

feature

# CLICK HERE

Click this, watch that, get more info here. While the technology behind Web ads may have changed, the challenge of designing an effective one remains the same...



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**T**ake another look at the last commercial Web page you visited. Chances are it's smothered in ads — flashing, moving, maybe even talking to you. But did you even notice them, beyond a flicker of annoyance at that overlay that keeps popping up?

The fact that Web advertising has become so ubiquitous that no one really notices it any more is both good and bad for the designers and agencies behind them. Good, because it means the medium has become totally mainstream; and bad, of course, because many ads simply fade into the background, despite their best efforts.

But it wasn't always that way. Ten years ago you'd be hard-pushed to find more than half-a-dozen different ads on the Web, and then only on major sites. The innocuous banner ad started it all, albeit in a rather more simple form than today's mini-epics.

### The birth of banner ads

As usual, there are several claims as to who designed the first banner ads. The most widely accepted candidate was an ad for US telecoms company AT&T, blatantly asking "Have you ever clicked your mouse right HERE? You will."

The ad made its debut on the pages of *Hotwired* (now just *Wired*) in 1994. Legend has it that a group at *Wired* was enamoured with online service Prodigy's own banner ad format and decided to 'pay homage' to it with its own. So although *Hotwired* may have popularised the format, it's likely that Prodigy first came up with the idea.

The AT&T ad was created by Tangent Design/Communications of Connecticut, USA ([\[w\] www.tangentdesign.com](http://www.tangentdesign.com)), and others soon followed for Club Med and Zima. Meanwhile, O'Reilly's Global Network Navigator (GNN), a popular site of the time, began accepting paid advertising and undoubtedly popularised the format significantly.

But banner ads weren't exactly warmly received. Internet users of the time, most of whom were from academic or programming backgrounds, railed against the use of any advertising on the Web at all. These new,

## “Ever-resourceful advertisers hit on the idea of spawning ads as new windows”

large, colourful and altogether intrusive banners just compounded the problem in their eyes.

Of course, compared to today's flashing, interactive, musical numbers, these simple static ads were paragons of modesty. It didn't take long, however, for designers to realise the animated GIF format could be used to imbue their ads with limited animation capabilities.

### Popping up everywhere

The next and more radical step was the birth of the pop-up. In 1995, Netscape introduced its JavaScript programming language, which paved the way for ever more interactive Web pages. One of its new capabilities was the innocuous `window.open` command, enabling the programmer to spawn a new browser window.

Following the dot com crash, revenue from banner ads had dropped considerably, and the ever-resourceful advertisers hit on the idea of spawning ads as new windows. Not only were these impossible to ignore, some less scrupulous marketers spawned yet another new window when you closed the first — ad nauseam, in extreme cases.

Pop-ups immediately became the bane of most surfers, despite the ad industry's claim that click-through rates are much higher compared to banner ads. As their numbers grew to epic proportions (particularly on porn sites), a thriving market in pop-up blockers evolved. Most Web browsers, with the notable exception of Internet Explorer before Service Pack 2, began to incorporate pop-up blocking as a default option.

### Banning ads?

So if everyone hates pop-ups, why are they still so ubiquitous? In fact, many companies and ad designers won't touch them. "We don't use noisy ads, pop-ups, DHTML or animations," says Richard Longhurst, ex-Editor of *.net* magazine and MD of LoveHoney ([\[w\] www.lovehoney.co.uk](http://www.lovehoney.co.uk)), an >



## The beauty of words

Just as banner ads and pop-ups become ever more garish, Google's AdWords have taken the opposite direction. The beauty of these small, text-only ads is that they're targeted to the user's search terms, while still clearly marked as ads.

Setting up an AdWord is straightforward: you simply write your copy and begin bidding on the keywords you want. "It takes minutes to set up an account and start advertising, but much longer if you have hundreds or thousands of keywords," says Richard Longhurst of LoveHoney.

