

admonsters

# PLAYBOOK

How Publishers Balance  
Ad Revenue With Ad Quality



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## ***What's a Playbook?***

A playbook is an extension of what the AdMonsters community has been doing at our conferences for 20 years. A playbook solidifies what has made our events “must attend” for many digital strategists. By bringing people together to share learnings and best practices in a focused way, people can create a plan and avoid hours—if not days—of doing research on their own.

The AdMonsters playbook concept takes existing AdMonsters content (from conferences and AdMonsters.com) and, with the help of the AdMonsters community, “crowd sources” a document that outlines best practices on a particular topic. Our belief is that this will allow for a free exchange of ideas with the benefit of curation for accuracy. This document does not get into specifics around individual solution providers intentionally.

Great effort has gone into writing the playbook in a fashion that applies to as many publishers as possible without becoming too general. In a technology-driven industry like digital advertising, information quickly becomes obsolete. The intention is that, based on the feedback of the AdMonsters community, the next playbook will start to take shape and, with additional contributors, grow in both depth and breadth.

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# 1. THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF BALANCING AD REVENUE WITH AD QUALITY

Back in 1994, the first-ever Internet ad appeared on HotWired.com, and enjoyed a 44% click through rate (CTR). That banner ad gave rise to a global industry that, 30 years later, is expected to top **\$717 billion**.

Digital advertising has undergone radical changes since that first ad, the most significant of which is programmatic. While programmatic has made it easier for publishers to fill impressions, it's not without challenges.

Programmatic is often a blackbox; publishers have no idea which ads will appear on their sites ahead of time, often because the exchanges themselves don't know which ads flow through their pipes.

Without transparency and complete control, publishers will continue to contend with scams and other unwanted ads that don't meet their standards. For many publishers, monetization comes at a cost to quality, but it doesn't need to be this way. With the right controls, monetization and quality can be assured.

Beyond those concerns, we wondered how advertising fit in with the experience publishers sought for their audiences. Specifically, we wanted to know:

- ***Do publishers view advertising as simply a way to monetize inventory, or can it serve as a strategic differentiator for their brands? How can publishers better protect the relationship with their audiences?***
- ***Can they support their brand suitability and strategic goals for advertising via programmatic channels?***
- ***Do they have the controls and tools they need to deliver on their strategic insight?***

To find out, we surveyed dozens of publishers across sectors of the publishing industry to assess the existing challenges they face, in terms of brand suitable ads, and the future they envision for their digital properties.

## 2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Advertising has long been viewed as a strategic source of revenue; a necessary practice to fund the daily operations of creating content and making it available to a community of readers or users.

Over the past few years, however, attitudes towards advertising have begun to shift. Publishers increasingly view advertising as a critical component of a positive brand experience (all publishers who responded to this survey said high-quality advertising will enhance the user experience).

Going further, quality advertising can help differentiate publishers from other sites within the sector, enabling them to attract a higher number of premium advertisers and active readers. What constitutes “premium” differs from brand to brand, with all publishers agreeing that brand suitability is tied to their readers’ interests. To achieve their brand suitability goals, publishers require tools that evaluate both the ad and landing page content automatically before appearing on their sites.

### **Tough Challenges Still Exist**

Few publishers are spared the burden of poor ad quality. It’s an issue that hits publishers where it hurts most: audience trust in their brand and reader churn. Nearly 46% of publishers surveyed said that poor ad quality significantly affects the lifetime value of their visitors.

Some 18% of publishers report seeing ads that were so bad they damaged, or had the potential to damage, their brand reputation.

Despite these challenges, publishers clearly view advertising as a means to sharpen their brand image within their sectors, with their readers, and advertisers they’d like to attract to the properties. This bodes well for the industry as a whole.

