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## Brands Move Down the Long Tail to Niche Nets

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By Brian Morrissey

**NEW YORK** When Levi Strauss launches a new online campaign next week, its ads will be found in the usual portals such as MSN and Yahoo. But the ads will also find their way to some new environments with names not well-known outside fashionista circles, sites like Kaboodle, SheFinds and Zafu.

Levi's is relying on a niche ad network distributed by Glam Media for a campaign running on about 200 small fashion sites. While Glam's 350 sites focus on fashion, other ad networks have popped up to cater to advertisers in niches large and small, from travel and auto enthusiasts to hard-core endurance athletes. The focused networks hope to capitalize on advertisers' desire to find niche audiences most likely to have an affinity for their products.

"There's going to be thousands of these," predicted Russ Fradin, CEO of Adify, a technology company that provides the infrastructure for three-dozen niche networks for gay, health-conscious, tech and other audiences. The company is powering networks for both individual entrepreneurs and established media companies like NBC Universal, Comcast and The Washington Post.

The mushrooming of networks focused on small sites, according to Samir Arora, CEO of Glam Media, is an inevitable spillover from the "de-portalization" of the Web as users visit dozens of sites tailored to their interests rather than a handful of broad destinations. Only networks can balance advertisers' need to reach these disparate audiences with advertisers' need for efficiency in buying media, he said.

"We wouldn't have been able to touch [the small sites] because they're not aggregated or they don't have a sales staff," said Patrice Varni, vp of advertising for Levi Strauss. "But they're highly attractive because we're looking for an audience that's more engaged with fashion and denim, and is an online shopper. It lets you home in on that consumer."

In a campaign running until Oct. 15, Nestle's PowerBar is targeting endurance athletes. While that means buys on sites like Runners-World.com, it also led the company to run a campaign through Active Athlete Media to introduce "newbie" endurance athletes to exercise-recovery drink C2Max on sites like MarathonGuide.com, TriNewbies.com and 10 others. Active Athlete uses behavioral-tracking technology to determine the visitors to its network of 120 community-oriented sites that are new to endurance activities. "There are subcultures within all these sports," said Robert Tas, CEO of Active Athlete.

The ability of Active Athlete to identify a subsegment within the niche got it on the media plan, said Michael Salvo, a media director at Moxie Interactive. "Their ability to do more in terms of sophistication puts them in a better position," he said. Similar targeting is a major selling point for the Travel Ad Network, noted Cree Lawson, CEO of the New York-based company representing 50 sites in the category. It has run campaigns for airlines to target specific routes to user behavior. "None of our sites has a critical mass in Denver flying to New York, but in aggregate we have enough critical mass," he said.

Levi's was looking for the same differentiation from Glam, asking the company to come up with a creative concept that would let it use its network as more than another repository for its display ads. Glam has crafted a "What is your denim identity?" tool that lets users find out their jeans type based on an interactive personality quiz.

To be sure, the niche networks remain a sliver of most media plans: PowerBar agency Moxie Interactive anticipates Active Athlete will account for just 5 percent of impressions it runs for the PowerBar campaign. Yet Salvo said the sites in Active Media and other enthusiast verticals offer brands a way to "get in under the radar and gain credibility" with an audience.

"We're looking to balance high-visibility, high-reach media with this type of engagement marketing," Varni said.

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