

## Urban Spam Blocker



Living in the city, we are bombarded by ads and written messages whenever we go out. Signs, T-shirt logos, billboards, and flyers litter the visual landscape as we go through our everyday lives. Standing on a street corner in Brooklyn, I was amazed to count twenty-one ads in my line of sight over the course of a minute. Even the relatively simple city garbage truck is festooned with signs, ranging from certification stickers to departmental logos and exhortations like “Don’t Litter.”

We have spam filters and pop-up ad blockers for our computers, and we go to extensive lengths to ensure safe Internet surfing and to avoid unwanted viruses and e-mails. Unfortunately, nothing like this exists for our urban experience. Written messages and advertising are so intertwined with public settings that we can’t remove them. While on a hike in the woods or wading at the beach, you’ll see very little (or even zero!) text or ads. But try finding a taxi that doesn’t show its name, phone number, and an advertisement; you simply can’t do it. Even in our own homes, book spines on the

## Out and About

shelf, cereal-box labels, and junk mail exert a subtle influence on our brains and attention. Outdoors, the only alternative is to wear a blindfold (or close your eyes), which I certainly don't recommend, especially when crossing the street.

So we need to find a way to coexist peacefully and mindfully with the city's ubiquity of advertising text and images. In this respect, we have two options: use these messages as a reminder to mindfully focus our attention on some other aspect of our experience, like breathing; or focus more deliberately on the messages, noticing what we see (and what thoughts and feelings arise within us).

- Choose some message or image as a prompt to focus mindfully on something else. For example, perhaps check in with your posture and roll back your shoulders whenever you see an "Open" sign. Or subtly finger your pants seam whenever you see a jeans ad. What you specifically decide to do isn't as important as the process, which prompts you to be more aware and mindfully present in your environment.
- Pay more attention—more mindful attention—to text and images you encounter. When looking at words, simply choose a letter, noting its color and shape. Note your mind's tendency to identify the letter, name the font, or make sense of certain letter combinations. For example, your mind might jump ahead to note that "delivery" is composed of "deli" and "very," instead of simply following the lines and curves of the text. When looking at images, notice what's depicted. What do you see in terms of color, shading, and placement?

As you focus on the ads and signs, be sure to notice what thoughts and emotions arise within you. While noticing an ad for Thai food, you might realize you're hungry, or when you see billboards for luxury goods, you might lament your limited budget. Clothing ads might prompt you to reflect on your own wardrobe or body shape. By encouraging you to be dissatisfied with the way things are, advertising is designed to make you want whatever's being promoted. If you felt content and comfortable with what you have (and don't have) in your life, you'd buy a lot less. So, as you conclude your mindful appreciation of such messages, ask yourself what judgments came to mind and what desires surfaced. By noticing our own reactions in this way, we can become more independent of these influences.