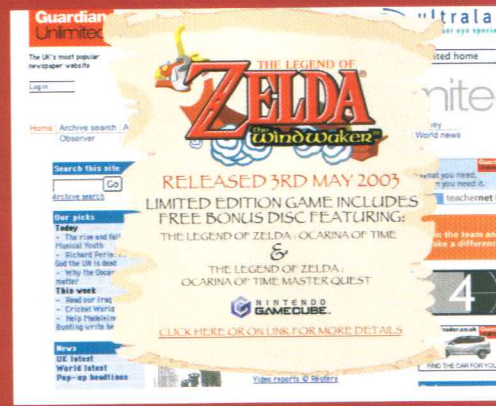
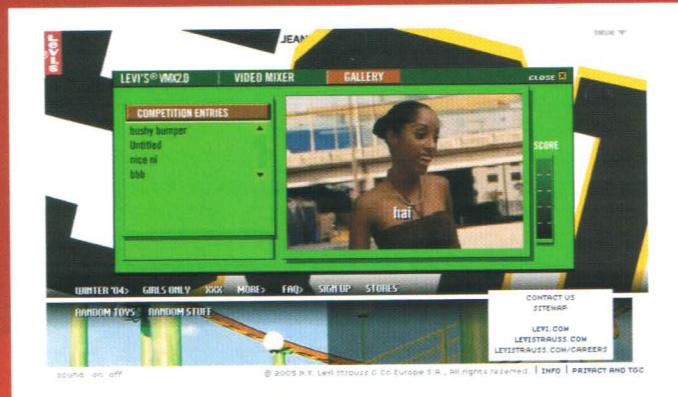
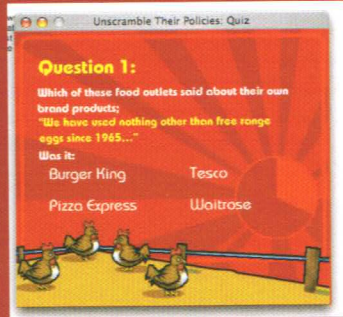
But he advises that simply having an ad on Google isn't enough. "Search-engine-friendly Web design is an absolute must — get the basic on-page optimisation right, get a good number of in-bound links from relevant sites, update your site regularly and Google will start loving you. Avoid Flash-turbation and pages swamped with images — for Google to understand what your site is about, and get high rankings for relevant searches, you need to have text."

Right: Lateral's work for the RSPCA. Campaigns aimed at increasing awareness of the treatment of broiler chickens and battery hens.

Below right: Part of the online support for Levi's 501 Anti-fit campaign, this Flash video messaging system was created by Lateral.

Top right: The Mobile Audio Mixer, or MAX, also created by Lateral for Levi's Europe. This Java app can run on mobile phones.

Far right: Elements of two campaigns for Nintendo UK, created by Lateral. The overlays were for the launch of the new Gameboy Advance, while the UK launch of the Gamecube was exclusively promoted with online media.



online adult toy shop. "They're annoying for users and we simply don't want to annoy people. Context-sensitive text ads are unobtrusive but available to users, and have a much higher click-through rate than other forms of advertising."

"They don't work on me," says Pat McAteer, Creative Director at Popcorn Design ([w] www.popcornbox.com). "Also, these days, browsers tend to block pop-ups."

Simon Crab, Creative Director at Lateral ([w] www.lateral.net), puts it rather more directly:

"Overlays are an unimaginative solution and thoroughly irritating." He even recommends using Firefox to block them altogether.

Pop-up and banner ads are no longer confined to simple browser windows and animated GIFs; with the increasing popularity of Flash and other rich-media formats, they can become far more interactive, with video, sound and other cues to tempt the buyer. Achieving a trade-off between the attention-grabbing and the simply annoying is a challenge every Web ad designer faces.

### Seamless delivery

So what's the solution? Tom Evans, Creative Director at Mook ([w] www.mook.co.uk), believes the options for Web ads are expanding rapidly. "Obviously the more

screen real estate you have, the more you have creatively," he says. "With full micro-sites being 'politely' squeezed into expandable banners, overlays are these days. Soon there'll be 'click through' at all."

The versatility of Flash, plus its small file size, has made it a favorite among agencies and designers. It puts it, "Flash enables us to communicate more complicated narratives in a more entertaining experience."

