

# The State of Ad Quality

Solving advertising's newest challenges in 2021

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# The state of ad quality: Solving advertising's newest challenges in 2021

From Google Chrome's impending elimination of third-party cookies in 2023 to Apple's IDFA privacy changes, the disappearance of user tracking mechanisms are forcing publishers to shift from audience behavior-based targeting to contextual approaches.

As contextual advertising is set to dominate the ad ecosystem in the next few years, lags in contextual capabilities are compromising assurances around ad quality which, so far, third-party cookies were able to ensure. Simply put, user privacy protections will have an impact on ad quality.

One result, as Amnon Siev, CEO at GeoEdge, sees it, is that once third-party cookies are completely phased out, the average overall CPM level in the market will drop.

"The first thought is that if CPMs are going to drop, bad ads are going to rise all over the place. While high CPMs are

not a total barrier to malicious actors, we tend to see bad ads in websites that have lower CPMs, compared to websites that have higher CPMs," said Siev. "In the contextual world, we will likely see a decrease in CPMs across the industry."

When it comes to ad quality overall, publishers and their advertiser partners also continue to grapple with challenges around heavy pages, CPU workloads, brand suitability — contextual matching is just one of the hurdles among all of these obstacles.

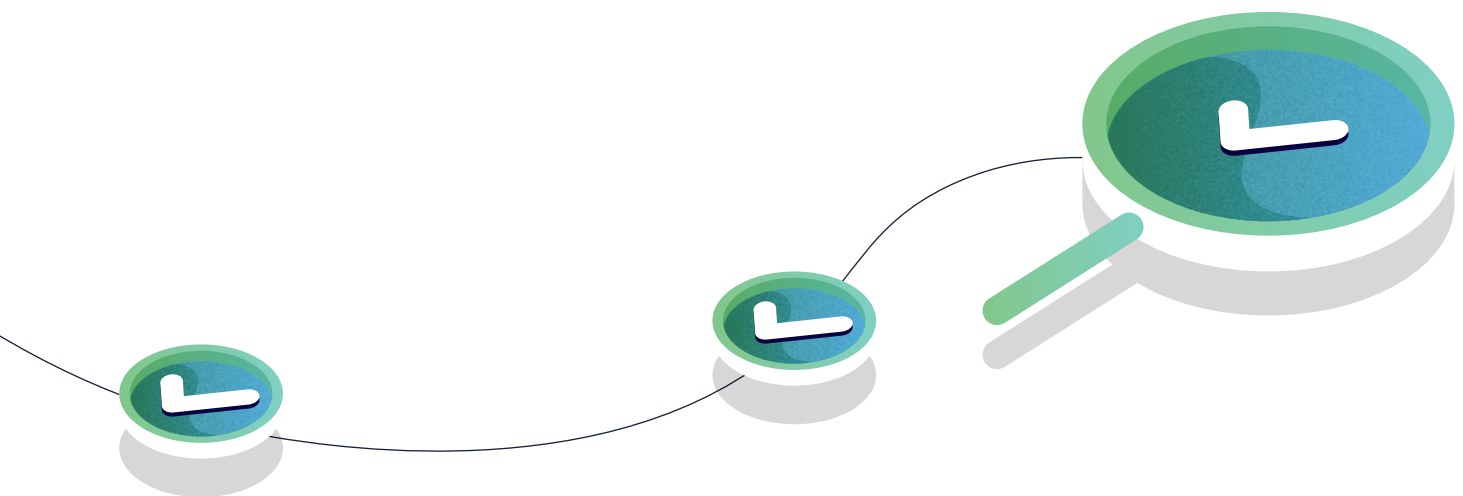
To uncover how publishers are dealing with the newest ad inventory quality challenges and approaching tactics to resolve those challenges, GeoEdge and Digiday surveyed nearly 100 publishers. This report highlights what they told us, as well as how publishers are moving beyond automation into a hybrid human-machine interface to better audit and control ad quality in the years to come.

## What's in this report

[What's working, what's broken and what needs to happen next to ensure ad quality](#)

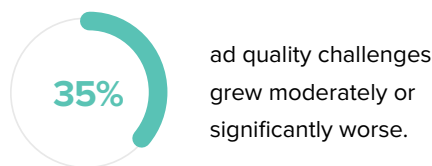
[The state of advertising after the events of 2020](#)

[How publishers are looking beyond the automated ecosystem to control ad quality and transparency](#)



