



BRAND SAFETY

Brand Safety

As the complexity of finding and interacting with audiences increases due to the deprecation of the third-party cookie looming, the importance of holistic measurement and how we utilise data becomes paramount. A less-is-more approach to data, and creating clear baselines of what media quality and performance mean for each brand is key.

But in a fragmented ecosystem, creating a baseline and aligning it with broader business imperatives is easier said than done. A straightforward baseline of quality might be built around making sure ads appear at the right time and in the right place. Adding to that, they should reach the right audience, in a brand-safe, fraud-free, viewable and targeted environment.

In order to keep brand safety top of mind, standards laid out by the the 4A's Advertiser Protection Bureau (APB) [Brand Safety Floor and Brand Suitability Framework](#) that is also supported by the Global Alliance for Responsible Media (GARM) should be built upon as necessary, for any specific brands.

According to [DV's research](#), 69% of consumers value companies that are genuine and authentic, and as many as 49% would actively lobby against a brand or product if they saw it advertised next to inappropriate content. As brands are forced to make rapid decisions to respond to an endlessly evolving news cycle, many advertisers' initial reaction is to consider blocking news content wholesale or to use broad keywords to try to protect themselves against high-profile and negative topics. The result, however, is often a significant reduction in scale, as well as inadvertent negative repercussions for legitimate news publishers. This has advertisers moving beyond brand safety to brand suitability.

Once your brand safety strategy is updated, it's time to take the next step and embrace brand suitability. Go beyond safety by ensuring you reach consumers in the ideal environments for your brand.

Brand suitability involves contextual relevance, which is a developing consideration that goes deeper to assess whether the content on the page is relevant to the ads alongside it. builds on that with contextual avoidance categories that offer protection against specific content that is unsuitable for the brand, while still supporting trusted sites.

Taking a more nuanced approach to brand safety and suitability can help advertisers achieve coverage of high-performance content while having safeguards in place that align with specific brand values. This process includes creating a brand safety profile that establishes a strong floor of protection and builds on that with controls like inclusion/exclusion lists and avoidance categories that offer protection against specific content that is unsuitable for the brand, while still supporting trusted sites.

Not all brands will create the same blueprint. For example, a luxury sports car brand may not have the same approach to brand suitability as a fast-food restaurant brand. In order to achieve the right balance of coverage, brands should establish a clear understanding of their core brand values and of which topics or events may (or may not) fit into those values. Having firm answers to these questions will enable advertisers to effectively work with verification providers to leverage the proper tools to avoid unsuitable content while still maintaining scale.

With a clear baseline in place, organisations can begin benchmarking quality and performance based on data that translates across multiple markets, channels and partners. This enables them to align and compare performance on specific sites and apps, or individual campaigns, orientated around meaningful business outcomes, and customer experiences.

A good place to start is to review the [Content Taxonomy](#) created by IAB Tech Lab. The Content Taxonomy has evolved over time to provide publishers with a consistent and easy way to organise their website content. For example, to differentiate “sports” vs. “news” vs. “wellness” material. IAB Tech Lab’s Content Taxonomy specification provides additional utility aimed at minimising the risk that content categorization signals could be used to generate sensitive data points about things like race, politics, religion, or other personal characteristics that could result in discrimination. While the Content Taxonomy itself doesn’t constitute sensitive data – it simply categorises page content, and does not on its own reveal information about a user – there are few technical controls preventing taxonomy nodes being associated with individual IDs to build behavioural profiles over time based on content preferences.

The Content Taxonomy provides a “common language” that can be used when describing content. Typical uses of the content taxonomy are contextual targeting and brand safety. [The 3.0 version](#) of the content taxonomy includes updates to better support a variety of areas – News, Video/CTV content, Podcasts, Radio, Games and App stores.

Refining A Brand Safety Strategy

As content consumption and creation has boomed, so have the chances of inappropriate ad placements.

While brand safety is already familiar, the constantly evolving online landscape has pushed it back up the priority list. For marketers, that makes it vital to both understand industry benchmarks and find smarter ways to manage their ad adjacency accordingly. As brands seek to harness the vast potential for broader exposure and engagement, they'll also need a refined strategy for tackling multiple types of risk – ideally with real-time capabilities as emerging threats can evolve quickly.

The news cycle is constantly evolving - adding in new crises and issues that brands need to consider as part of their strategy - from elections to wars to entertainment controversies. Such topics can cause disruption across the digital media space and have a significant impact on online risk. There is a need to expand contextual technology to cover content beyond text, including images, video, and audio. With digital video ad spend projected to rise 17% this year to reach \$55.2 billion, it's more important than ever for brands to have a scalable solution for safety and suitability that can be applied across all media types. As we delve deeper into the artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML)-driven age, marketers have access to cutting-edge tools backed by AI/ML, that reveal largely unused insights by third-party adtech vendors across video, audio, and text content. Multimedia classification solutions that are able to classify video content - in the same way that is done for text on web pages today - hold the key to solving the impasse of transparency and brand safety for advertisers.