**100%**

**of publishers say high quality advertising enhances the user experience**

**60%**

**of publishers say ad quality differentiates their brand within their sectors**

**80%**

**of publishers say brand suitability increases reader/user trust in a site.**

### 3. KEY FINDINGS

- **86%** of publishers say they struggle with bad ads throughout the year.
- Not one publisher reported zero poor-quality ads on their sites.
- **0%** of publishers said they feel as though they have complete control over the ads that appear on their sites.
- **72%** of survey respondents say poor ad quality lowers the level of trust visitors have in their brands. While this number is high, it represents an area of focus that will go a long way in improving the consumer's overall trust in the industry.
- Conversely, brand suitability is a positive step that boosts reader and advertiser confidence. **80%** of publishers say brand suitability increases reader/user trust in a site.
- Brand suitability is most often defined as ads that are relevant to a site's readers, which means that achieving brand suitability requires a highly customized approach.
- Publishers will need to invest in sophisticated tools that can apply their brand suitable standards proactively, especially in the programmatic channels where they face the greatest risk of receiving poor quality ads.

# 4. THE IMPACT OF POOR ADS ON PUBLISHER REPUTATIONS AND VISITOR BEHAVIOR

## Problems Persist: 100% of Publishers Experience Poor Ad Quality

Nearly 87% of publishers said problematic ads appear a few times or from time to time on their properties. Another 9% say it's a recurring challenge.

18% of publishers report seeing ads that were so bad they damaged, or had the potential to damage, their brand reputation.

Tellingly, not one publisher reported a complete absence of poor quality ads on their site over the past year.

## Types of Unwanted Ads that Appeared

When we asked publishers to describe the types of unwanted ads that have appeared on their sites over the past 12 months, we heard:

**Sexually explicit/offensive**



**Clickbait**



**Deceptive offers**



**Politically polarizing**



**TIP-** Implement a real-time solution that can address all of the issues you face: deceptive and misleading ads, predefined content issues, malvertising, technical issues that disrupt the user experience, and inappropriate ad formats. Ensure your ad quality vendor can prevent all unwanted ads across the threat map—from financial scams, to brand infringement and misleading product offers. User protection providers like GeoEdge have tools that enable publishers to get very granular in terms of the ads users see—keeping users safe and engaged.

## Readers Don't Like Poor Quality Ads

To readers, poor ad quality is a turnoff, and a clear indication that the publisher isn't paying attention to the ads that appear on their sites, or can't attract legitimate advertisers.

Importantly, only 9% of users who come across low-quality ads complain to the publisher, they simply churn silently. This leaves pubs confused why users go to their competitors, end subscriptions or bounce off the site, as the survey results indicate.

Almost half of the publishers confirmed that poor quality ads prompts users to spend less time on a site, and that an equal number will complain about it on social media, often unbeknownst to the publisher.

**Prompts users to spend less time on site**



**Prompts negative comments on social media**



**Prompted complaints to customer service**





## Impact of Poor Ads on Lifetime Value

Poor ad quality presents multiple challenges for publishers. Not only do publishers lose readers, but a smaller, less engaged audience makes it more difficult to attract advertisers.

**Diminishes trust in our brand**



**Discourages return visits**



**Significantly affects lifetime of audiences**



**TIP:** Ensuring publishers' sites and apps remain clean and profitable require proactive solutions that weed out deceptive and misleading ads, long before any damage can occur. Maintaining a quality user experience requires the highest degree of granularity for publishers to define rules for what is and isn't allowed on their site.

— Amnon Siev, CEO, GeoEdge

## 5. AD QUALITY AS STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE

We know that poor ad quality can damage a publisher's reputation, but does it follow that consistently high quality advertising serves as a strategic advantage for a publisher? In other words, will proactively monitoring for ad quality return dividends above and beyond user churn and lower LTV?

Not surprisingly, 100% of publishers said that quality advertising can somewhat or greatly enhance the user experience.

### Competitive Advantage of High-Quality Ads

High quality ads send important messages to both the reader and the advertiser. Readers know they're less likely to fall victim to scams or be infected with malware. The higher level of trust means users are more likely to respond to an ad that piques their interests. Meanwhile, advertisers are assured their ads won't appear side-by-side with poor-quality ads like clickbait.