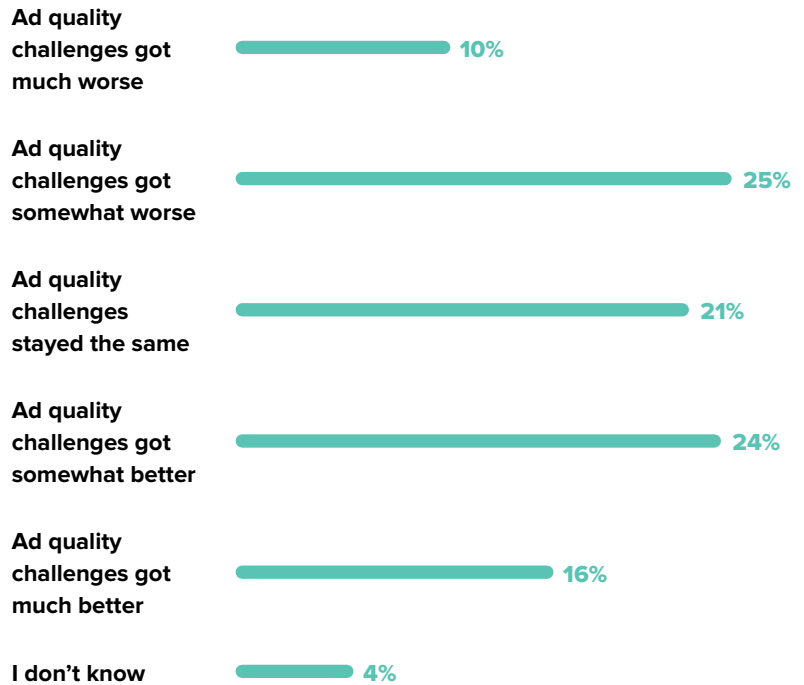
# Ad quality concerns in 2021

Our survey found that publishers remain somewhat split on their views of how ad quality challenges have changed in the past year. **About one-third (35%) said ad quality challenges grew moderately or significantly worse.** Closer to half, however, (40%) said ad quality challenges were lessening and ad quality was improving. Clearly, on both sides, there is work to be done, partnerships to be built and a general effort to work on ad quality is an outstanding need across the industry.

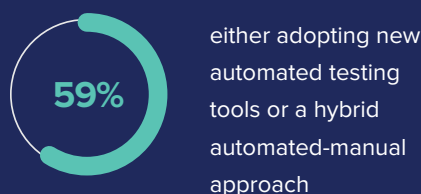


## How ad quality challenges have shifted in a year

Q: In the past year, have ad quality challenges gotten better or worse?

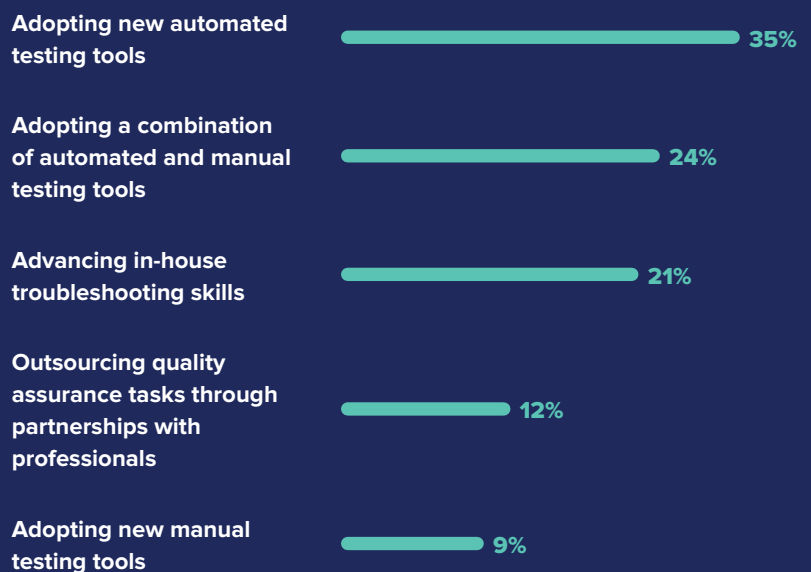


For respondents whose ad quality challenges are increasing, **a majority of respondents (59%) are either adopting new automated testing tools or a hybrid automated-manual approach to improve** quality assurance, the latter of which we'll explore later in this report. In both cases, however, the data highlights the trend: Technology is at the heart of the ad quality solutions for which respondents are reaching.



## How publishers are changing approaches to quality assurance

Q: If ad quality challenges are increasing, how are you changing your approach to quality insurance?



When it comes to the types of ad quality challenges in place, brand safety and suitability is a priority for publishers in 2021, followed by poor contextual

