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POV: Google's Ad Safety Issues
Could Affect Our Pharma
Media Campaigns

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Google's Ad Safety Issues Could Affect Our Pharma Media Campaigns

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Advertisers are currently **pulling ads** from the Google Display Network (GDN) and YouTube to mitigate the risk of being placed beside questionable content such as hate speech and other objectionable content. Google has announced that, along with other preventive steps, it plans to thoroughly vet all online content that might be considered hate speech, or derogatory or offensive content.

In this POV, we'll explore safeguards currently in place to prevent ads from being located next to objectionable content, how pharma brands could be affected, and what Intouch is doing to ensure brand safety.

BACKGROUND

Marketers across multiple industries have suspended advertising on Google's GDN and YouTube properties in the wake of ads appearing alongside questionable content such as hate speech and terrorist-oriented websites. While safeguards are available for both properties, the GDN currently offers more brand safety options than YouTube.

GDN and YouTube ads are purchased and targeted through Google's AdWords platform, so any safeguards are dictated by Google, not outside parties.

GOOGLE'S RESPONSE

While Google hasn't released an official statement around specific actions they plan to take, they have indicated through a number of blog posts that they are committed to taking steps to ensure ads are not placed with offensive content and recognize the need for stricter policies defining where Google ads should appear. Google's chief business officer, Philipp Schindler, said in a **blog post** earlier this week that "Google is improving the controls and reporting tools advertisers have about where their ads are displayed." He said the company is also hiring more staff and developing artificial-intelligence algorithms to better identify hate speech.

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There are 400 videos uploaded to YouTube every minute. Ronan Harris, Google's UK managing director, said in a **blog post** that Google invests millions of dollars each year and employs thousands of people to stop bad advertising practices. In 2016 alone, they removed nearly *2 billion* bad ads from the systems, removed 100,000 publishers from the AdSense program, and prevented ads from serving on over 300 million YouTube videos.

On April 3rd, Google **announced** that brands advertising on YouTube will soon have access to third-party brand safety vendors to assure marketers that their budgets will not be spent on ads that appear in violent or offensive content. Google states it will work with accredited ad verification companies, like Double Verify and Integral Ad Science, but did not yet provide a timeline of when these tools will be available or an exact list of verification vendors they will use. Google's offer of future ad verification for YouTube advertisers signifies they are taking steps to tackle this issue.

IS PROGRAMMATIC SAFE FOR PHARMA BRANDS?

In most cases, brands don't typically buy each online ad placement with individual publishers. Instead, they use a method called *programmatic,* which employs automated systems to target large audiences across a multitude of websites (such as GDN) or different video platforms (such as YouTube).

Programmatic advertising is seen as an efficient way to reach specific audiences online, but there's also some risk that ads will inadvertently appear next to undesirable content. This can happen if proper white lists, blacklists, and other safety checks are not put in place by both the ad platform and the ad buyer. Currently, Intouch doesn't purchase YouTube inventory via INSIGHT Media Marketplace, our in-house programmatic trading desk.

"All agency and media partners should recognize that — above all other objectives — protecting the brand should stand head and shoulders above everything else …. The most important [priority for brands] is 'to do no harm'." Bob Liodice – CEO ANA

In 2015, YouTube pulled back the reigns on where their inventory was available and removed it from the DoubleClick Ad Exchange that third-party companies (data service provider or DSP) were using to access it. Today, YouTube inventory is only available directly from Google Adwords/YouTube or via Doubleclick Bid Manager (Google's own DSP).

Because of this, the strict brand safety guidelines Intouch adheres to for programmatic campaigns run through INSIGHT Media Marketplace cannot be implemented.

Do Any Safeguards Currently Exist?

Because the GDN is purchased programmatically, directly through Google's platforms, we explored the safeguards available for both Google platforms and programmatic campaigns run through INSIGHT Media Marketplace.