But Web ads don't, or at least shouldn't, stand alone. They're part of an overall campaign and every successful agency takes advantage of that. "I'm a strong believer in integrated campaigns," says Simon Crab. "The most effective projects are those that seamlessly







# Tutorial: Creative web ads

Create an online ad campaign that will pull at the heart strings and control the purse strings with just a few clicks...

**P**rint designers often say, "I can't do banner ads!" But truth be told, advertising is advertising, whether it's on a billboard, bus or website. It's the concept that makes it work, and the designer's imagination that eeks every last ounce out of the medium.

Nevertheless, there are a couple of aspects to online advertising that make it unique. One is that most people completely and utterly hate web ads, especially pop-ups and overlays, which appear in the middle of web pages over the top of the text. The trouble is, these are also the ones that attract the most clicks, and as designers we have to do our job and create ads that get results.

Two other 'features' make online advertising tricky: the dimensions and the file sizes, which are often difficult to work with.

On the other hand, the internet offers a huge range of interactive possibilities that other forms of advertising cannot match, and many great web ads exploit this to the max.

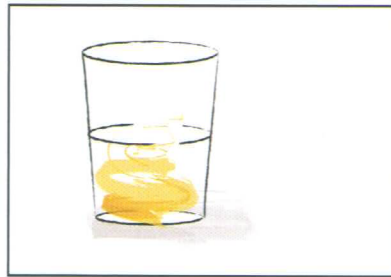
Our fictional project to explore these areas of online advertising is a familiar idea: a cheap flights websites. Our concept for the campaign is to attract people to go on romantic city breaks for special occasions, rather than spend their money on traditional flowers-and-dinner combinations. We draw people in with the idea that the costs really aren't that different... >



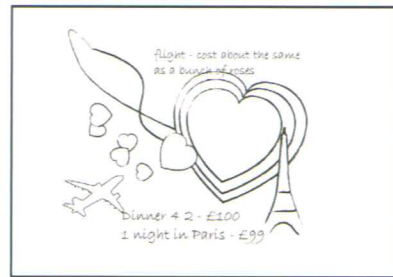
Expertise provided by Plum Digital Media, [w] [www.plumdigitalmedia.com](http://www.plumdigitalmedia.com).

## Part 1: Things to think about up front

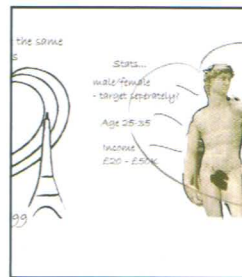
Take time out from your work environment to come up with your message and sketch out ideas.



**1** A good place to start any ad campaign is in the pub. Seriously. Get away from the computer, buy yourself a beer and stop to think about things a little. This is where your ideas will begin to flow.



**2** There's no rush to get caught up in the first idea you have. Start sketching out notes and images, scraps of headline copy, shapes and swirls.



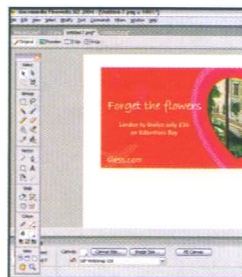
**3** Who's your target market? Male or female? How much do they have? Are they looking for quality? Do they want from life that they're not getting? And how can your pro...



**4** A strong ad campaign needs a single, clear, direct message that can drive it all the way. Some advertisers want a memorable ad, others just want maximum clicks. Either way, you need to be looking for a theme that can develop across various media to meet all your objectives.



**5** A few pages full of ideas should be enough to get you started. Pick a couple of these and start to develop them on screen, moodboard style. Try colours, fonts, photos, the lot. You might end up with several documents full of images...



**6** Now you can choose your favorite ideas from these to more polished content.

## Part 2: Attracting clicks

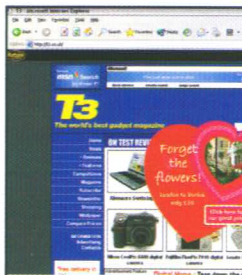
Think about click-through rates when deciding what type of ad to run...



**1** There's stacks of writing on the web about what makes for a better click-through, some of it valuable, some of it boneheaded. But there are a few universal truths: DoubleClick.com puts average click-through rates around a measly 0.3 per cent for standards ads, to 1.5 per cent for rich media ads. Achieve more than that and you're doing well.