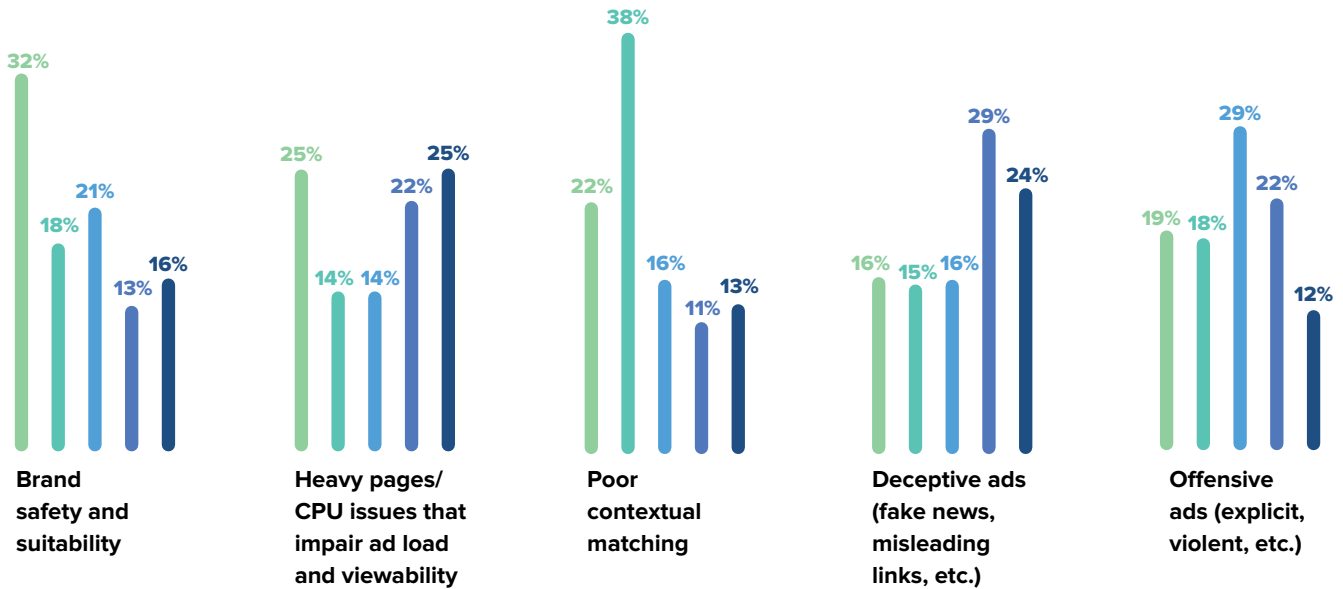
matching, offensive ads, deceptive ads and heavy pages that impair ad load and viewability.

### The ad quality challenges publishers are prioritizing right now

Q: What ad quality challenges are your team prioritizing in 2021?

Rate in order of importance (1 being most important, 5 being least important)

■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5



The priorities are changing, however. One year from now, poor contextual matching is set to be the main concern and focus for publishers, which correlates with the rise of contextual becoming the dominant targeting alternative to third-party cookies.

### Ad quality forecast: The main challenges for 2022

Q: One year from now, which ad quality challenges do you expect will be your primary focus? Select all that apply.



Poor contextual matching is a key concern for publishers because, at its core, contextual targeting is less personal and less accurate than third-party, data-based targeting. Contextual approaches can lead to an open door of mismatches that include off-topic ads or inappropriate content, since there is a lack of ability to pinpoint and retarget specific users with contextual tactics.

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**“This leads to a problem that publishers are going to have with protecting their brand and how they are perceived by their users,” said Siev. “The user doesn’t differentiate between the ads on the website and the website itself — they look at their experience on the website as a whole.”**

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Publishers are trying to solve this issue by filtering or blocking certain verticals and categories on their ad servers. However, this approach can be ineffective since ad servers don’t analyze the actual content of certain campaigns. For example, a gambling company can easily declare the category

of its campaign as entertainment. This will allow that advertiser to bypass the filter and show up on a website that might not want its users to encounter ads about gambling. This is significant, especially in cases such as gambling ad content, which isn’t just unwanted by certain publishers — it can also be illegal depending on laws and regulations in different locations.

When it comes to other challenges, heavy pages and CPU workload issues that damage ad viewability are also a chief concern for publishers.

Google Chrome has countered heavy ads by blocking them — the issue, however, is that publishers alone don’t have a way to monitor which ads are being blocked. Siev explained that one action publishers can take to better track blocked ads is adopting technology that enables them to identify when their ads are blocked and log these events into their analytics systems.

Richard Bailey, Global Head of Ad Operations at tech media company IDG, noted that Google Chrome initiatives,

in which the browser disengages with ads that drain a user’s CPU, is helping improve CPU workload issues and the overall user experience.

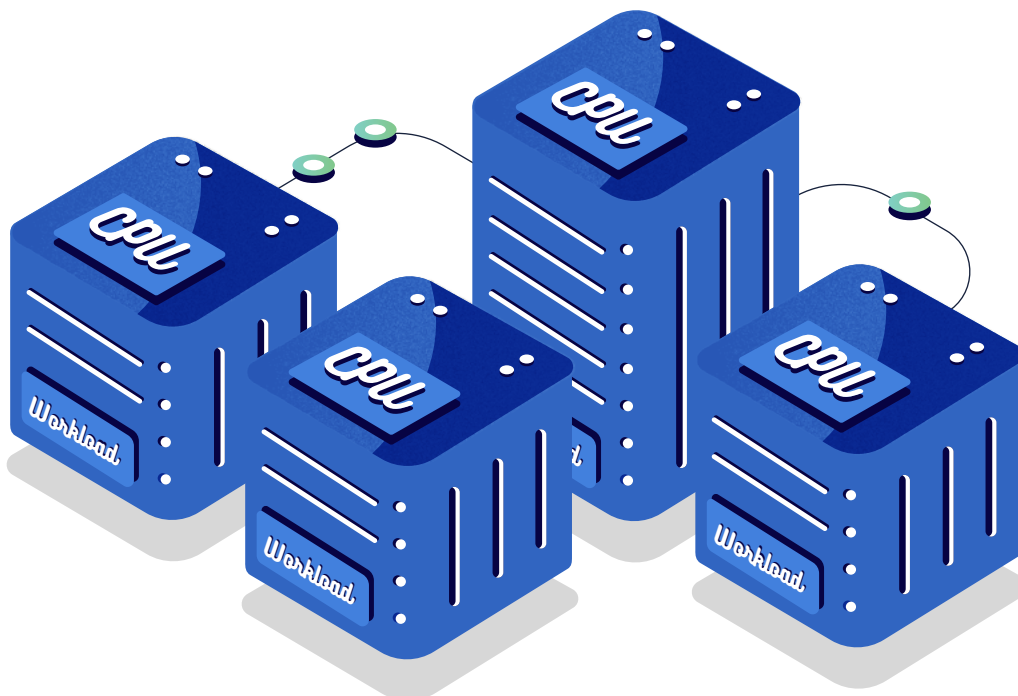
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**“The performance of the page is very important to us,” Bailey said. “We want users to stay on and read our content. We don’t want the user experience to be influenced by something as simple as trying to scroll, because the ad causes drainage to such a degree that the rest of the page pays a penalty.”**

