

POV: GOOGLE HATES YOUR INTERSTITIALS

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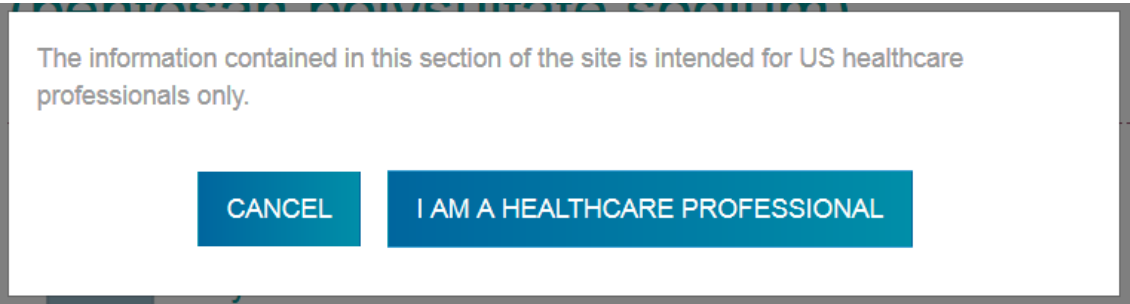
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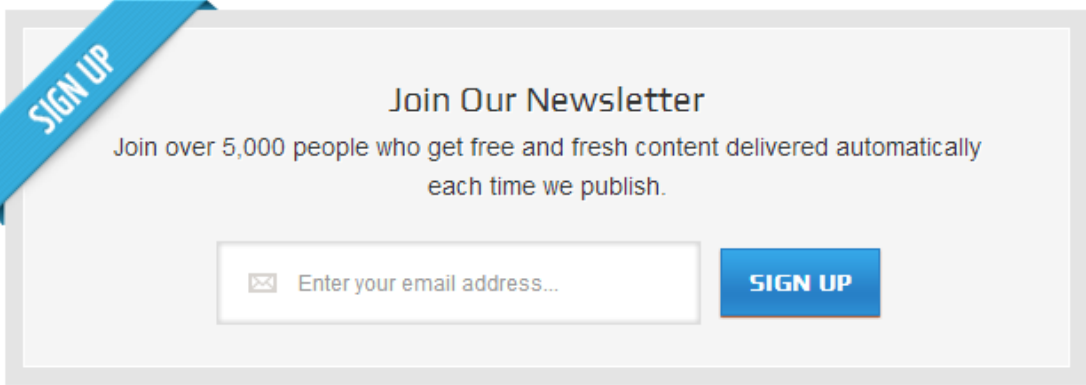
GOOGLE HATES YOUR INTERSTITIALS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Anyone involved in creating pharmaceutical websites is familiar with the industry's penchant for using interstitial pop-up windows to help mitigate risk. Interstitials frequently appear when website visitors move from one site to another; they can serve as an interlude to alert the visitor that they will be seeing a different type of content on the site they are headed toward. Interstitials can provide digital separation between consumer and HCP content, branded and unbranded content, and pharma-endorsed content versus content outside of the company's control. Interstitial pop-ups are also used to identify content approved for use in one country versus another, or as a way to elevate the visibility of product risk and safety information.



Outside of the pharmaceutical industry, companies use interstitials for a very different reason: as a call to action. These interruptive interstitials are believed to help achieve marketing goals, e.g., drive newsletter signups, increase coupon usage, showcase new products, and/or generate app downloads.





Not surprisingly, complaints about promotional interstitials have been on the rise, and Google has been paying attention. In 2015, Google, with its large user base, began testing and evaluating how mobile users reacted to websites with intrusive interstitials. Since then, Google has updated its algorithm in order to improve the mobile experience for its users.

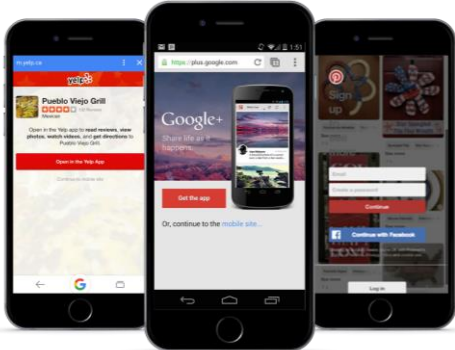
Despite the fact that pharma deploys interstitials for a very different purpose, pharma marketers need to be aware that Google sees them as the same, and in fact now penalizes mobile websites that use them. With this in mind, this POV discusses what led Google to update its algorithm, how those updates impact pharmaceutical websites, and what can be done to avoid the penalty.

BEHIND GOOGLE'S RECENT MOBILE SEARCH UPDATES

Since Google's search engine launched in 1998, it has run numerous tests using indexed websites, most recently focusing on mobile websites. From the mobile-friendly label within Google's UI to a mobile-first index, Google has extensively tested its mobile search results since 2014, when the number of mobile searchers began to rapidly grow.

GOOGLE TESTS APP DOWNLOAD INTERSTITIALS

In 2015, Google tested an interstitial designed to improve download rates of its social platform, Google+. In this [study](#) conducted by Google, the Internet giant found that 69% of visitors who were served a mobile interstitial for Google+ abandoned the page they clicked on entirely. They didn't download the app. They didn't go on to visit the website. They simply left.