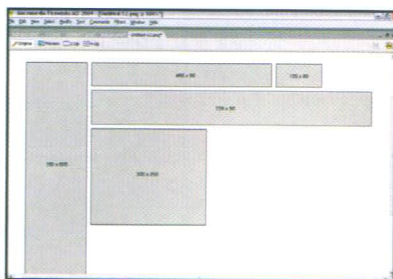
**2** Ads with great ideas and great headlines really do get more clicks, as do ads with animation, interactive features, and something genuinely interesting to offer. A clear call to action – "Click here to [do whatever]" – is essential.



**3** Sadly, ads that pretend to be something they're not get more clicks too, but at the expense of winding up your audience. A bad name. Click-through rates for your organisation a bad name. Click-through rates perform well, but the increase in clicks may hit this dramatically.

## Part 3: Thinking about formats

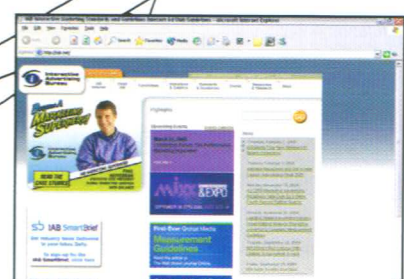
You need to consider file sizes before you start working on the artwork...



**1** You can't just go crazy with web advertising. You've really got to put some thought into the spaces and file sizes on offer. Some of the standard dimensions are pretty odd – 468x60 and 600x90, for example.



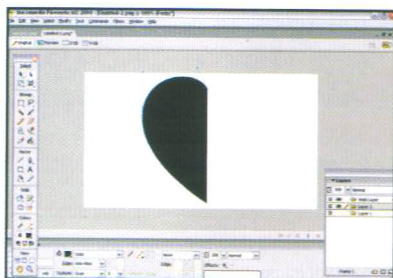
**2** Many website publishers impose strict limits on the file size – in some cases, a max of 20K for a skyscraper. You're never going to manage this with full animation, colour and photography. Judicious use of white space and flat, vector-style graphics really helps.



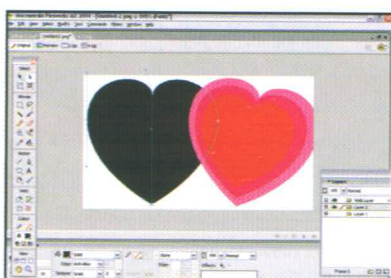
**3** Some publishers even limit the length of animation, so don't go crazy planning a ten-minute featurette. The Internet Advertising Bureau ([Iw](http://www.iab.net)) [www.iab.net](http://www.iab.net)) recommends a maximum of 15 seconds of animation. Stop by, it's packed with lots of excellent info.

## Part 4: Putting together the artwork

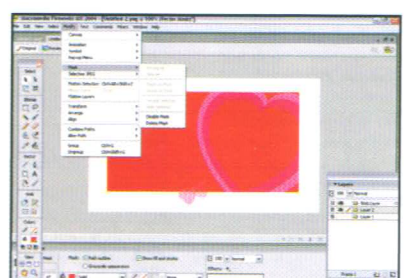
Use *Fireworks* or another program of your choice to create the artwork...



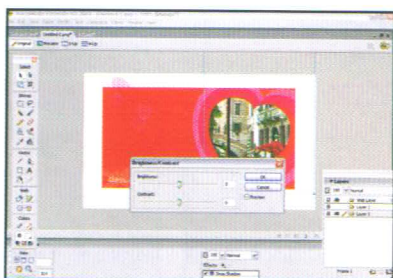
**1** The artwork for this ad uses fairly straightforward techniques. We're using *Fireworks*, but you could do this in *Illustrator* or *Photoshop*. We start by drawing out half a heart using Bézier curves.