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Bailey noted that there is a divide among big internet browsers in how they handle CPU workload issues, which isn’t helping improve CPU workload performance.

For now, Bailey’s team at IDG is using Google’s Core Web Vitals — a set of standardized user-focused metrics that provide information on page usability such as load time, interactivity and visual stability of content on the web pages as they load — as a guide when making decisions on site developments or readjusting site framework.



# The state of brand safety after an unusual year

Misinformation has proliferated on the internet especially in the past year, resulting in marketers [reconsidering brand safety controls](#) amid events like the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. presidential election and Inauguration Day. The events of 2020 and early 2021 have transformed audiences and publisher expectations alike.

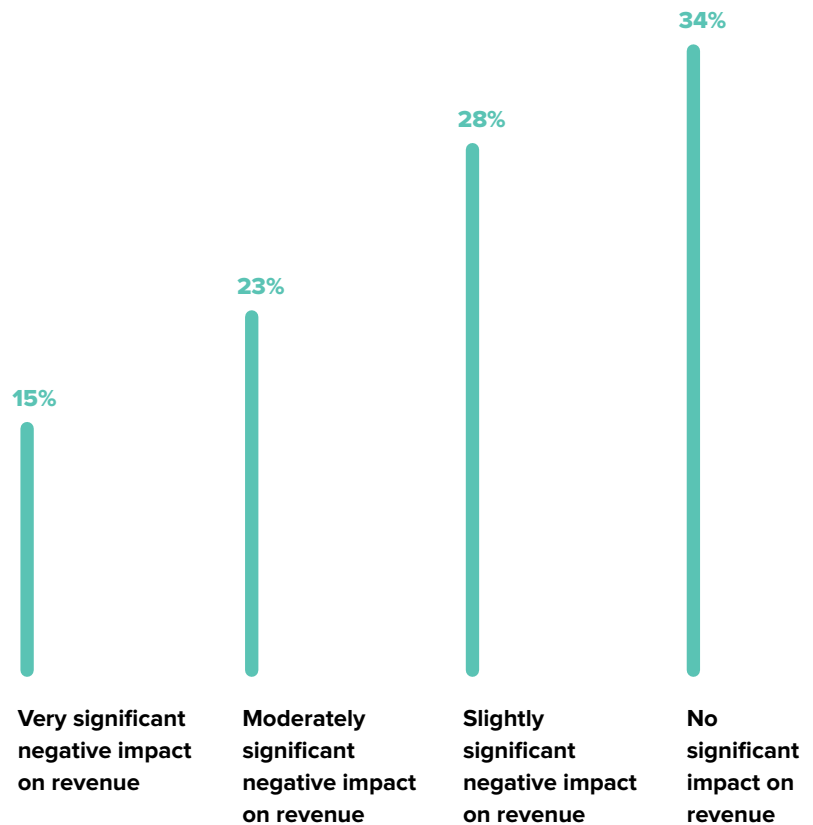
The effects of ad quality challenges have hit advertisers bottom lines as well. In our survey, **nearly 40% of respondents reported that ad quality challenges in the past year have led to a moderate or very significant negative impact on revenue.**



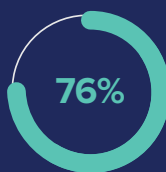
66% of respondents said ad quality challenges had a slight to very negative impact on revenue

## How ad quality challenges impacted revenue

Q: In the past year, how significantly have ad quality challenges impacted your revenue?



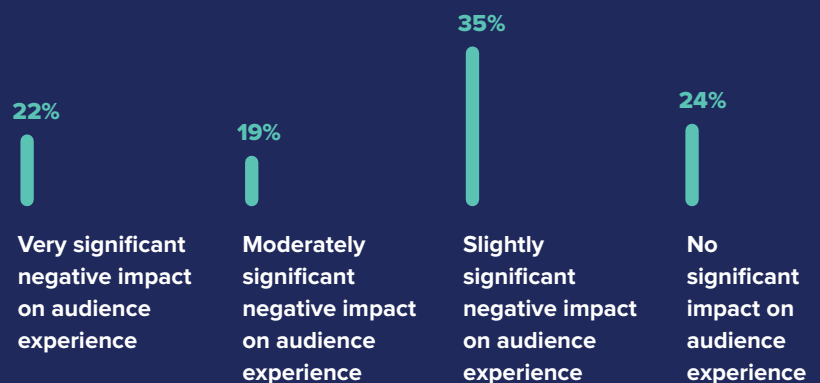
**Nearly half of publishers (41%) also reported that ad quality challenges had a moderate to very significant negative impact on the user experience.**



76% of respondents said ad quality challenges had a slight to very negative impact on audience experience

## The impact of ad quality challenges on the user experience

Q: In the past year, how significantly have ad quality challenges impacted the audience experience?