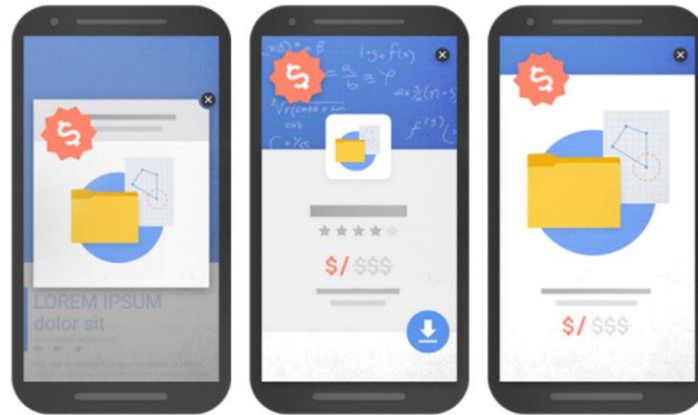


This app-interstitial study influenced the company's decision to demote or penalize websites using [full-page app interstitials](#). As Intouch Solutions reviewed this update, it was clear Google was becoming increasingly critical of all mobile interstitials. Unsurprisingly, the app interstitial signal and ensuing shift in search-result rankings paved the way for the more recent mobile interstitial update.



GOOGLE PENALIZES ALL INTRUSIVE MOBILE INTERSTITIALS

As Google does with many of its updates, it continued testing to see if there was a larger user-experience problem at play. Google determined that there was, and began penalizing sites that used interstitials. Regrettably, Google's guidance for avoiding an intrusive mobile interstitial penalty isn't objectively decisive. However, Google did offer up a few offending interstitial examples. They are described below from left to right:



1. Showing a popup that covers the main content, either immediately after the user navigates to a page from the search results, or while they are looking through the page
2. Displaying a standalone interstitial that the user must dismiss before accessing the main content
3. Using a layout where the "above-the-fold" portion of the page appears similar to a standalone interstitial, but it is built in with the original content, which resides underneath the fold

Ultimately, Google sees the majority of interstitials — regardless of purpose — as barriers to a good user experience, and therefore, Google will demote websites that don't make an effort to minimize the impact mobile interstitials may have on a user's experience.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING (SEO + PPC)

As is the case with most Google quality guidelines, the mobile interstitial update also influences *paid* search results. Google determines which ads will show for any given keyword search based on two factors: bid amount and AdWords quality score. Websites penalized for intrusive interstitials may see a decrease in quality score, therefore negatively impacting related paid search campaigns. The implications create a double-whammy effect for sites wanting to gain



traffic through paid and organic search — it decreases website visibility, CTRs, and both organic and paid traffic.

IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PHARMA

At the core of these updates is Google's attempt to improve the way users experience the Web. It's a fact that most consumers experience the Web via a mobile device. Because of this, Intouch Solutions recommends brands stay up to date with current mobile trends, algorithm updates and designs. This rings true especially as we consider how our brands interact with primary target audiences: patients, healthcare providers and caregivers.

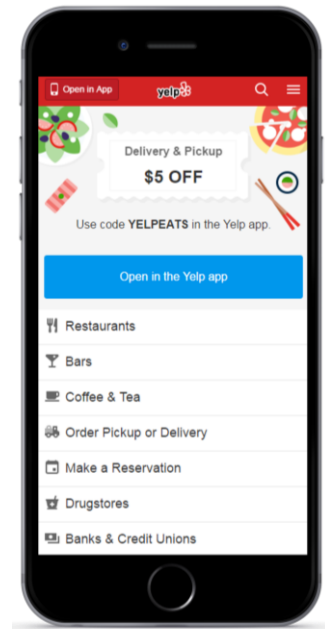
This update does not mean pharma should stop using interstitials to mitigate risk. However, Intouch believes in finding a way to improve user experience while also protecting the brand from undue risk. Intouch also believes the way mobile interstitials are built and executed can and should change.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOBILE INTERSTITIALS

As long as there have been pharmaceutical websites, there have been pharmaceutical interstitials. But times have changed. Mobile interstitials have become over-used by marketers; users — and therefore Google — just don't like them, and Google has a tremendous influence on the visibility and popularity of websites today. Add to that, the FDA does not require interstitials, nor has it ever provided direction or a warning letter specific to the use of interstitials.

From a search engine marketer's point of view, it's time to put pharma's use of interstitials to bed and find a better alternative. Below are some options:

1. Review your brand's use of interstitials and what purpose they typically are intended to serve. Have a focused conversation with your legal, regulatory and medical representatives, and come armed with information (such as this POV) and with new options. Are you using interstitials simply because "that's the way it's always been done"?



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Is there an alternative way to achieve the same objective — one that won't inadvertently penalize your search engine ranking? If interstitials can't be omitted entirely, are there ways you can reduce their use?

2. For interstitials that are unavoidable, for example, in cases where consumers visit sites designed for HCPs and may not fully understand what they are reading, we recommend the use of banner interstitials. While they look and behave very similarly to pop-up interstitials, they can be built so that they provide the needed information while avoiding the penalty from Google.

CONCLUSION

As technology shifts toward mobile-first philosophies, the need for us to focus on user experience design as we develop websites, applications and technology solutions dramatically increases. It is more and more apparent that the use of interstitials is becoming progressively limited, and one way we can improve visitor experiences is to avoid the use of mobile interstitials when possible. In instances where interstitials are necessary, Intouch Solutions recommends using alternative approaches such as banner interstitials that still help mitigate risk while allowing access to content.

To audit the impact of Google's anti-interstitial algorithm update on your website(s), as well as more information on alternatives to pop-up interstitials, contact your Intouch Solutions representative.

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