[Research from IAS](#) shows that in EMEA, for instance, experienced a 3.3% increase in desktop display advertising risk that drove total levels to 5.8% in H2 2020; the highest rate since 2017 — a year marked by national tragedy and high-profile brand safety incidents. The rise in brand risk was reflected in environments globally.

Consideration #1 - Tailoring your brand safety strategy

Brands invest a significant amount of time creating an image, cultivating consumer perception and fostering associations. Therefore, it's very important to ensure digital messages appear in suitable environments, not solely to avoid risk, but also to effectively reach the right consumers.

All brands are unique and their definition of safety and suitability is driven by their values and goals. Here are some tips on how to employ a multi-layered approach, with customisation and comprehensive protection:

Start with brand safety

1 - Set your base protection

To ensure your reputation is undamaged, determine your baseline protection. Start with your brand values, to determine your risk tolerance, then set your brand safety settings to balance campaign goals with the brand's risk tolerance. This brand risk generally involves specific types of content covered by standard content categories and site inclusions.

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2 - Risk calibration

After identifying risky topics, brands need to define what level of risk each of these have. Work with your verification provider that provides a more granular, holistic approach instead of a simple binary (on-off) brand safety solution. Advertisers generally agree on which categories are risky, but have a more granular control of your risk tolerance for each major content category. Consider the potential reduction in scale and missed opportunities from overly restrictive tactics to make the most of your campaigns.

3 - Understand the limitation of keywords

Keywords are effective at blocking content in real-time, but don't take into account whether the environment as a whole is actually right or wrong for your brand. They can also be very time consuming to maintain. As a result, blocking common or trending keywords has the potential to unnecessarily limit scale and harm publishers. A common misconception is that keyword exclusion lists are necessary to avoid risky content or trending negative topics. While it's important for brands to avoid unsafe content, most brand safety content categories already account for unsavoury environments. Additionally, context and intention can shift the meaning of even the most commonly blocked keywords.

4 - Advance to brand suitability

Once your brand safety strategy is updated, it's time to take the next step and embrace brand suitability.

Brand suitability is an approach that favours nuance and inclusivity media buying over blocking.

Going beyond safety will ensure you reach consumers in the ideal environments for your brand. Utilise a brand suitability technology that is able to review all elements on a given page and takes additional steps beyond URL analysis to understand the meaning of the content. Work with a partner that uses natural language processing (NLP) to evaluate language nuances and determine whether an environment is suitable for your brand.

5 - Unlock scale with contextual relevance

Language can be tricky to navigate in the digital world. Words can have multiple or related meanings, and different words or phrases can refer to the same thing. On top of that, language can express different sentiments or emotions depending on how it's written. That's why natural language processing is so important—it helps determine the meaning of the words on a page and anticipates how a human would interpret it.

6 - Understand sentiment and emotion analysis

Sentiment analysis uses Natural Language Processing to determine whether an article conveys a positive, neutral, or negative feeling to the person reading it. Emotion analysis is a deeper classification of sentiment. For example, humour or love are different types of positive emotion that can be detected by emotional analysis.

7 - Look beyond positive versus negative

It's important to remember that negative sentiment doesn't necessarily indicate that content is 'unsafe.' For example, a news article about an alarming stock market crash might have negative sentiment, but isn't categorically unsafe. Not to mention that it would be unrealistic for advertisers to avoid all content with negative sentiment. Instead, consider tailoring your message to different environments within your safety and suitability parameters.

8 - Set up content avoidance parameters

Work with an ad tech partner that provides pre-bid filtering and post bid blocking of content that falls outside your brand guidelines.

9 - Engage consumers with contextual targeting

Go beyond content avoidance and increase consumer engagement by targeting the environments that are contextually relevant to your brand or campaign.

10 - Navigate Brand safety with inclusive media buying

Most media buying strategies are built by blocking sites, pages, and keywords, which is inherently exclusive. Inclusive media buying aggregates content rather than eliminates it. Brands gain several benefits from inclusive media buying. First, they achieve better brand safety. Second, they support their inclusivity goals. Third, they achieve growth.

In practice, many brands still implement legacy brand safety techniques based on keyword exclusion approaches. Despite the push for change to utilise advanced contextual avoidance, many advertisers still block news sites and minority perspectives because of the risk of advertising against negative or politically charged content. For brands with DEI goals (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion), it is critical that they assess the inclusivity of their brand safety strategy, migrate to contextual avoidance and readjust to ensure that important and diverse content is included.

Consideration #2- Buying models

When approaching brand safety and suitability, buyers should consider that different inventory and buying models offer different levels of knowledge and control over the contextual environments where ads will be displayed.