These survey outcomes support what experts say is a convergence of factors. In the past year and a half, two major trends have impacted the world of brand suitability. One is growing user awareness and concern around issues such as internet privacy, data integrity and fake or misleading information. The other is the increase of fraudulent campaigns that use clickbait methods to direct users to landing pages with phishing scams.

Siev noted these two trends have collided, resulting in a negative impact on brand safety for publishers, as users view the publisher as responsible for their entire website experience.

“If a user is lured to a phishing scam from a specific site, it will automatically impact

the publisher’s reputation,” Siev said. “If it wasn’t for the high user awareness and sensitivity, it would be a different story. Today, publishers have even more to gain from investing in ad quality.”

Bailey at IDG said editorial teams for its publications — which include Macworld, Tech Advisor and PCWorld — see an uptick of bad ads on sites around the time when online rumors begin surrounding new Apple product and software announcements.

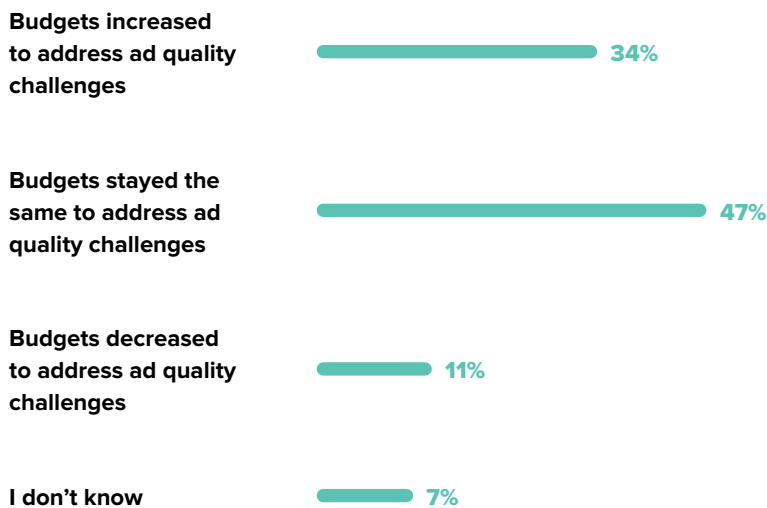
These deceptive ads are usually flagged by users via social media, users messaging editorial teams directly or by members of editorial teams. Brand suitability issues, such as those reported by users, have pushed IDG to invest in ad protection technology.

**“We want to have that fence of protection which, first and foremost, identifies, blocks and protects us from malware, malvertising and other issues categorized under ad security,” Bailey said. “We want to improve user quality, engagement, and site performance. If user engagement is being influenced by spurious ads, we want to stop those immediately.”**

For nearly half of respondents, the events of 2020 didn’t prompt publisher teams to change budgets to address ad quality control. However, just more than **one-third (34%) reported that 2020’s impact on ad quality led them to increase budgets to solve ad quality challenges.**

### How 2020 has impacted spend on ad quality control

**Q:** How did 2020’s impact on the state of ad quality affect your spend on ad quality control?



**“**If a user is lured to a phishing scam from a publishers site, it will automatically impact the publisher’s reputation. If it wasn’t for the high user awareness and sensitivity, it would be a different story. Today, publishers have even more to gain from investing in ad quality.