**60%**

*of publishers agree that high-quality ads help to differentiate their sites from other sites within their sectors.*

## Defining What Brand Suitability Means

Today, more publishers seek to transact inventory based on brand suitability. But what is it? And how does it differ from publisher to publisher. To find out, we asked survey respondents to indicate how they define brand suitability. Here's what they told us:

**Ads that are relevant to our readers (i.e. core content)**

**100%**

**Ads for products and services our readers want to buy**

**80%**

**Ads that incentivize users to stay on our site longer and return more frequently**

**40%**

**Ads that run next to content that is appropriate to the advertiser**

**10%**

**80%**

**of publishers say brand suitability increases reader/  
user trust in a site.**

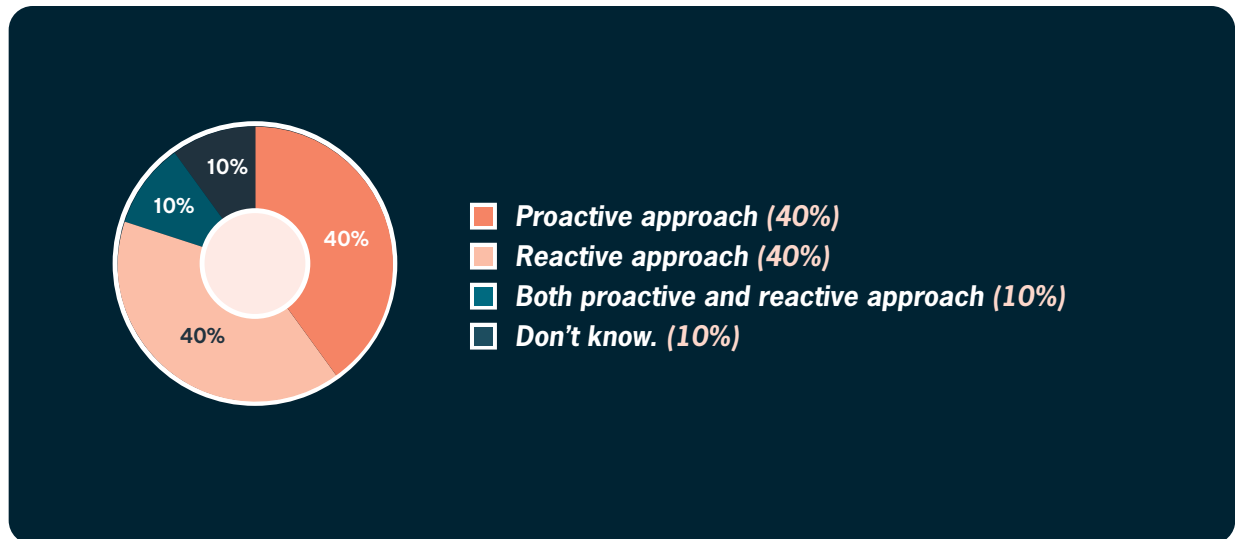
## 6. THE STATE OF BRAND SUITABILITY: STILL WORK TO DO

Publishers define brand suitability as ads that are relevant to their users' interests and endemic to site content. Does it stand to reason that they are able to deliver on their brand suitability goals? Is brand suitability possible in programmatic channels? What tools do they need to ensure their brand suitability targets and goals are met?

### Publishers Have Work to Do in Terms of Brand Suitability Enforcement

Most people understand that when it comes to enforcing standards in programmatic advertising, publishers need to take both proactive and reactive measures. Proactive approaches define what a brand suitable ad is and qualifies an ad before it is served. Reactive approaches are necessary for those borderline instances that require additional review.

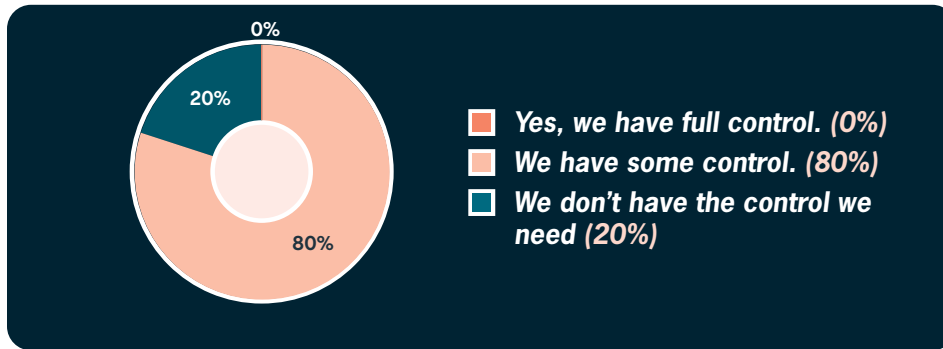
***The survey makes clear that publishers still have work to do. When we asked about their current brand suitability approach, publishers told us:***



## Publishers Lack the Full Range of Controls they Need

It's clear from our survey that while publishers would like to do a better job protecting their users and enhancing the user experience, they lack the tools to do so.

