the carpet-bombing approach to Internet advertising, and I understand where that would come from. Sometimes you just can't change the goal that your client has. The challenge as an advertiser is how do you make the work still great, how do you make the campaign

effective, and how do you meet the business goal. From this perspective, what we try and do is insert that bit of humor and weirdness enough that it becomes almost viral.