

admonsters

# PLAYBOOK

## How Bad Ads Affect Consumer Perception of Publishers



An Admonsters Playbook  
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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. ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF BAD ADS ON THE PUBLISHING INDUSTRY

Distrust in news organizations is on the rise. **According to Pew Research**, only six in ten Americans trust news organizations to tell them the truth.

At the same time, news avoidance is also increasing. Reuters Institute and the University of Oxford released its annual **Digital News Report**, a survey measuring people's news consumption habits and sentiment.

Consumption of news media has declined, and interest in news “has fallen sharply across markets, from 63% in 2017 to 51% in 2022.”

Is advertising contributing to that sense of distrust? Malware and malvertising scams start from advertising, prompting the US government to advise organizations to install ad blockers — a move that could defund the internet if followed. Late last year, the **FBI reported** that consumers lost some \$10 billion to online scams, and recommended that consumers install an **ad blocker to protect** themselves.

Is there a connection between bad ads and media distrust? How does seeing bad ads affect consumers' perception of the sites and apps that display them? Specifically, we wanted to understand:

- Do bad ads prompt users to leave a news site or app? Do they report those poor experiences to the publisher?
- What is the impact of a bad ad on the consumer's propensity to return to that site, recommend it to others, or make a purchase on it?
- Do bad ads send users a message that publishers care more about making money than they do about their safety?

To gain that understanding, we surveyed 250 consumers about the impact of a “bad” advertisement on their perceptions of a website or app. We defined a bad ad to survey takers as “any advertisement — including the web page or app that clicking on it brings you to — that you find unpleasant, inappropriate, untruthful, or has some kind of computer virus associated with it.”

## 2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Publishers have always struggled with bad ads. Nefarious players and scammers, who sought to exploit the digital advertising ecosystem to steal money or data from consumers, have been around almost since the first ad was placed. But as the world became more digitized, and as global wealth (and access to it) went online, bad actors stepped up their game. Online scams beginning with a digital ad are now dizzyingly complex, with fraudsters going to great lengths to appear legitimate to their victims.

Not surprisingly, malvertising is now a major crime, with 46% of consumers saying they, or someone they know, has fallen prey to a scam. According to the FBI, American consumers **lost \$10 billion to online scammers** in 2022, and 2023 promises to be an even worse year for consumers.

Malvertising and malware are upending digital advertising, with the **FBI warning consumers** to install ad blockers, and the **New York Times telling its readers** that “if it’s advertised, you probably shouldn’t buy it.”

Programmatic advertising burst onto the scene in the mid-2000s promising better monetization opportunities for publishers and better access to audiences for brands. That promise led to a robust industry; in 2022 global revenues topped **\$173.74 billion worldwide**.

The scales have tipped, and programmatic has become more of a liability than an asset. Last year, Bloomberg News made headlines when it announced it was pulling the plug on open programmatic, citing bad ads and the impact they had on the reader’s experience.

They’re hardly alone. **Jared Collett, Sr. Director of Ad Operations and Analytics, Major League Fishing**, also said his company changed who they work with as a result of bad ads. “We’ve had to sever relationships with various programmatic partners and ad networks because they couldn’t get control over the bad ads they were sending us. I would rather serve a house ad, or no ads than serve a bad ad.”

Worse, bad ads are eroding consumer trust in publishers. For 77% of consumers, a bad ad is a signal that the publisher cares more about making money than it does about their safety. Another 64% say that seeing a bad ad on a single site tarnishes the entire industry. It’s fair to say we’re at a crisis point.

“This finding is really important. It brings home the point that rightly or wrongly, the reputation of the advertiser and the reputation of the publisher are really tied together. This is something media organizations will need to address.” said **Amnon Siev, CEO, GeoEdge**.

## Users Don't Report Bad Ads

Most publishers hope that their readers will share their experiences with bad ads so that they can address them, but that's not the case. Over half (56%) of consumers say they'll leave a site or close an app immediately when they see a bad ad. Thirty-one percent of consumers will stop and consider how bad an ad actually is (e.g. an ad selling medical miracles vs. malware) prior to leaving.

