

Evolve Umbrella Planted in the Pub Garden

Mar 17, 2010 [Gavin Dunaway](#) | [Share](#)



ADOTAS – Marvel is a great brand and Marvel.com is a great site, Evolve co-founder and Gorilla Nation President Brian Fitzgerald says, but with only 700,000 monthly uniques according to comScore, it doesn't have the reach to be competitive as a publisher, with massive portals like Yahoo! Selling on its own, the pub likely can't offer ad units anything besides boring old banners.

However, Evolve – a media “supergroup” with the combined forces of Gorilla Nation, AtomicOnline, Double Helix and Springboard — can package Marvel with StarWars.com and other relevant mid-tail fanboy sites and offer customized placements as well as branded content and other less traditional solutions.

“We can build the type of media programs marketers are looking for, but also not limit

them to the big sites at the fat end of the tail,” Fitzgerald says. “They can go down the tail and get into the site segments that speak to their audience.”

Testing the umbrella operations waters with a few clients last year produced sterling results. The test subjects in particular liked the ability to work with one partner to not only create and design but also distribute.

Evolve will reach 300 million uniques a month through Gorilla Nation's sales network and AtomicOnline, which boasts 83 million coming from owned media properties including SheKnows.com, CraveOnline.com, TheFashionSpot.com, GameRevolution. Evolve employs more than 100 editors and contributors who put out 1,100 pieces of content a week on these branded affinity sites with engaged audiences. To further allure clientele, Evolve layers in Double Helix and Springboard as its creative and video foundation, respectively.

Making up 95% of its clientele, Fitzgerald claims agencies are resource-constrained, yet tasked with more work from brands without receiving the margin needed to hire enough full-time employees to execute digital campaigns. Evolve can assist with design and development, then anchor on quality sites through AtomicOnline and distribute through Gorilla Nation.

Historically agencies have had to go to portals like Yahoo! to get reach. As a huge firehose Yahoo! can tease sponsored articles on

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homepage and drive users to them. However, for example, die-hard financial types may spend a minute on Yahoo! Finance, but they're truly poring through sites such as TheStreet.com or The Wall Street Journal online.

"No one gets fired for buying Yahoo! – it doesn't matter if it's working as best it could or that it's more expensive than it needs to be," Fitzgerald remarks. "It's a safe bet."

Gorilla Nation's various affinity sites – anything from women's interest to a huge kids network — offer better contextual targeting for a lower CPM than portals such as Yahoo! or the Microsoft Network (but still higher than ad networks and the like); the value proposition is enhanced by lower production costs for microsites and branded content than major media companies, hence more money for media placement.

"Marketers recognize the value of reaching affinity audiences," Fitzgerald notes. "The challenge is if there isn't someone like us that pulling it all together transactionally, saying 'Hey, you need to try and work with all those sites. Make one buy with me and I have the creative services to build a cool integrated program and the technology to distribute and control ad delivery.'"

International is also a large piece of Evolve's business. In the past, media buyers outside the U.S. would buy local sites to reach targeted audiences, but as the number of local sites dwindles, they'll instead turn to ad networks and

buy unsold inventory, usually in banner form. However, through its tagging system, Evolve can control the page inventory (even based on country) for a plethora of sites and then offer enhanced marketing tools such as rollover wallpapers and push-down video bars through its creative outlets.

Brand Effectiveness Over Efficiency

Evolve's services are directed at marketers looking beyond direct response and insta-ROI of ad networks to increase awareness in branding through audience targeting and old-fashioned raw reach. Branded display is at the core of online advertising along with its brother in blandness, search, Fitzgerald says. Sure, it's not as sexy as what the DSPs are pushing but studies show buying content provides the greatest brand lift.

"Efficiency kills brands," he notes. "If you get caught up too much in the current market fervor around DSPs, studies show it can negatively impact your brand."

However, Fitzgerald is quick to note that ad networks and DSPs have their place and deserve a percentage of spend as DR objectives. Agencies are always going to spend against branding, but as budgets depart traditional media for online, the value of branding becomes clear.

"At the end of the day, buying a cookie on real-time bidding across eight media-buying

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platforms for the lowest possible CPM and really out of context... is not as effective as buying in context, on content sites with the right frequency around the creative," he says. "As a brand, you need to be focused on ad effectiveness rather than buying efficiency."

The challenge for publishers is pushing back against the DSP mania so their inventory isn't marginalized. In the next six months, Fitzgerald predicts big publishing groups will increasingly find ways to wall-off their inventory from exchanges and networks and instead create publishing-side platforms. Already players like CBS, ESPN and Forbes have pulled their inventory to avoid being backdoored.

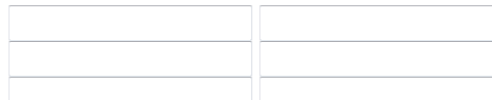
With its owned properties via AtomicOnline and being the exclusive rep of publishers on Gorilla Nation, Fitzgerald considers Evolve firmly planted on the publisher side, comparable to Viacom online.

Rather than DSPs, Evolve's competes more with vertical networks. Fitzgerald feels like Evolve actually created the vertical concept in 2004, but they haven't made the same splash as Glam Media, which he remarks took his company's model as well as several employees.

However, he prefers the moniker "vertical publisher," as Evolve owns a great number of sites and then affiliates with other relevant ones for contextual reach.

"The one difference that's too nuanced for a lot

of people to appreciate is that there's a different level of control that a vertical publisher can demonstrate against its sites," Fitzgerald says.



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