COMMUNITY RESOURCE

Ads You Might Not Realize Are Ads

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How many ads do you think you see in a day? You may count the commercials, billboards and magazine ads you see. But what about the email newsletter you receive? An article on a website? Or just while you're scrolling your social media feed? It is estimated that people see roughly 5,000 ads per day. That's 5,000 times a day that brands are trying to influence you to take an action, often without you even realizing it.

So how do you combat this? Part of becoming media literate is looking deeper and asking yourself: Who wrote this, and why? It's about identifying the source and the intent of the content you consume.

To help protect your well-being, we've outlined a handful of examples of typical ads you may come across on a daily basis that you may not realize are even ads, and how to identify them. Because once you are aware, you can think more critically and be less easily influenced.

Recognizing Advertising in Everyday Media

Native Ads

Consumers today are savvier than ever and know how to block ads or ignore obvious advertisements. But advertisers are always trying to stay one step ahead. One way they do this is through native advertising.

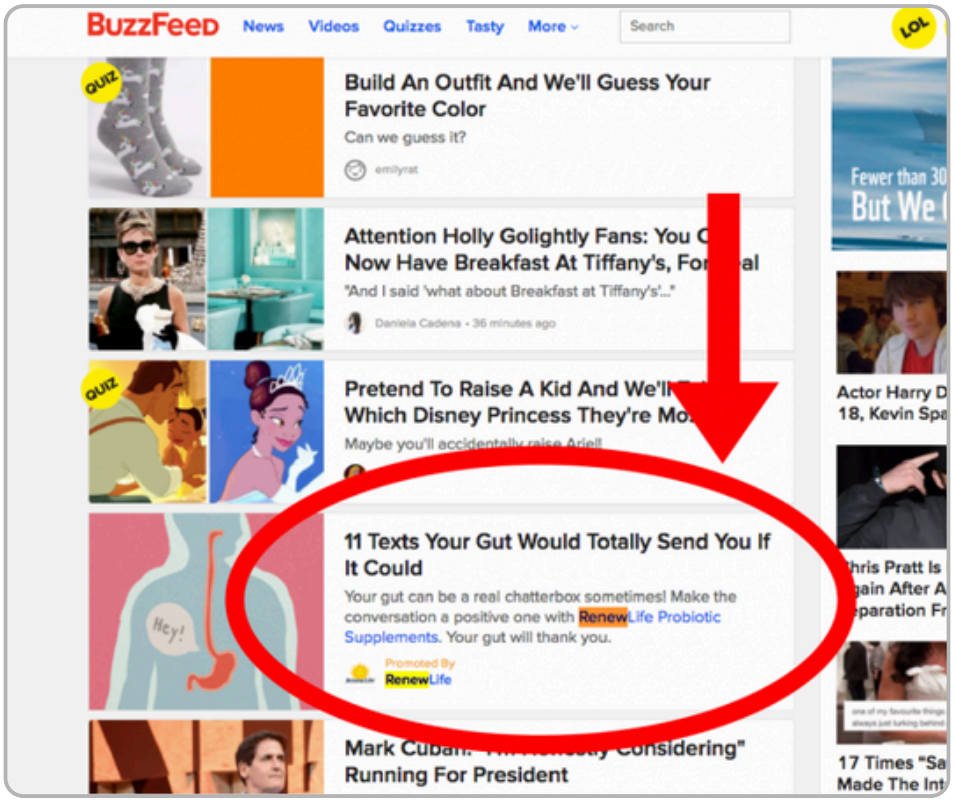
Advertisers use contextual ad targeting to put Native Ads on websites or web pages that match the content you're viewing. For example, if you're reading an article about hiking, you might see an ad for hiking boots. This way, the ads directly relate to what you're looking at in the moment.

Native ads are intentionally created to blend into surrounding content. On YouTube, beyond the branded content videos you've likely watched, the platform uses native ads strategically placed to influence user behaviors.

For example, streaming platforms like HBO Max often upload snippets of its shows and movies for free, and then uses YouTube's advertising features to place native ads around them to encourage people to purchase a subscription.

See the blue "Buy" button in the top right of the graphic above? Brands use this technique to maintain your trust while subtly promoting their products.