In a previous survey, we found that 71% of publishers say they learn about bad ads that appear on their sites only if they are reported by a reader.

**The Upshot:** Publishers rely on users to alert them of bad ads, but most users don't report them. The result is a blindspot that's growing bigger each quarter.

## The Consumer's Clarion Call: Fix Digital Advertising

Since its inception in the early 1990s, digital publishers have relied on advertising to fund their content, and later on, their apps. Publishers have a fair expectation for consumers to view ads in exchange for free content. However, consumers are now making their own request: Ensure that the ads displayed on your site won't pose any harm to me.

The industry would be wise to heed the consumer's demand. The data revealed in this survey show that we are in a crisis. The consumer is suffering great harm from malvertising, and that's hurting the publisher's reputation. If the industry doesn't make meaningful progress in combating and mitigating bad ads soon, the entire ecosystem will be at risk.

**46%**

*of consumers say they were victims of an ad scam or know someone who was*

**56%**

*of consumers say that when they see a bad ad, they leave the site or close the app immediately*

**77%**

*of consumers say publishers that have bad ads care more about making money than keeping users safe*

### 3. KEY FINDINGS: A WAKE-UP CALL FOR PUBLISHERS

- **77%** of consumers encountered bad ads; nearly a quarter of them (19 out of 77) say they encounter such ads almost every time they consume media websites and apps.
- **56%** of consumers say that bad ads will cause them to leave a site or close the app immediately. 31% will stop to consider how bad the ad actually is prior to leaving the site.
- **73%** of consumers said they won't recommend a site or app to friends and family after encountering a bad ad on it.
- **77%** of consumers believe that when they encounter bad ads on a site, they conclude that the publisher cares more about making money than they do about their safety.
- **64%** of consumers agree that seeing bad ads undermine their trust in all media organizations, not just the site where I see the ad.
- **67%** of consumers say that the primary responsibility for keeping bad ads at bay lies with the website owner.
- **77%** of consumers said they'd report bad ads if the publisher or app made it easy to do so.

# 4. ASSESSING CONSUMER EXPOSURE & RESPONSE TO BAD ADS

First we wanted to understand how frequently consumers encounter bad ads, and to what degree such ads affect their overall experience.

## 77% of Consumers Say They've Seen Bad Ads

We asked survey respondents if they've encountered ads that met the definition of bad ads — e.g. ads they found unpleasant, inappropriate, offensive, untruthful, or containing malware. The vast majority — 77% said they did. Of the 257 consumers who answered this question, only 30 said they've never encountered a bad ad.