AdWords Platform (GDN + YouTube) Safeguards

Due to the sensitive environment of the pharmaceutical industry, Intouch already applies brand-safety safeguards to all clients running on the GDN and YouTube. We encourage brand safety by using a two-pronged approach:

1. Negatively targeting offensive keywords, i.e., providing Google a list of keywords that we don't want our ads associated with.
2. Excluding offensive or questionable site categories, i.e., excluding website categories that we don't want our ads associated with.

Both approaches help ensure safety on the GDN and YouTube by keeping a brand's creative away from any sites or videos that contain one of the negative keywords or that are considered part of our site category exclusion list.

Although Google offers multiple safeguards for these properties, they currently do not guarantee 100% brand safety.

Site category options

Exclude Display Network categories of sites, content, or ad placements where you don't want to show your ads. Learn more

Sensitive content

- ⊖ ↕ **Crime, police, and emergency** ?
- ⊖ ↕ **Death and tragedy** ?
- ⊖ ↕ **Military and international conflict** ?
- ⊖ ↕ **Juvenile, gross, and bizarre** ?
- ⊖ ↕ **Profanity and rough language** ?
- ⊖ ↕ **Sexually suggestive** ?

Type of placement

- ⊖ ↕ **Forums** ?
- ● ↕ Social networks ?
- ⊖ ↕ **Parked domains** ?
- ⊖ ↕ **Error pages** ?
- ⊖ ↕ **In-game** ?
- ⊖ ↕ **Gambling** ?
- ● ↕ Photo-sharing pages ?
- ● ↕ Video-sharing pages ?

Experimental

- ⊖ ↕ **GMob mobile app non-interstitial** ?

Digital content label

- ● ↕ General audiences (DL-G)
- ● ↕ Audiences with parental guidance (DL-PG)
- ● ↕ Teen and older audiences (DL-T)
- ⊖ ↕ **Mature audiences (DL-MA)**
- ⊖ ↕ **Not yet labeled**

Video content

- ● ↕ In-video ?
- ● ↕ Live streaming video ?
- ⊖ ↕ **In-video (user embedded only)** ?

Ad location

- ⊖ ↕ **Below-the-fold** ?

While topic and page type exclusions are done to the best of our ability, we can't guarantee that all related webpages will be excluded.

[Close]

GDN Site Category Exclusions Currently Used by Intouch

YouTube Content Exclusions Currently Used by Intouch

INSIGHT Safeguards

Intouch takes a pharma-first approach to setting up our programmatic campaigns in INSIGHT Media Marketplace, including a brand-safety execution plan, using tools spanning pre-bid screening and a post-impression screening analysis.

INSIGHT views brand safety as very important both from a setup perspective, as well as a means of continuing to shape the campaign as it progresses. We often work with legal teams to spell out the approach in a template so that all parties are comfortable with the plan up front.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PHARMA

Intouch typically recommends running text ads through the GDN as part of a robust paid-search effort. Due to the sheer size of the network and the ability to use existing text ads, the GDN offers brands a cost-effective way to achieve high visibility and increased site traffic. The GDN can be a huge traffic driver, especially for rare-disease drugs and indications that may not get a lot of visibility on the search network alone. The GDN can offer a lower cost-per-click than the search network since more inventory is available and there is less competition. For brands that consider awareness/site traffic to be a top KPI, or brands that may have smaller budgets, removing the GDN and YouTube from paid search efforts could lead to lower levels of site traffic and an increased overall cost-per-click.

Intouch's Plan of Action

Intouch will be closely monitoring this situation and checking in with our Google contacts as they work internally to resolve these issues. There have been no formal next steps conveyed from Google besides a commitment to do *something* and to let advertisers use third-party verification vendors that have not yet been specified.

In the meantime, all Intouch-managed paid search accounts will be audited to confirm that all necessary brand safeguards are in place. As an extra precaution until a solution is implemented, Intouch recommends "blacklisting" or removing YouTube from GDN campaigns since the majority of the issues lie within that particular platform.

For brands that want to be removed from the GDN all together, Intouch will investigate whether the reach and scale that the GDN brought to the campaign is available through INSIGHT Media Marketplace, so we could potentially shift dollars to that platform.

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