

Search Technology

Inside Technology

Bits Blog »

Personal Tech »

Internet | Start-Ups | Business Computing | Companies | Digital Cameras | Cellphones | ALL PRODUCTS

The Columbia Senior Executive Program (CSEP)

October 3 - 29, 2010 | May 1 - 27, 2011

Learn More »



Retargeting Ads Follow Surfers to Other Sites

By MIGUEL HELFT and TANZINA VEGA Published: August 29, 2010

The shoes that Julie Matlin recently saw on Zappos.com were kind of cute, or so she thought. But Ms. Matlin wasn't ready to buy and left the site.

Enlarge This Image



Christinne Muschi for The New York Times

Julie Matlin was tempted by a pair of shoes on Zappos.com. Then the shoes started showing up in ads on other sites she visited.

Then the shoes started to follow her everywhere she went online. An ad for those very shoes showed up on the blog TechCrunch. It popped up again on several other blogs and on Twitpic. It was as if Zappos had unleashed a persistent salesman who wouldn't take no for an answer.

"For days or weeks, every site I went to seemed to be showing me ads for those shoes," said Ms. Matlin, a mother of two from Montreal. "It is a pretty clever marketing tool. But it's a little creepy, especially if you don't know what's going on."

People have grown accustomed to being tracked online and shown ads for categories of products they have shown interest in, be it tennis or bank loans.

Increasingly, however, the ads tailored to them are for specific products that they have perused online. While the technique, which the ad industry calls personalized

retargeting or remarketing, is not new, it is becoming more pervasive as companies like Google and Microsoft have entered the field. And retargeting has reached a level of precision that is leaving consumers with the palpable feeling that they are being watched as they roam the virtual aisles of online stores.

More retailers like Art.com, B&H Photo, Diapers.com, eBags.com and the Discovery Channel store use these kinds of ads. Nordstrom says it is considering using them, and retargeting is becoming increasingly common with marketers in the travel, real estate and financial services industries. The ads often appear on popular sites like YouTube, Facebook, MySpace or Realtor.com.

RECOMMEND

TWITTER

COMMENTS (248)

E-MAIL

SEND TO PHONE

PRINT

REPRINTS

SHARE



Log in to see what your friends are sharing on nytimes.com. Privacy Policy | What's This?

Log In With Facebook

What's Popular Now f

Bedbugs Crawl, They Bite, They Baffle Scientists



At Bookstore, Even Those Not Buying Regret Its End



Afternoon Update



Sign up for a recap of the day's top stories and business headlines, sent weekday afternoons. See Sample furd@mit.edu Sign Up Change E-mail Address | Privacy Policy

The Columbia Senior Executive Program (CSEP)

October 3 - 29, 2010 May 1 - 27, 2011

Learn More »



Subscribe to Technology RSS Feeds

Technology News

Internet Start-Ups Business Companies Computing

Bits Blog

Personal Tech Pogues' Posts

MOST POPULAR - TECHNOLOGY

E-MAILED BLOGGED VIEWED

- 1. Retargeting Ads Follow Surfers to Other Sites
2. Technology Aside, Most People Still Decline to Be Located
3. Your Brain on Computers: Digital Devices Deprive Brain of Needed Downtime
4. Software War Pits Oracle vs. Google

In the digital advertising business, this form of highly personalized marketing is being hailed as the latest breakthrough because it tries to show consumers the right ad at the right time. "The overwhelming response has been positive," said Aaron Magness, senior director for brand marketing and business development at Zappos, a unit of [Amazon.com](#). The parent company declined to say whether it also uses the ads.

Others, though, find it disturbing. When [a recent Advertising Age column](#) noted the phenomenon, several readers chimed in to voice their displeasure.

Bad as it was to be [stalked by shoes](#), Ms. Matlin said that she felt even worse when she was hounded recently by ads for a dieting service she had used online. "They are still following me around, and it makes me feel fat," she said.

With more consumers queasy about intrusions into their privacy, the technique is raising anew the threat of industry regulation. "Retargeting has helped turn on a light bulb for consumers," said Jeff Chester, a privacy advocate and executive director of the Washington-based Center for Digital Democracy. "It illustrates that there is a commercial surveillance system in place online that is sweeping in scope and raises privacy and civil liberties issues, too."

Retargeting, however, relies on a form of online tracking that has been around for years and is not particularly intrusive. Retargeting programs typically use small text files called cookies that are exchanged when a Web browser visits a site. Cookies are used by virtually all commercial Web sites for various purposes, including advertising, keeping users signed in and customizing content.

In remarketing, when a person visits an e-commerce site and looks at say, an Etienne Aigner Athena satchel on eBags.com, a cookie is placed into that person's browser, linking it with the handbag. When that person, or someone using the same computer, visits another site, the advertising system creates an ad for that very purse.

Mr. Magness, of Zappos, said that consumers may be unnerved because they may feel that they are being tracked from site to site as they browse the Web. To reassure consumers, Zappos, which is using the ads to peddle items like shoes, handbags and women's underwear, displays a message inside the banner ads that reads, "Why am I seeing these ads?" When users click on it, they are taken to the Web site of Criteo, the advertising technology company behind the Zappos ads, where [the ads are explained](#).