**Next, we asked how frequently they see such ads. Here's what we heard:**

***Almost every time I consume content on media websites and apps.***



***Occasionally***



***Very rarely***



***Never***



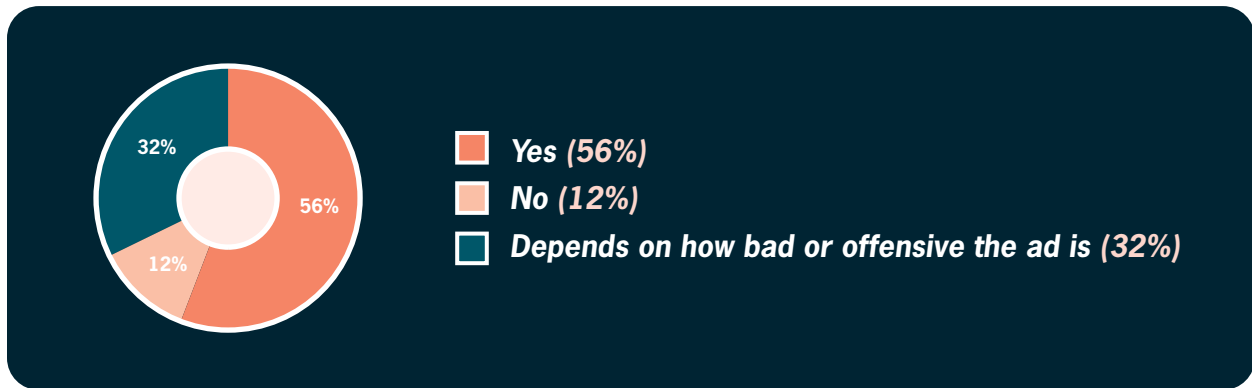
***Don't know***



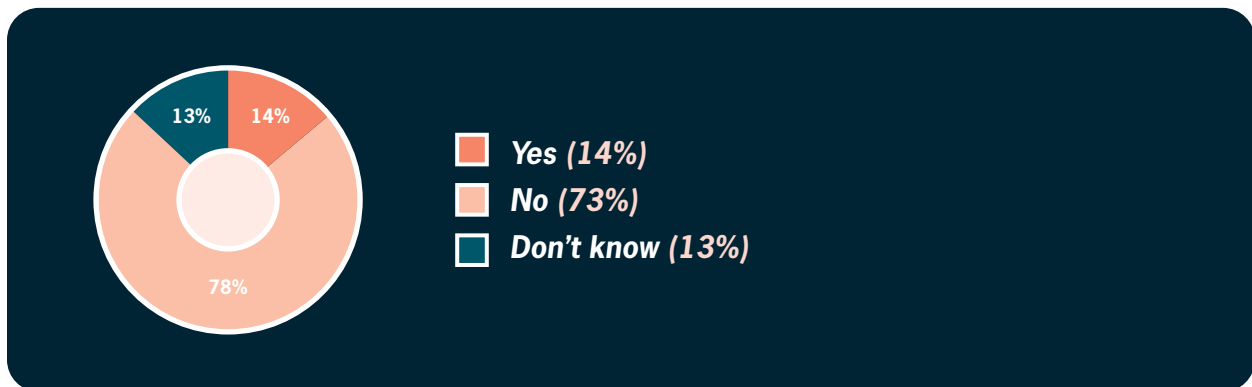


How do those encounters affect consumer behavior? We asked: “When you see a bad ad, does it prompt you to leave the site or close the app immediately?”

**We heard:**



Bad ads clearly have a negative impact on a publisher’s reputation. When we asked survey respondents if they’d recommend a website or app to others after encountering bad ads on them, the answer was decisively no.



“As search algorithms change and social media traffic comes and goes, word-of-mouth sharing between friends and family is wildly important to a brand. You lose the chance for a new reader to be referred to your site when the experience is so bad no one wants to DM anyone the URL.” Justin Wohl, Chief Revenue Officer, Salon.com.

**Next, we asked consumers to describe how bad ads affect their opinion of the website or app that has shown them bad ads. Most agreed that it made the publisher seem unprofessional.**

***I consider it a low quality / unprofessional publisher***



***I become concerned for my security***



***I question the legitimacy of the publisher***



***It scares me away from making purchases or sharing my first-party data with the app or site***



***I'm less like to return to the site or app***



***Other***



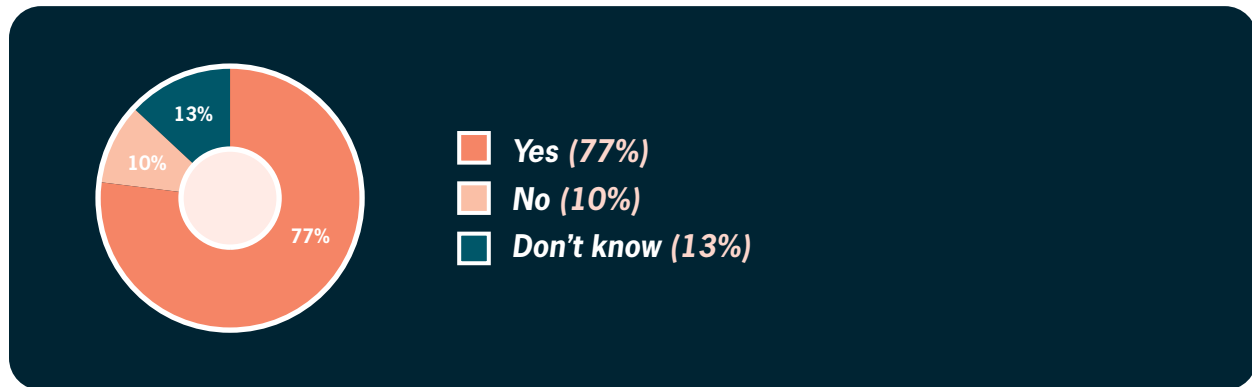
***Some of the impressions provided under “other”:***