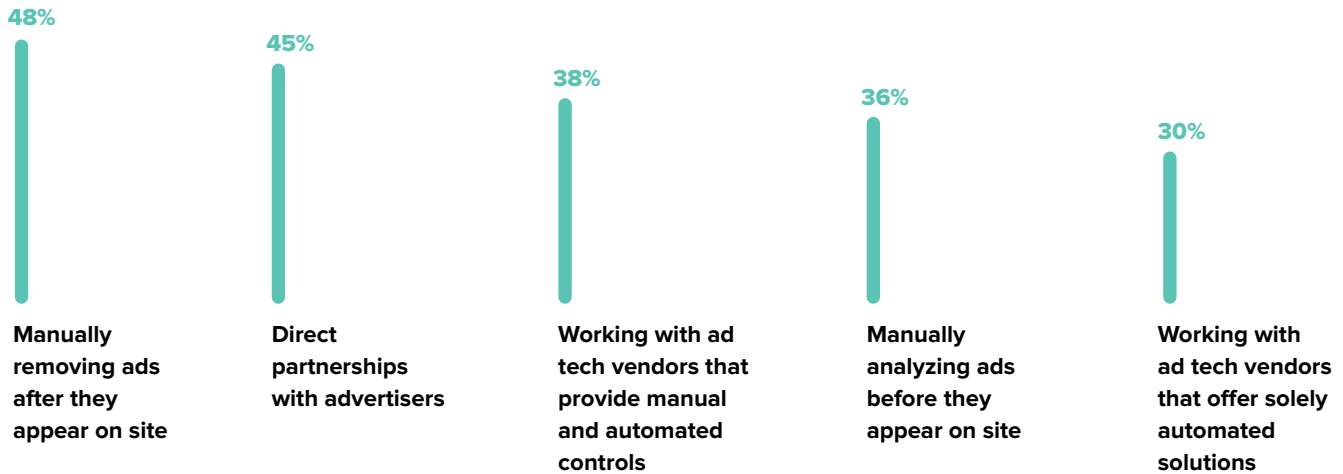
— Amnon Siev  
CEO at GeoEdge

On a tactical level, to improve ad quality control and transparency, nearly half (48%) of publishers are manually

removing ads, and on the strategic front, again nearly half (45%) are investing in direct partnerships with advertisers.

### How publishers are solving for better ad quality control and transparency?

Q: In 2021, what approaches are your team exploring to control ad quality and improve transparency? Select all that apply.

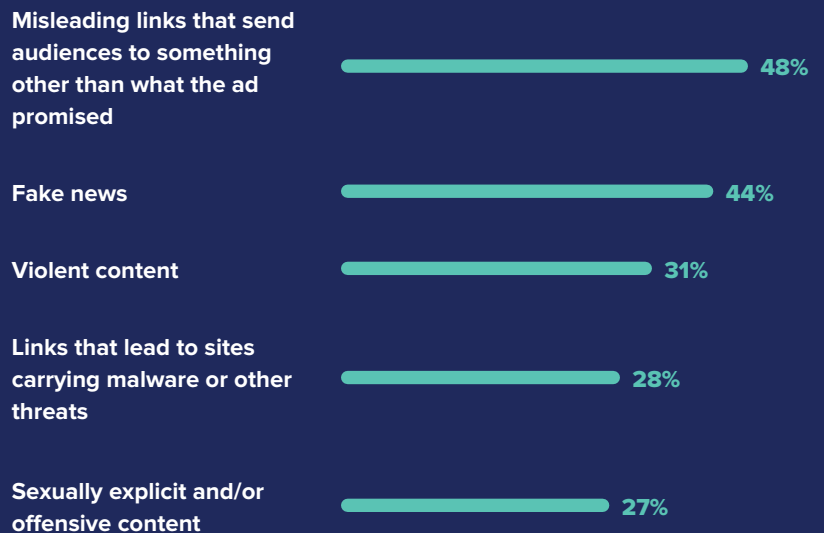


What our publisher respondents are finding as they analyze their sites and remove these instances is most often related to bad actors luring them off-site under false pretenses. When it comes to low quality ads, the most common types that our respondents are encountering are misleading links that direct users to something other than the ad promised.

**Respondents also cited fake news (44%) and violent content (31%) as common types of low quality ads they are running into this year.**

### The low quality ads publishers are encountering the most

Q: What types of low quality ads are you most often encountering? Select all that apply.

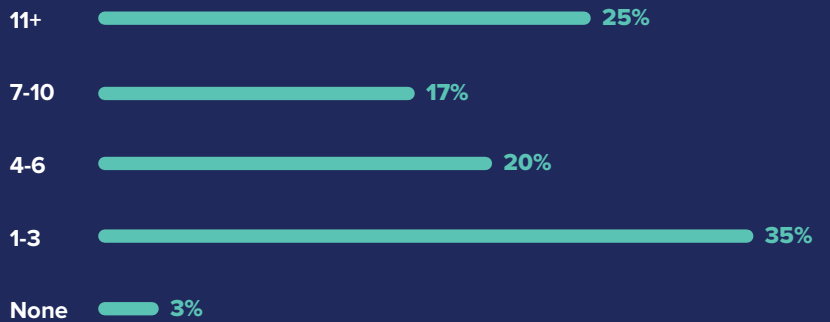




Our survey **found that 63% of publishers are encountering more than three problematic ads weekly**; far more than a conscientious team would want to see. It's also possible that the publishers encountering fewer than three low-quality ads per week are working with tools that aren't advanced enough to monitor for ad quality. In other words, they may be relying on user complaints to flag problems. As technology improves control and transparency, publishers working with more advanced approaches are measuring more unwanted ads — giving them the power to block low-quality content.