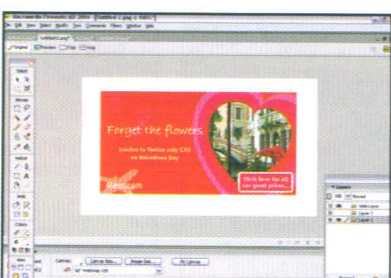
**2** We take a copy of the heart, flip it horizontally and join the two parts for a nice even-shaped heart. Then we create several copies at different sizes and hues on an angle, to create the kitsch 70s effect.



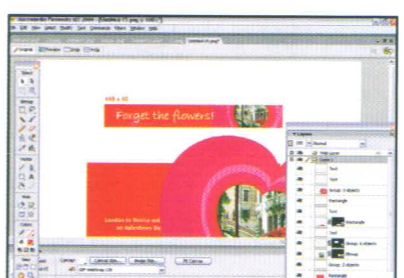
**3** Much of the rest is done with masks: we create a bright red rectangle, and mask the hearts to its edges. Then we scatter some smaller hearts about at different sizes, angles and transparencies.



**4** Next we pick the image for the ad, mask it into a heart, and contrast it up a bit. Ideally we'd find a range of pictures for different destinations, to run as a series, each with a different strapline.



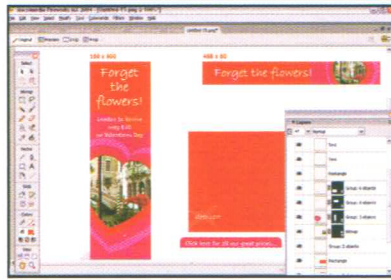
**5** The final touch is the text and 'Click here' button. We've used Bradley Hand for the main headline – which is about as cheesy as you can get – and a friendly, readable *Officina Sans* for the rest of the copy. With the artwork done, we need to think about the different formats



**6** Most of the standard web ad formats have their drawbacks. With banners, you simply can't get a decent size image in there, unless it's got an unusually well-suited composition. The solution is often to focus on the headline, and choose imagery that works well small...



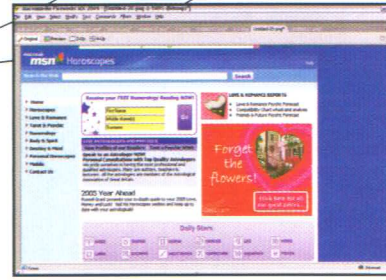
# Putting together the artwork continued...



**7** Skyscrapers, on the other hand, always disappear below the fold of the screen. On many sites, your viewer will initially only see the top few inches, so you've really got to pack your message in there...



**8** ...then repeat it at the bottom for those that didn't pay attention at the top. You might want to put more information down here for those that need a little persuasion before they click. But bear in mind people are around five times more likely to read the headline than the small text.



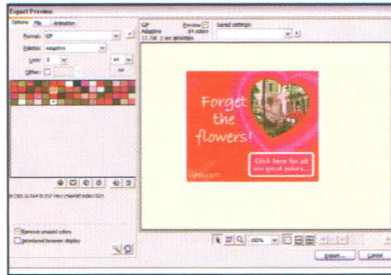
**9** Most websites that carry advertising are extremely busy with text, links, buttons, and, of course, other ads. If you have the luxury of designing a rectangular ad, you may benefit from putting a little space around your message. Comp your ad into the page to see how it will look.

## Part 5: Optimising GIFs

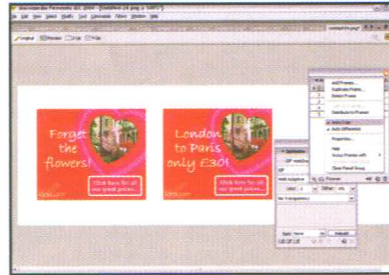
Make sure you use the correct image file format for your ad...

### GIF alternatives

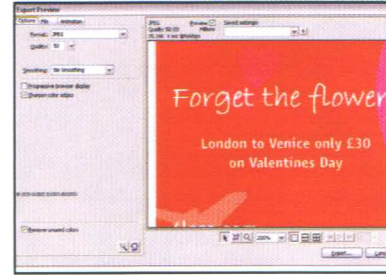
It might seem crazy to make GIF format ads at all considering the click-throughs of rich media, but you always need to provide a GIF alternative. Adobe *ImageReady* and Macromedia *Fireworks* both have excellent capabilities for creating these.