- “I turn them in as fraudulent”
- “It rubs me the wrong way and makes we wonder if they screen advertisers”
- “I cringe”

Nearly half (46%) of survey respondents said that either they or someone they know have been victims of a malvertising scam. Given the high percentage, we asked them to tell us what they believe it says about the publisher’s priorities.

We asked: When you see a bad ad on a website, do you feel as if the publisher cares more about making money than ensuring your experience with their site or app is safe?

## Here's what we heard:



**PRO-TIP:** “We need to be cognizant of the balance between the user experience and revenue. As publishers, revenue is obviously important to us. A lot of the ads that users are calling out in these findings are the high-impact ads, which they see as intrusive. As publishers, it’s important for us to ensure that the user experience is paramount.”

Many publishers are shifting their revenue model away from per impression and thinking in terms of revenue per session. When your goal is to encourage users to have lengthy user sessions and read multiple articles, the user experience becomes far more critical. In this scenario, it’s important that the first few ads a user sees aren’t intrusive. We also need to create environments where the user doesn’t actively seek to avoid ads, with an ad blocker.” Michael Persaud, Head of Programmatic, A360 media.

## Publishers Weigh In

Why are bad ads so commonplace right now? To some, the shrinking pool of available consumers to target is a culprit.

“Obtaining user consent is crucial for ad-supported website owners, whether it’s GDPR or ATT on iOS apps. The lack of user consent is directly leading to low bid density due to low marketing outcomes. This presents itself as the perfect environment for low-quality ads to serve,” explained **Jeremy Gan, SVP, Revenue Operations & Data Strategy, Mail Online.**

# 5. BAD ADS TAINT CONSUMER TRUST

Trust in media is at an all-time low, with just **six and ten consumers** stating they believe publishers tell them the truth. Does advertising play a role in that distrust?

To find out, we asked quite explicitly, “To what extent do you agree with this statement: “Bad ads undermine my trust in all media organizations, not just the site where I see the ad.”

*Here's what we heard:*

**Strongly agree**



**Somewhat agree**



**Neither agree nor disagree**



**Somewhat disagree**



**Strongly disagree**



**Who should take responsibility for keeping sites free of misleading and dangerous ads?  
In the eyes of the consumer, that task should fall to:**

**The website itself**



**The government**



**Me**



**Don't know**



**Other**



**Responses provided under other include:**

- “Web companies and app stores”
- “Website owners and government both”
- “Website running the ads, particularly games geared towards children”
- “Companies like Facebook and Google who sell those ads”

**How do users respond when they see a bad ad? Do they know what to do? To find out, we asked:  
When you encounter a bad ad, which best describes your inclination to report it? Here's what we heard:**

- “I report sexual things”
- “I report sketchy ads that appear on kids’ websites”
- “If it’s a website I frequently visit I’m more likely to report an ad”
- “I would alert the website, but I don’t trust their ability to keep my computer url safe”
- “I report it when possible. Some sites don’t have a method for that.”

**Of those who report, we asked how they go about it, checking all that apply. Here's what we heard:**

***I look for a form or email address to contact the publisher***



***I Google the editor of the paper***



***I describe my experience on the publisher's social media page***



***I make a complaint to a third party, such as the FTC or BBB***



***I never report bad ads***



***Other***



***PRO-TIP:*** *Is important for publishers to provide users with a direct feedback mechanism to report bad ads. Consumers assume that publishers are responsible for serving the ads and may view them as approving the content. While this isn't accurate, giving them the ability to flag an ad and establishing a channel of communication between publishers and end users can help identify and address bad actors. It will also build trust with the reader that publishers care about their experiences.*

**Responses provided under other include:**

- "I use spamcop to find the crooks and report it to their ISP"
- "I'm not sure how to report it therefore I have never done it...though I've wanted to a million times!!"
- "I've left reviews in the Apple Store for apps that promote bad ads."

