

JAGUAR, FIAT, JEEP AND OTHER BLUE CHIPS PARK THEIR ADS IN DUBIOUS AD SPACES



Jaguar, Fiat, Jeep, Sheraton and Hewlett-Packard are all big names. Add to that Westin Hotels, Citibank and JetBlue? What is the one common link that all these blue-chip companies share? All of them advertise heavily on advertiserscelebritynewsstories.com and mommymixing.com, all properties of a company called AlphaBird. Its CEO Chase Norlin says, "We're an audience company. We're paid to acquire audiences on the Web. We look more like a search company. We're really good at buying SEM traffic." Further enquiries revealed that the company, AlphaBird is also getting into the content business. However, what comes as a surprise is the media buyers, who are investing so much in these unfamiliar sounding names, also have little or no idea of who they are. In spite of their relative anonymity, their success is baffling. They are delivering tons of impressions via supply-side buying platforms (SSPs) like Admeld and Pubmatic. Moreover, knowledgeable sources say, driverswhoknow.com progressed from 250,000 available impressions to 5 million within weeks. Likewise, the site cars-trucks-minivans.com, from Genesis Media, has seen its inventory pool spiral upwards, through various SSP's. Perusing the site, one finds innumerable auto play video ads from, such big auto makers as Nissan, Audi and Chevrolet. There are always players of uncertain character in every aspect of life and the Web has had its fair share of them. These include domain squatters, who load ads on pages that recurrently pop up in generic searches. Last week, the site driverswhoknow.com was full of only press releases, evidencing that it lacked substance and that its content was not par with *The Economist*. The content of most of these dubious sites is substantiation enough that their standards are not of the class and quality that they pertain to be. The site deliciousfit.com carried many articles about fitness and a press release about Facebook's Timeline. Likewise fundwiser.com featured a mix of press releases with links to articles from Bloomberg and Reuters. cleverbetterstock.com had taken an article from Yahoo News and, horror of horrors; it had wrongly spelt LinkedIn in the headline. celebritynewsstories.com, brillianttriches.com and technewsstories.com exhibited similar poor quality. The site politicalnewsstories.com almost entirely has articles by just one writer, Philip Loyd, who claims he contributes to other websites as well. It is easily apparent that these sites don't attract serious user engagement; hence the surge in their traffic is inexplicable and hard to comprehend. Media buyers believe that these companies are, one way or the other, paying for the clicks or that they are deceiving lost searchers. Yet they command a respectable premium via SSPs, for they can be easily be counted amongst those delivering valued audiences such as auto buyers. Their content, to their credit is not controversial or racy, to arouse suspicion and be subject to verification from companies such as DoubleVerify. It's merely substandard. "There are ways to technically avoid buying this inventory," said one digital buyer. "But most advertisers don't even know how or where to look." Google said that it was worried about these vendors, who were giving a bad name to the others and that they were policing the matter. A Google representative said, "We've recently become aware of an issue affecting several SSPs with a number of sites that appear to gaming the system. We are investigating...Bad actors like this harm the entire ecosystem." A buyer who counts travel and automakers as clients said, "It's definitely a new way to think about the publishing business," "Content isn't king," he concluded. AlphaBird does not agree with all that is being said about it. It claims that they are making a serious claim to be a major player in the media business and have hired experienced content producers. "We see ourselves looking like Glam Media or Gorilla Nation—we're taking this very, very seriously," said Norlin. "We're building a very legitimate business on Fortune 1,000 brands." AlphaBird recently hired former Endemol executive Russell Naftal, to work as senior Vice President, Development and Programming. He confessed that there was still a long way to go, saying, "Am I happy with 90 Second Reviews? No, But we think we're going to build an audience with these sites and start getting a lot of return visitors. This is what audiences have come to expect to see, and it's how you build a publishing business."

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