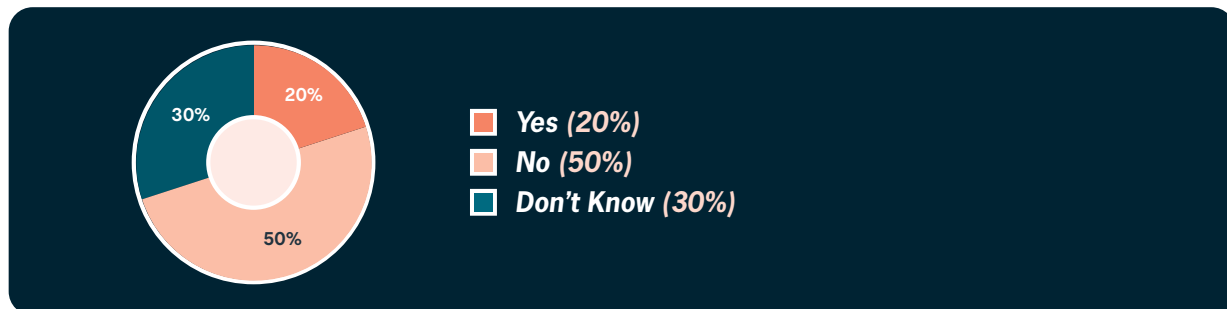
**We asked: Do you feel as if you have sufficient control over the ads that appear on your sites? They responded**



**ONLY 20%**  
of Publishers Have  
Proactive Brand  
Suitability Tools

It's not surprising that less than half of publishers say they have the ability to implement their brand suitability standards proactively. When we asked whether they had tools to be proactive, half said no.

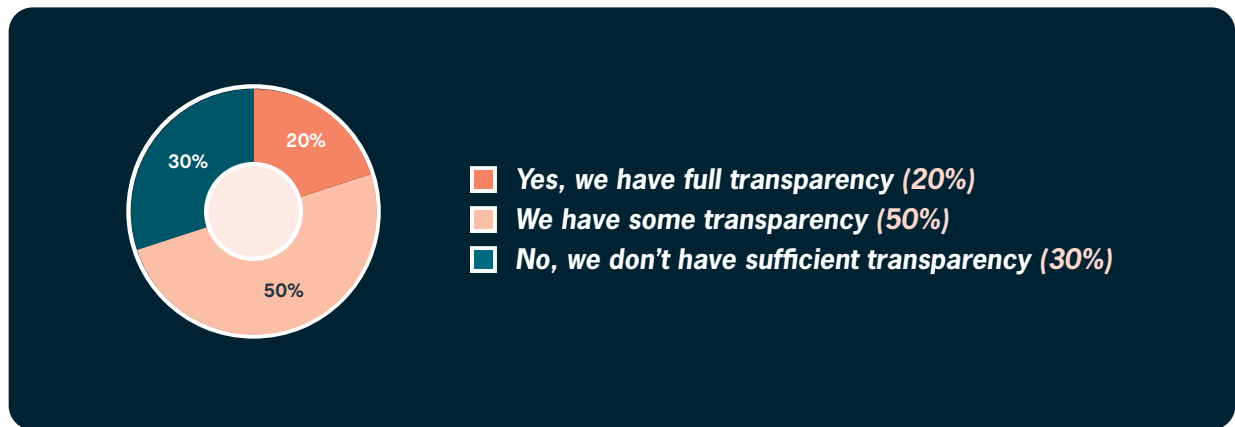
**We asked: Do you have the tools you need to proactively enforce your in brand suitability? They said:**



## Transparency Still a Challenge in Programmatic

85% of survey respondents said they rely on programmatic to acquire ads for their inventory, and yet only 20% say they have complete transparency into the ads that come through such channels. This is a significant issue, as all ad quality standards – inventory quality, brand safety and brand suitability – depend on complete transparency into who is behind each ad.