Would users report bad ads if it was easy to do so? More than three-quarters of respondents (77%) said yes.

Next, we asked consumers about the impact of ads on their online experiences. First, we asked, “Overall, how would you describe the advertisements you see online? (Check all that apply.):

**Here’s what we heard:**

**Annoying**



**Deceptive**



**Relevant to my interests**



**Informative**



**Unpleasant**



**Offensive**



**Disgusting**



**Entertaining**



**Other**

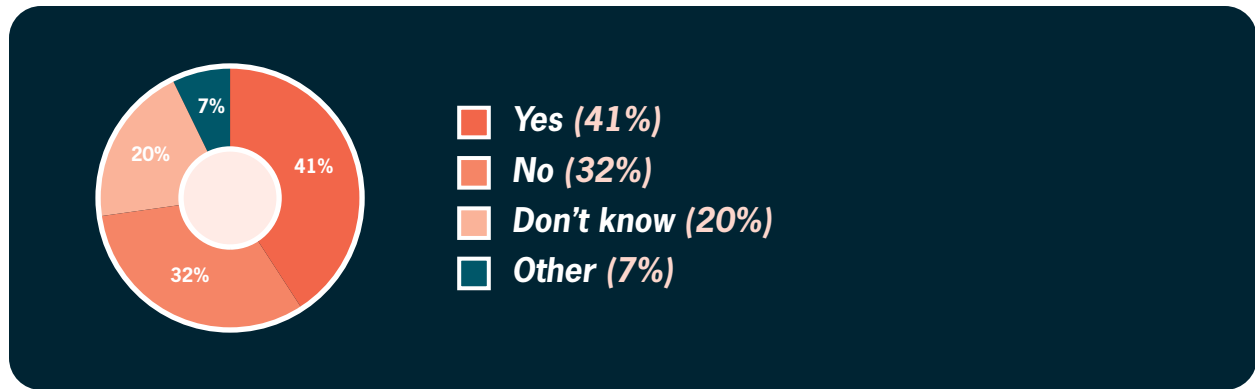


**“Other” responses include:**

- “I can easily ignore ads”
- “I do not shop from click ads — if I’m interested I will go look up the thing advertised—these ads are in my opinion generally fake/ disreputable or ways to greenwash information”
- “Damn lies”

Finally, we asked respondents, “Do you agree with this statement: Visiting apps/websites feels risky to me.”

**Here’s what we heard:**



**“Other” responses include:**

- “Not risky to me but it is to my children”
- “It’s risky to click on ads, but not to go directly to the URL”
- “I feel hesitation only if I have to click on a link. Visiting a website or using an app from my phone’s App Store does not bother me.”
- “I tend to research website reviews prior to going to them. There is always risk.”

**PRO-TIP:** “Don’t sacrifice long-term growth for a short-term gain in revenue. Publishers need to monetize as efficiently as possible and so they’ll add a lot of partners through their header bidder wrappers. That can deliver a lot and I think what they’ll see is a lot of revenue in the short term, but it comes with a lot of negative hits to viewability, trust score, and everything related to SEO. Chasing short-term revenue can lead to long-term implications of losing readers and advertisers who don’t want to work with you.” Michael Persaud, Head of Programmatic, A360media.



# 6. THE PLAYBOOK

## Set and enforce standards for the types of ads that can appear on your site.

Purveyors of many ad formats promise advertisers high engagement rates and publishers higher CPMs as such ads are guaranteed to grab the consumer's attention. But is that a good thing?

“Many bad ads are also intrusive ads (ie: pop-up ad that is hard to dismiss due to cleverly hidden x button). I believe most users will leave the site as it's unclear how to proceed on with the site experience” explained **Jeremy Gan of the Daily Mail**.