There is a diminishing scale of insight when moving from single to aggregated inventory sources and from direct to indirect buying models. For example, consider a direct buy with a publisher who owns all content creation and exercises full editorial control and compare this to buying on the open exchange across several inventory aggregators, which include non-curated and user generator content.

For programmatic buys, pre-bid technology is utilised to minimise impression waste and to ensure that buyers do not bid on impressions that will eventually end up failing due to brand safety concerns. Pre-bid targeting segments are integrated within all major Demand Side Platforms (DSP), allowing brands to target only safe impressions before ever placing a bid.

Artificial intelligence is playing an increasingly important role in helping classify content at scale, especially when buying programmatically. AI enables us to move at the speed of content - which has jumped from sites producing dozens of articles per day, to thousands. By some estimates, AI will be responsible for 99% of all content developed by 2030. For brand safety, AI is a necessary tool to identify and classify content in multiple languages at scale rapidly. It also means being able to classify content that includes video, audio, images and text. When buying programmatically, leveraging such tools can make the difference between protection and problem.

Consideration #3 - Device types and environments

Brand risk is measured differently depending on the device and the environment. Display ads, for example, use the same measurement methodology on desktop as on mobile web with certain nuances considered. In-app ads however, are handled differently, while social media platforms require unique measurement solutions for their unique customer experiences.

1 - Mobile in-app

As consumers are spending more time on their mobile devices, in-app has become a key focus for campaign planning. With [eight in 10 mobile display ads](#) being traded programmatically, it is imperative that advertisers leverage targeting tools that are built specifically for mobile in-app environments.

Programmatic in-app environments – while slightly more brand safe than desktop environments – produce significant challenges for brands. This is mainly due to a lack of reporting and optimisation tools across the industry. That said, when in-app pre-bid targeting or automation is applied to programmatic environments, brands can virtually eliminate brand safety violations.

2 - Video

Video advertising is rapidly growing across all devices and for good reason: it continues to be the most impactful medium for reaching consumers. Despite witnessing growth across the board, video is still causing a challenge for advertisers in terms of measurement due to the mix of devices and environments used when video is consumed.

3 - Social

The proliferation of user-generated content and sharing of risky content on social media can pose a significant challenge for a brand. Understanding the content you want your brand to be aligned to is absolutely critical. No matter how sophisticated brand safety solutions become, you will need to understand what are the suitable environments and the audiences you want to target.

4 - CTV

Addressing brand safety in CTV today is still a nascent area and innovation in this space is imminent. Currently brand safety within CTV environments is most widely available at the app-level.

With app-level brand safety, brands can gain access to classifications of CTV apps and can use this information to determine if there are certain areas of CTV inventory that do not align to their brand safety requirements. App-level brand safety is not as sophisticated and can present a challenge to buyers with limiting scale.

The latest innovation in brand safety for CTV centres on channel and content-level brand safety. Where brands will be able to understand and define the CTV programmes that they want their advertising to appear alongside. This is critically important in CTV environments where there are a multitude of content aggregators and apps can host a plethora of content. In order to support the drive in this area of innovation, publishers should make content-level information available to their buyers to give them the ability to target contextually relevant ads on CTV.

Ad verification in CTV has been successful when providers work with publishers directly to gain access to content-level information and can validate that video ads are played to completion, and are fraud-free.

Brand Risk - best practices

Here are 10 easy-to-implement best practices that can help protect your brand's reputation when advertising online.

1. Determine brand value and campaign goals. Determine the risk tolerance and set brand suitability settings, balancing this with campaign goals.
1. Choose the right partners. Work with global digital verification partners that are integrated with all the major DSPs.
1. Prepare for a crisis by partnering with your communications team and verification partners to prevent this from happening. Create a plan in case the worst does happen.
1. Be honest with your partners and publishers – make your expectations clear from the start and keep an open dialogue throughout your partnership.
1. Reduce the reliance on legacy keyword-only strategies and consider contextual segments in their place. Migrate away from keyword-only strategies, both with the content verification provider and with the DSP. Rely on contextual segments in their place. Apply this approach at a post and pre-bid level in order to ensure brand suitability whilst minimising wasted budget on low quality impressions.
1. Consider buying models and apply the same pre-bid filter against both OMP and PMP buys. Private marketplaces (PMP) are a great opportunity once key partners have been established. However, it is crucial that advertisers don't lose sight of their brand suitability goals and ensure the quality of the media being passed via these curated marketplaces or PMPs meets their requirements for brand safety and suitability.
1. Keep track of industry benchmarks to ensure you're performing at your best.
1. Stay informed. Know your partners, their capabilities and how they can help you achieve your campaign goals.
1. Don't just set it and forget it. Keep your exclusion list and keyword lists up to date and review them quarterly.
1. Consider machine learning and AI. Partner with a verification vendor that uses robust, machine learning-based methodology for more accurate and scalable coverage

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