While users are given the choice to opt out, few do once they understand how the ads are selected for them, said Jean-Baptiste Rudelle, the chief executive of Criteo.

But some advertising and media experts said that explaining the technology behind the ads might not allay the fears of many consumers who worry about being tracked or who simply fear that someone they share a computer with will see what items they have browsed.

"When you begin to give people a sense of how this is happening, they really don't like it," said Joseph Turow, a professor at the Annenberg School for Communication at the [University of Pennsylvania](#), who has conducted consumer surveys about online advertising. Professor Turow, who studies digital media and recently testified at a Senate committee hearing on digital advertising, said he had a visceral negative reaction to the ads, even though he understands the technologies behind them.

"It seemed so bold," Professor Turow said. "I was not pleased, frankly."

While start-ups like Criteo and TellApart are among the most active remarketers, the

5. [Gadgetwise: Ten Photo-Editing Tips From a Pro](#)
6. [Autodesk Will Reinroduce Its AutoCAD Design Software for Macs](#)
7. [Pogue's Posts: Google Shakes It Up Again With Free Phone Calls](#)
8. [State of the Art: New Kindle Leaves Rivals Farther Back](#)
9. [App Smart: Took a Bad Photo? Paint, Sketch or Distort It, Beautifully](#)
10. [Bits: Steve Jobs, Circa 1997, Reinroducing Apple](#)

[Go to Complete List »](#)



## Women who hit very hard

Also on NYTimes.com

[FiveThirtyEight: Nate Silver's political calculus](#)  
[Connect with The New York Times on Facebook](#)

**nytimes.com**

### ADVERTISEMENTS

Find your dream home with  
 The New York Times Real Estate



ThinkPad Edge with Intel® Core™ i3  
 Starting at \$649

The new issue of T is here

See the news in the making. Watch  
 TimesCast, a daily news video.



Ads by Google

what's this?

### [internet advertising marketing](#)

Learn 10 ways to get the most out of an Internet Advertising Budget.

[learn.AdReady.com/10-Reasons](#)

technique has also been embraced by online advertising giants.

Google began testing this technique in 2009, calling it remarketing to connote the idea of customized messages like special offers or discounts being sent to users. In March, the company made the service available to all advertisers on its AdWords network.

For Google, remarketing is a more specific form of behavioral targeting, the practice under which a person who has visited [NBA.com](http://NBA.com), for instance, may be tagged as a basketball fan and later will be shown ads for related merchandise.

Behavioral targeting has been hotly debated in Washington, and lawmakers are considering various proposals to regulate it. During the recent Senate hearing, Senator Claire McCaskill, Democrat of Missouri, said she found the technique troubling. “I understand that advertising supports the Internet, but I am a little spooked out,” Ms. McCaskill said of behavioral targeting. “This is creepy.”

When Advertising Age, the advertising industry publication, tackled the subject of remarketing recently, the writer Michael Learmonth described being stalked by a pair of pants he had considered buying on Zappos.

“As tracking gets more and more crass and obvious, consumers will rightfully become more concerned about it,” he wrote. “If the industry is truly worried about a federally mandated ‘do not track’ list akin to ‘do not call’ for the Internet, they’re not really showing it.”

Some advertising executives agree that highly personalized remarketing not only goes too far but also is unnecessary.

“I don’t think that exposing all this detailed information you have about the customer is necessary,” said Alan Pearlstein, chief executive of Cross Pixel Media, a digital marketing agency. Mr. Pearlstein says he supports retargeting, but with more subtle ads that, for instance, could offer consumers a discount coupon if they return to an online store. “What is the benefit of freaking customers out?”

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

**Correction: August 31, 2010**

An article on Monday about online advertising that follows prospective buyers as they browse the Internet misstated, in some editions, the political affiliation of Senator Claire McCaskill of Missouri, who called the practice “creepy” at a recent Senate hearing. She is a Democrat, not a Republican.

A version of this article appeared in print on August 30, 2010, on page A1 of the New York edition.

**Get the full newspaper experience, and more, delivered to your Mac or PC. Times Reader 2.0: Try it FREE for 2 full weeks.**

COMMENTS  
(248)

E-MAIL

PRINT

REPRINTS

Ads by Google

[what's this?](#)

**Google Mobile Advertising**

Reach Your Customers On-The-Go! Start With Google Mobile Ads Today.

adwords.google.com

Related Articles

FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM



TELEVISION »



A 'Family' Celebration at the Emmys

SCIENCE »



The Evolutionary Value of Helping Relatives?

BUSINESS »



Doctors Seek Way to Treat Muscle Loss

OPINION »

Op-Ed: Abandoned in Baghdad  
America's former Iraqi employees deserve easier visa applications.

SPORTS »



Colombians Build a Tennis Future

OPINION »



Letters: On the Eve of the Mideast Talks

[Home](#) | [World](#) | [U.S.](#) | [N.Y. / Region](#) | [Business](#) | [Technology](#) | [Science](#) | [Health](#) | [Sports](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Arts](#) | [Style](#) | [Travel](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Autos](#) | [Back to Top](#)

[Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company](#) | [Privacy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Site Map](#)

MORE IN TECHNOLOGY (10 OF 26 ARTICLES)

**Technology Aside, Most People Decline to Be Located**

[Read More »](#)