***Do you feel as if you have a sufficient level of transparency into your programmatic inventory? We heard:***



## What is Meaningful Transparency?

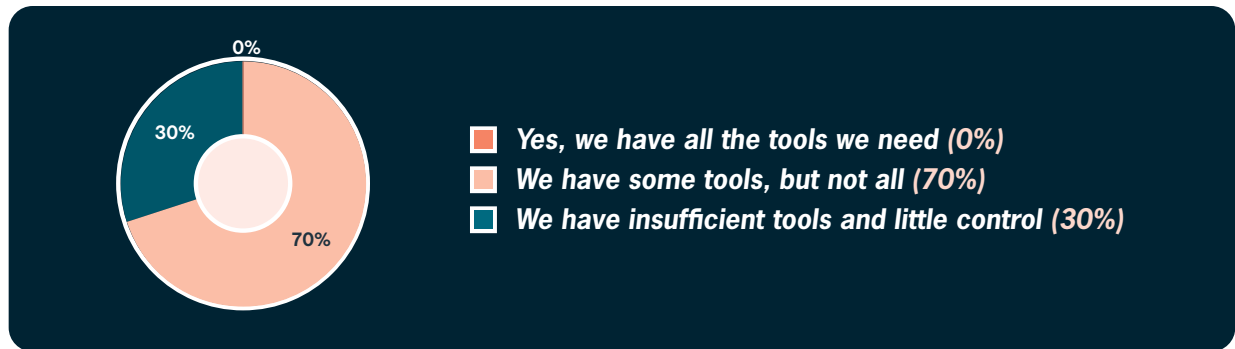
Transparency remains a stubborn challenge for publishers. Programmatic platforms can provide placement-level detail of ads, but those files are unusable to the ad quality teams seeking to enhance the ad experience for their users.

Millions of ads can be shown in a month, making it impossible to see the big picture of the user experience. Meaningful visibility requires a solution that displays the ads that appear on sites, and enables publishers to flag/block unsuitable or bad ads both automatically and reactively. As it stands now, most publishers are left confused when users silently churn and only learn of bad ads when users leave negative comments on social media.

## Publishers Also Lack Tools to Prevent Bad Ads

Given the negative impact of misleading ads on the brand's reputation with readers and advertisers, we wanted to see if publishers had the tools to block them.

**We asked: Do you have the tools you need to prevent deceptive, misleading, or false advertising about products or services? On the whole, survey respondents tell us they have some of the tools they need, but not all. They responded:**



### AS ONE RESPONDENT EXPLAINED:

**"We have tools, but ads slip by those tools as the accuracy of creative identification is difficult. For instance, if an ad is selling T-shirts, but those shirts have a graphic or text that is not appropriate."**

**TIP:** Adopt a tool that secures the entire scam delivery process, one which monitors the content on both the creative and the campaign's landing pages. User protection vendor GeoEdge, leverages optical character recognition, image recognition, and context analysis to analyze campaigns and landing pages on a real-time basis.

## A Lack of Confidence is Inevitable

Given the tumultuous newscycle over the past few years, we asked publishers the degree to which they are confident they can ensure safe, brand suitable advertising during evolving news cycles, trends and events. Here's what we heard:



## Current Tools & Strategies to Prevent Poor Ads

It's no surprise that publishers lack confidence given their current tactics to ensure ad quality. Maintaining lists of who can advertise and who can't has always had a limited impact in the programmatic world.

***We asked: Which tactics do you currently deploy to prevent bad ads from appearing within your apps? (Check all that apply.) They responded:***

***Manual ad filtering***



***Integrating an automated ad quality solution (Real-time blocking)***



***Sell only to pre-qualified advertisers***



***Advertiser inclusion lists***



***Advertiser exclusion lists***



***Restrict certain selling models (e.g. no selling inventory in an open exchange)***





## Ad Quality Priorities in the Next Year and a Half

*Finally, we wanted to get a sense of which ad quality issues will be a top priority over the next year and a half. Here's what we heard:*

*Ads that users perceive as disruptive (auto-sound, screen takeover)*



*Clickbait, deceptive and misleading advertising*



*Irrelevant ads (advertising that doesn't appeal to users)*



*Sensitive and inflammatory ads*



*Offensive and explicit content*



Both the ad content and ad format contribute to brand suitability, and they can vary from site to site, even those owned by the same publisher. Gambling and crypto-currency advertisements may be appropriate for some sites, while completely unsuitable for others.