**1** Use *Photoshop*, *ImageReady* or *Fireworks*' on-board compression tools to optimise your ad. Set the colour palette to Adaptive, avoid Dithering, set the number of colours to 256, then start reducing the colours until you're within your target file size.



**2** A GIF animation is effectively a single file containing one image for each frame. Tricky. However, it also includes a clever feature where parts of the image that don't change throughout the entire animation only need to be stored once.



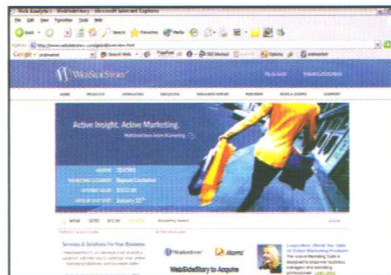
**3** The JPEG format is great for photos, but doesn't support animation and leaves unpleasant messiness around colour edges in flat colour images.

## Part 6: Creating Flash ads

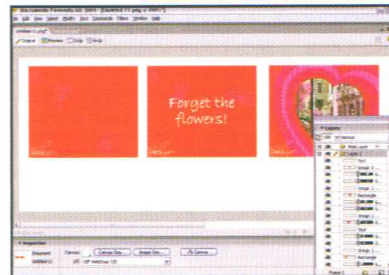
You need to get your message across quickly in a *Flash* advert...

### Essential Flash

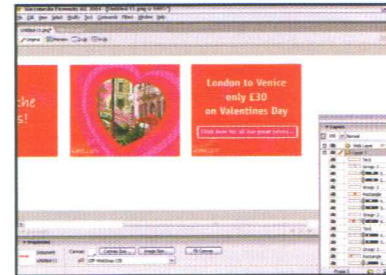
Elliptically referred to as 'rich media' in executive reports, *Flash* has become the king of online advertising, from banners to microsites.



**1** Ads that download quicker tend to get more clicks. Some analysts put the average time spent on a web page at under 15 seconds. It also tells us that you need to get your message right at the beginning of the ad: don't bother with the long intro. Visit [w] [www.websitestory.com](http://www.websitestory.com) for stacks of valuable statistics like this.



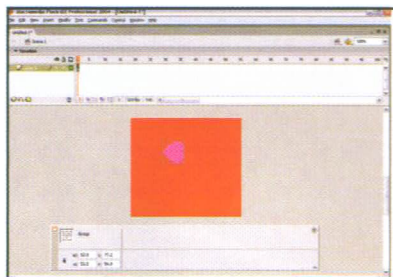
**2** A good way to get going with *Flash* is to quickly storyboard your ad, even for very simple animations. You can see if it's going to work before you get tangled up in frames and tweening. The first two keyframes introduce the headline...



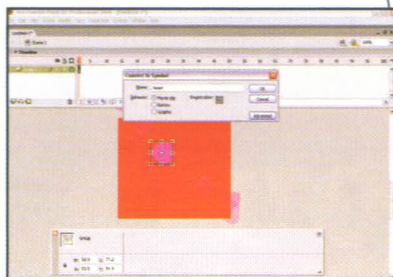
**3** ...while the next two provide the resolution. With the benefit of animation, you don't need to squeeze everything in the layout at once – but you do need to get from beginning to end in just a few seconds, so keep it simple.



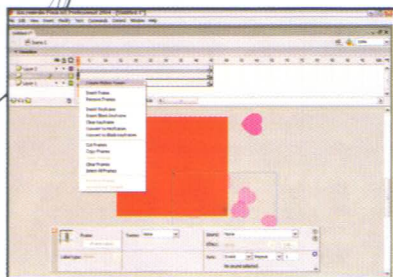
# Creating Flash ads continued...



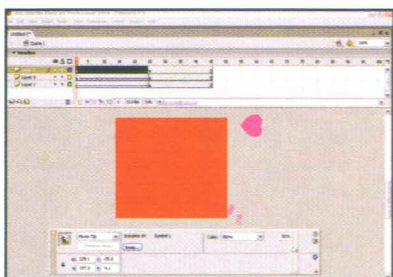
**4** If you prepare your designs in *Illustrator* or *Fireworks*, you can easily copy and paste, or export the vectors as an EPS and import them into *Flash*. Most of the tools designed to export automatically to *Flash* make a meal of it, and don't offer much hope for your file size, so it's better to do it by hand.