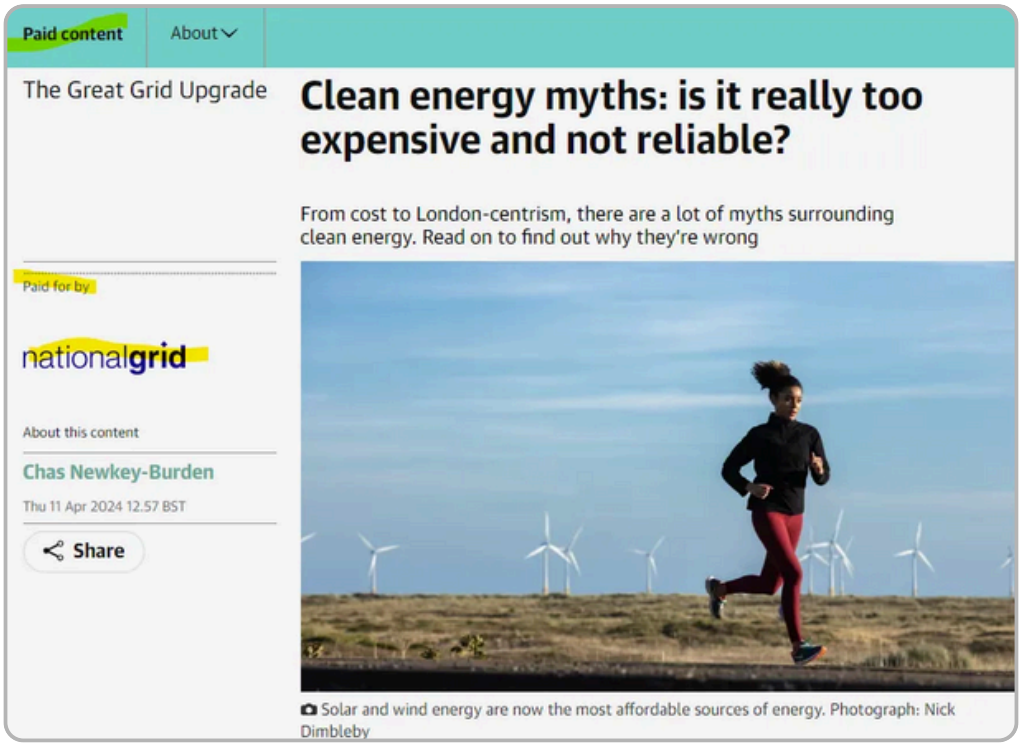
Another way to spot native ads is to keep a keen eye out for the small "Sponsored Content" label, which may also appear as "Powered By" or "Promoted By".



Advertorial Articles

A specific type of Native Ad, like the Buzzfeed example featured previously, is an Advertorial. Advertorials are designed to look like regular written articles, but are intended to sell or promote something.

Look out for a brand advertisement on the side or near the bottom of the article to tell if it's a paid media placement, like the National Grid Advertorial below.



Geotargeting

Do you ever feel like your phone is listening to you? You were just talking about something, or just went somewhere, and somehow the content you're seeing on your social media feed seems to know?

While it can feel like your phone is listening, "geotargeting" is a type of ad that uses *location* services to target relevant ads to you based on your location. This can show up as a local restaurant showing ads to people within a few miles of their location. A geotargeting map can be as broad as targeting your country or as specific as your neighborhood.

Boosted Social Media Posts

We know that spotting the "Sponsored" label is a way to identify a paid ad. But how can you tell if money has been spent to "boost" a social media post? Here's the scary truth: it is now always obvious! You may see a "Sponsored" or "Suggested" label, but it also may just blend in as a

standard post on your feed. For as little as $1-5 per day, anyone can boost their social media post to get it in front of a wider audience.

So consider, when you see a video with a ton of likes and comments, and it resonates with you, it may not have shown up in your feed because "the algorithm knows me so well." It could very likely be because someone paid to make sure you see their content through boosting.

Advertising Beyond the Screen

Events

A fundraiser event like a 5K race for cancer research has very clear objectives. But what about something like the Met Gala? The Met Gala isn't just a cool party where celebrities wear outrageous outfits. Did you know that it's also a fundraiser for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute that raises millions of dollars annually?

So even when it comes to events, remember to ask yourself: Why does the event exist? Who are the sponsors? What do they hope to gain from me purchasing a ticket?

Fashion

You likely already understand how social media influencers work. Brands send influencers products, such as clothes, and pay them to promote those products on their channels. The influencers may really enjoy the product and fully endorse, but they also may just be earning a check.

However, sometimes clothing can be used as an influence for good. For example, why is the NFL wearing rainbow colors this season? Beyond looking wicked stylish, the colorful clothing items are also being use to spark curiosity and to raise awareness. The initiative is "Crucial Catch: Intercept Cancer," and the color patterns are used to raise awareness for multiple types of cancer. This apparel is available for fans to purchase through the NFL store, and the money goes directly to the American Cancer Society. Over the years, the partnership has raised over $27 million!

EXERCISE: How to Start the Conversation at Home

One of the most effective ways that parents can build media literacy with their kids is through simple, ongoing, open-ended conversations while naturally encountering media together and asking about their perspectives. If you're watching a show together, or if they're scrolling on their phone while you're in the car, you can pose questions that encourage them to pause and think more critically about the content they're consuming.

For example:

- "Did you notice any brand names or products in that show?"
- "How do you think the influencer really feels about that makeup product they just shared? Do you think they are getting paid by the brand to promote it? What is the benefit to them?"
- *At sporting events:* "Did you notice the brand logo on the player's jersey? Why do you think a brand would pay to put it there?
- *On social media:* "This Reel has a ton of views. Do you think it's really that popular, or do you think someone paid to boost this?"

These small prompts help children practice noticing patterns, questioning messaging, and recognizing that all media is created with purpose. Over time, this will become a natural way they will navigate through the world.

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