This example points to a key finding in the survey: the tools that publishers have at their disposal generally seek to prevent bad ads, but with the exception of inclusion lists, they don't allow them to concentrate on ensuring "good" ads, or ads that enhance the user experience. This is a missed opportunity given that 100% of survey respondents said they consider brand-suitable ads as ones that offer products and services that are of interest to their users.

## 7. THE ADMONSTER'S BRAND SUITABILITY PLAYBOOK

- Craft a brand suitability framework to articulate what brand suitability means for your brand and audience. Discuss questions such as: Is this advertiser type or content category of interest or offensive to our users? Look for a tool that allows you to create and apply granular rules to enforce security, content, and user experience standards.
- Adopt a tool that protects the entire ad delivery process, one which monitors the content on both the creative and the campaign's landing pages. GeoEdge frequently blocks ads that are categorized as family-friendly but include images of offensives ranging from liquor bottles to sexually explicit content. They also commonly block ads that conceal the true nature of the product sold. To prevent these incidents, implement a tool that leverages optical character recognition, image recognition, and context analysis to analyze campaigns on a real-time basis.
- Make sure your toolkit is stocked with a transparency solution to efficiently review the ads that appear in each site and determine if they meet the criteria laid out in your brand suitability strategy. Some ads may be “edge” cases, and require you to make a determination if they meet your standards. Real-time solutions will take it from there to enforce your rules going forward.
- Take ad quality control down the last mile by automatically informing your demand partners of malicious and offensive ads originating on their end. Adopt a solution that not only automatically blocks security incidents but mitigates the issue with automated demand reports to the incident's origin. Streamlining incident mitigation not only lightens the load on app publishers but contributes to an overall cleaner environment.
- Ensure your Ad Ops team is up-to-date on new and evolving ad quality challenges. From financial scams, and brand infringement to post click-cloaking attacks—your team should be aware of the latest threats to your audience. Partner with an ad quality vendor to keep your team on the same page with the latest lexicon to accurately define the bad ads which seek to wreak havoc on your audience.

## 8. ABOUT THIS SURVEY

Types of Publisher	
Business	19%
Sports	6%
Lifestyle	12%
Entertainment	19%
General	12%
Tech	12%
Financial	6%
Other	12%

Size of Organizations Based Number of Employees	
1 to 49	20%
50 to 499	33%
500 to 999	20%
1,000 to 4,999	13%
5,000+	13%

Respondent Seniority	
C-suite	7%
Vice President	33%
Director	47%
Manager	13%

## How Respondents Organizations Fill Inventory

*Ad network*



*SSPs*



*Programmatic*



*Direct deal with an advertiser*



*House ads*



*Other (please explain)*





The global leader in strategic insight on the future of digital media and advertising technology. Through our conferences, website, and original research, we offer unparalleled in-person experiences and unique, high-quality content focused on media operations, monetization, technology, strategy, platforms and trends. We provide a forum to share best practices, explore new technology platforms and build relationships.

AdMonsters has built its reputation on providing objective editorial leadership based on deep, real-world expertise. We have continued to evolve our editorial strategy to address the changing needs of the market and, as a result, AdMonsters has attracted a highly focused audience who are at the forefront of the industry, and leading marketing partners have found AdMonsters to be a powerful channel to reach these decision makers. Today, our portfolio of integrated media solutions includes industry-leading live events, our innovative Connect content solutions, email marketing programs, and more.

AdMonsters is part of the [Access Intelligence](#) family of companies.

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GeoEdge's mission is to protect the integrity of the digital advertising ecosystem and to preserve a quality experience for users. GeoEdge's advanced security solutions ensure high ad quality and verify that sites/apps offer a clean, safe and engaging user experience, so publishers and app developers can focus on their business success.

App Developers and publishers around the world rely on GeoEdge to stop malicious and low-quality ads from reaching their audience. GeoEdge allows publishers to maximize their ad revenue without quality concerns, protect their brand reputation and increase their user loyalty. GeoEdge guards digital businesses against unwanted, malicious, offensive and inappropriate ads—without sacrificing revenue.

To learn more, visit: [www.geoedge.com](http://www.geoedge.com)

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