To protect your users against bad and intrusive ads, craft a brand suitability framework to articulate what ad suitability means for your site or app. Discuss questions such as: Is this advertiser type or content category of interest to our users? Look for a tool that allows you to create and apply granular rules to enforce ad security, content, and user experience (e.g. intrusive ads) standards

“Most publishers we talk to settle for filtering the ads their existing tools are capable of filtering, rather than defining what ads they don't approve and then searching for a tool that is capable of filtering such ads,” said **Amnon Siev, CEO at GeoEdge**.

## Test for malvertising before allowing ads on your site

Admittedly, malvertising can be difficult to detect. An ad may pass through an SSP and multiple malware screens because its code is clean. But many legitimate-looking ads lure consumers to landing pages that make unrealistic promises, trick users into disclosing the credentials to their financial institutions, or some other scam.

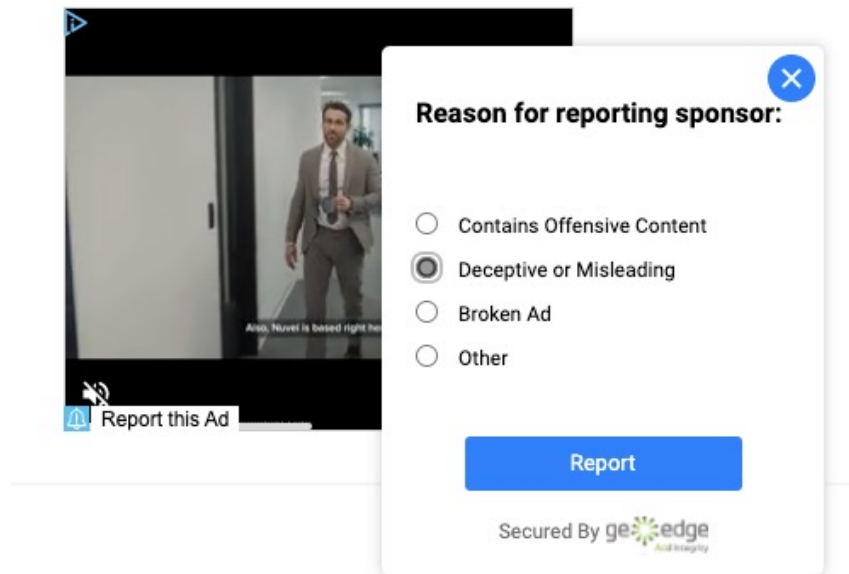
Malware filters won't catch these social engineering scams. To protect your users, deploy a tool that can test the end-to-end ad delivery process ads — ad creative, text, and landing page — before allowing it on your site. Some tools leverage optical character recognition, image recognition, and context analysis to analyze campaigns on a real-time basis.

“Fraudsters deploy a variety of tricks to slip their ads through filters. We frequently block ads that are categorized as family-friendly but include images of offensives ranging from liquor bottles to sexually explicit content,” explained **Amnon Siev, CEO at GeoEdge**.

## Make it easy for readers to report a bad ad, directly from the ad itself.

Seventy-seven percent of users say they would willingly report bad ads if publishers made it easy for them to do so. Take advantage of this cadre of eyes and ears on your site! There are solutions available that generate reports directly from the ad itself. Establish a workflow that acknowledges the report, and follow up with the steps you took as a result of receiving it.

The existence of a reporting tool and follow-up workflow will tell your reader that you are taking responsibility for the experience they have on your site, which is a critical step for re-establishing trust.



Another tip: Remove Google's "mute ad- x button" as it confuses users and provides no value to the publisher whatsoever.

## Inform your supply partners when they send bad ads to your site.

Let your demand partners know about any malicious or offensive ads on their end with automatic notifications. Adopt a tool that automatically blocks security incidents and reports them to the partner that sent them to your site. Streamlining incident mitigation will both lighten your load and contribute to an overall cleaner environment.



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, highquality 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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