### How often are publishers encountering unwanted ads?

**Q:** How many low quality ads do you encounter on your pages on a weekly basis?



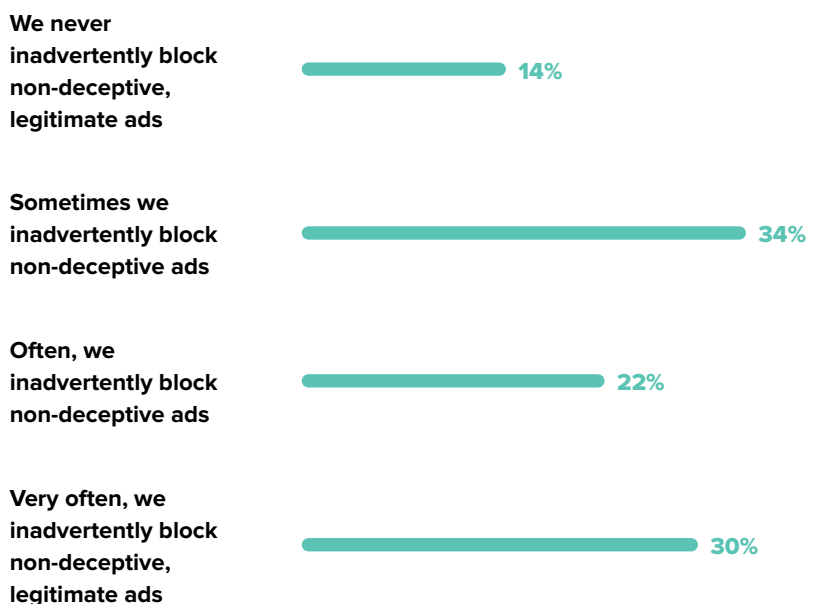
## The shift to publisher-controlled ad quality solutions

As the data at the end of the previous section suggests, publishers are responding to ad quality challenges by putting hands on keys. Ad inventory quality challenges publishers have faced over the last year are prompting teams to shift from using solely automated tools to a more hands-on practice in an effort to improve control and transparency. The “set it and forget it” mindset of using automation to control brand safety no longer applies, as publishers can't afford to accidentally block brand-suitable ads while missing deceptive ads.

The problem is still sizable. In our survey, more than three quarters of respondents reported that they inadvertently block non-deceptive, legitimate ads sometimes, often or very often.

### The challenges of ad blocking

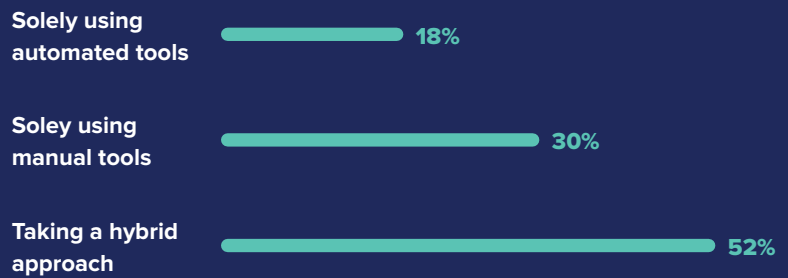
**Q:** Which of the following statements best describes your organization's outcomes when eliminating or blocking low quality ads?



And to control ad quality challenges and improve transparency, more than half of respondents are taking a hybrid approach in that they are combining automated and manual solutions, and a vast majority (82%) are manually tackling ad quality overall.

## Changing approaches to automated and manual elements

**Q:** How are you approaching the manual and automated elements of controlling ad quality challenges for maximum transparency?



Publishers shifting from automation to automated-manual approach is a response to growing awareness around ad content and ad-related user experience, as well as changing definitions of what ads are “good” and what ads are “bad.” An ad that violates one publisher’s standards could be acceptable for another publisher and, overall, it’s not as simple to define what is and isn’t malicious activity.

For example: Let’s say a publisher serves a campaign that has completely clean creative with messaging that isn’t offensive, and the link takes a user to the campaign’s landing page. The landing page is also clean and is offering users to purchase a product. However, when a user clicks to buy the product, they find the product doesn’t actually exist.

Was this ad malicious or not? According to Siev, it depends on which publisher one asks, and the answer will likely change from publisher to publisher. “Because of this, publishers can’t just rely on a solution that involves plugging it in and letting it run,” Siev said. **“You have to have an automated solution**

**that enables you to set your own parameters, and specific rules and guidelines according to your own boundaries and values as a publisher.”**

**In other words, shifting to a more hand-on approach isn’t about putting in more manual work. It’s about publishers having the ability to manually set more defined rules and criteria for what is and isn’t allowed on their site, as well as defining how their solution will proceed for each case.**

Siev also noted that supply-side platforms (SSPs) and publishers share the responsibility to uphold ad quality. To solve their ad quality problems, publishers are turning to cooperation and sharing of data, and investing in ad quality tools such as automatic demand notifications. The goal, overall, is to more efficiently inform SSPs about malicious or unwanted ads that were blocked from publisher pages. This will help SSPs eliminate recurring bad ads. In other words, using automatic demand notifications will help clean the entire publishing industry, not just a single site.

Bailey at IDG said the company has historically relied on numerous third-party tech tools and partnerships to control ad quality. In the past two years, IDG has hired a global CIO who influences decisions on how the company should approach tech partners that can help facilitate automated vs. manual solutions.

“We’re focused on building partnerships and long-term relationships with tech partners that have already spent the time and effort in building the technology [to control ad quality,]” Bailey said.

“**We’re focused on building partnerships and long-term relationships with tech partners that have already spent the time and effort in building the technology [to control ad quality.]**

— Bailey, IDG

# How publishers are future-proofing ad quality control

The evident trends around manual solutions look set to continue. In the next five years, 35% of our respondents predict that automated and manual approaches will equally be a part of their ad control strategy, while 32% believe

that the balance will shift significantly away from manual toward automated.