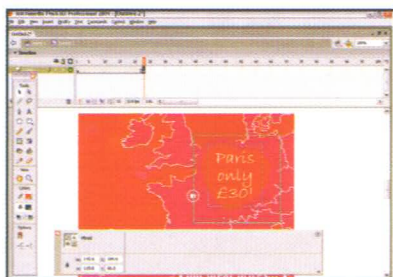
**5** *Flash* gives a lot of bang for your buck when it comes to file size, but it can also encourage you to go over the top with imagery. Wherever you're going to use a shape, symbol or device more than once, turn it into a symbol and duplicate that. This means *Flash* only has to store the details of the symbol once in the file rather than many times over, making for much faster download.



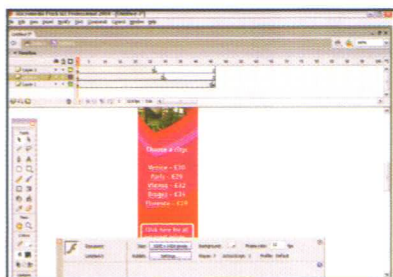
**6** We set up the animation using tweening. This is the technique *Flash* uses to calculate how to move graphical objects between two different frames, saving you the trouble of creating each frame by hand – and again, this really cuts down on file size.



**7** You can tween motion, rotation, scaling, opacity, colour effects and many other properties of graphics.



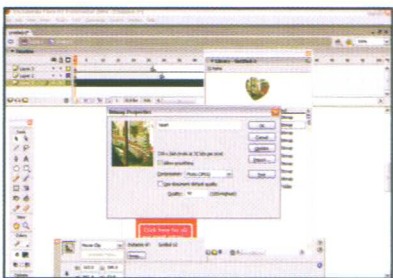
**8** Make good use of the interactive features of *Flash* to provide a more immersive ad. If you've got plenty of time on your hands, you can even create a mini game. Here we give people a map of Europe to explore – they can start their holiday right away in the advert.



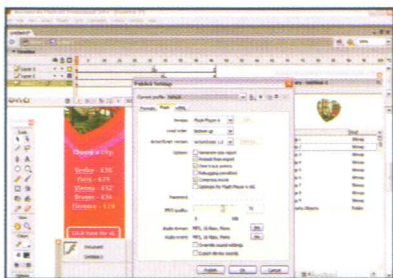
**6** For every click, many sites lose about 50 per cent of their traffic. You'll make much more money if you can take people direct from the ad to a particular product page rather than a hub page. Here we list all the destinations, so people can go directly to the one they're interested in.

## Part 7: Preparing Flash for delivery

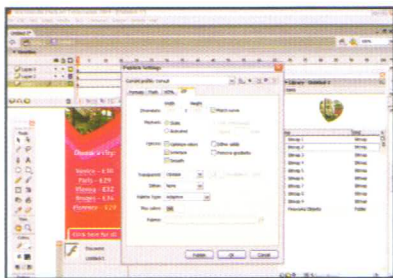
Follow these final, essential steps before exporting your online advert...



**1** Before exporting your *Flash* ad, clear up all your symbols, set compression properties individually for each bitmap image, and compress all your line-art two or three times over.



**2** Use *Flash*'s Publish Settings to get things as fast as possible. You'll benefit if you can export your *Flash* movie for an earlier version – 95 per cent of people can view *Flash* 6 files, but only around 80 per cent can view version 7 files. For details, see [www.macromedia.com/software/player\\_census/flashplayer/version\\_penetration.html](http://www.macromedia.com/software/player_census/flashplayer/version_penetration.html).



**3** You need to provide a GIF alternative for people that can't view *Flash* files. You can use the *Flash* option to export a GIF image, but you'd be better off creating a dedicated GIF ad that distills the main points of your advert in a way better suited to the format. **ca-p**