Our respondents are nearly split in terms on how they view their current ad quality tools. Half of respondents said the

tools they're using have the necessary amount of control. **However, nearly half of publishers (47%) feel lost when it comes to their current ad quality tools, and need more control and transparency over their ad inventory.**

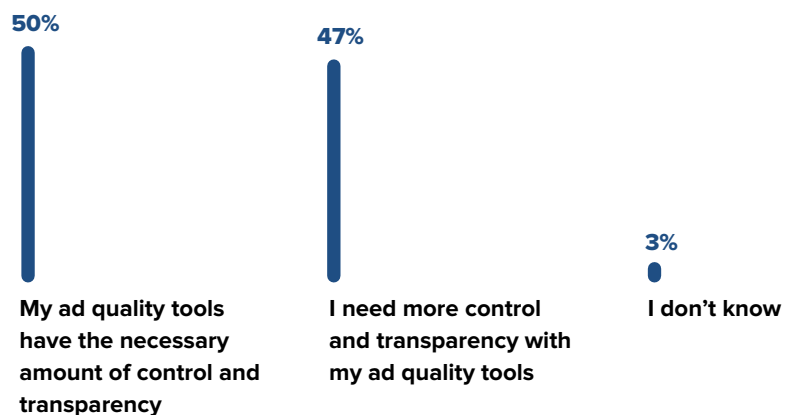
## How publishers predict manual and automated approaches will change

**Q:** In what ways do you predict manual and automated approaches will change within the next five years?



## How publishers view their current ad quality tools

**Q:** How do you view the level of control and granularity delivered by your current ad quality tools?

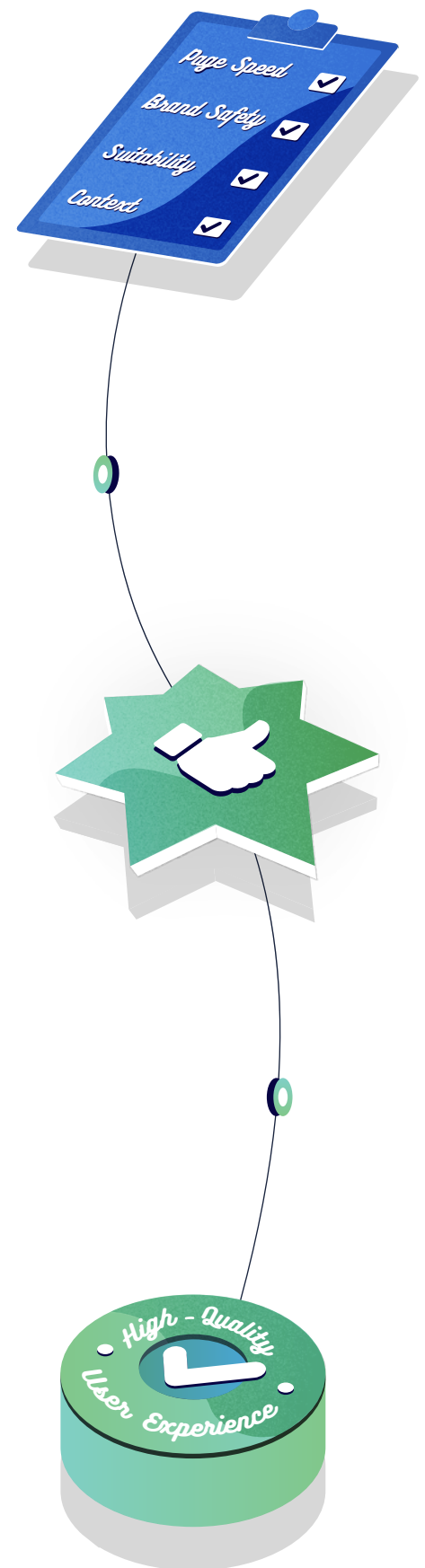


Publisher teams will need to take these steps and considerations as they continue navigating and solving ad quality challenges, and seeking partners to do so, in 2021 and beyond.

- 1** Publishers need to define their values and translate those values into ad quality standards, asking themselves: What does a good ad look like and what does a bad ad look like for their publisher brand and the different audiences they have?
- 2** After defining these ad quality rules and guidelines, publishers should seek a partner that can help turn these guidelines into actions. Publishers also need to make sure they choose a partner that has expertise in working with similar publishers, such as those in the same geographical region or those that cover the same industry.
- 3** Once publishers secure a partner, they need to consider What will such a solution take of my time? What will it save me? Questions to ask include: Will there be automatic reporting for high-level and low-level users? Will there be on-demand notifications for the SSP? How available and self-explanatory is the data that the solution is offering? And how easy is it to turn blocking and filtering rules into action?
- 4** A solution with a strong detection mechanism isn't enough to successfully manage ad quality in the future. Having a partnership where the vendor has the publisher's back is equally important. Publishers want to work with tech partners that are able to quickly resolve problems and provide explanations for why those problems happened, as well as how those problems will be prevented in the future.

The past year and a half has taught publishers that they need to be ready for unprecedented change when managing ad quality to avoid brand harm and monetization hiccups.

Taking these action steps to support their dual automated-manual approach will help publishers improve future-proof their ad quality strategy.



## About GeoEdge

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 offer a clean, safe and engaging user experience, so publishers can focus on their business success.

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.

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