

Google Selling Invalid Traffic

by Craig Jaffe, September 29, 2015, 8:00 AM

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Advertisers pay companies like Google to get their ads displayed on sites, such as YouTube in this case.

The premise we all assume is that those advertisers have negotiated with Google in good faith, expecting real people to see their ads running on YouTube.

After exposure to the ad, there is expectation that these real people will then take some sort of action, hopefully culminating in sales. This is then factored into how the advertiser calculates the return on its investment in the advertising campaign with Google

However, sometimes real people are not seeing the ads.

[There are many situations when ads are served to invalid traffic](#) and the advertiser has lost a chance to convert ad exposure into sales.

Google is beholden to the ad industry and must bear the burden of putting into place processes that attempt to filter and remove invalid traffic. Also, the burden of proof falls primarily onto Google to demonstrate that the ad running on its YouTube channels was exposed to valid traffic.

There are strict guidelines in place governing how companies in our industry are required to handle invalid traffic (i.e. bots). Advertisers are not the ones primarily responsible for distinguishing between invalid and valid traffic. In this case, Google is the entity primarily responsible.

Further, if Google is selling invalid traffic and passing it off as valid traffic, then Google is breaking industry guidelines. A number of its services are audited by Ernst & Young with oversight by an objective third-party (MRC). If the audit reveals Google is selling invalid traffic in this manner, Google will not pass its audit, and the company will be

stripped of its accreditation. If Google fails to address the audit findings, advertisers may begin to lose faith in Google, and could potentially put it out of business.

Will Google go out of business? Will it escalate to this point?

Although it is not likely, I emphasize this aspect because the guidelines are not just nice to know concepts. The guidelines are mandatory requirements.

For those of us who work in digital, the guidelines are reassuring. It reminds us we work in a business where companies are accountable.

All companies in this business need to follow the guidelines, especially those who are responsible for counting (i.e. video views). In this case, Google is on the hook, not the advertiser.

If there are advertisers who believe Google is including invalid traffic in its counts and passing it off as valid traffic, I encourage these advertisers to immediately contact the MRC where this issue will be effectively addressed.

I also encourage advertisers not to be complacent on the issues and to make sure they have an understanding of the guidelines as well.

Advertisers are not primarily responsible for detecting invalid traffic, but they are a responsible party nonetheless.

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Ed Papazian from **Media Dynamics**, September 29, 2015 at 8:43 a.m.

If this is true, isn't this a gigantic scandal and a case of deliberate fraud whose solution goes far beyond getting the MRC to sort things out? Just asking.

[Reply](#)

Craig Jaffe from **Craig Jaffe Research 360°**, September 29, 2015 at 2:07 p.m.

I suppose that is one way to view it. In my opinion, it would be of greater concern if a body such as the MRC didn't exist to help establish guidelines for our industry.

Reply

Eric Madison from **Independent**, September 30, 2015 at 7:02 a.m.

I agree that Google shouldn't be charging for it. However, I don't quite understand why Google is the only one being singled out in this article. Every publisher, network, and exchange bills their clients for it (unless there is a contract that forbids it).

Reply

Craig Jaffe from **Craig Jaffe Research 360°**, September 30, 2015 at 9:52 a.m.

Thank you for your comment. There are a couple of reasons why Google is the focus here. Since Google's YouTube is the dominant company in the online video marketplace, it serves as a reference for this problem and warrants special attention from those of us involved in seeking solutions to improve digital measurement. Second, although Google's YouTube is typically regarded for its relatively effective detection of invalid traffic, recent examination of YouTube indicates it may still be susceptible to simple attacks from fraudsters. Lastly, there were recent instances when Google charged brands for advertisements served on YouTube even when the video platform's fraud-detection systems seemed to have identified that its viewers were robots rather than human beings. I can't speak on behalf of Google regarding how it currently decides to communicate the features of its advertising services. I am eager to learn more about its disclosures. If it isn't doing so already, I would encourage Google to be transparent about what advertisers can expect when deals are negotiated for running ads on YouTube. At the same time, I would hope the advertisers wouldn't be complacent about accepting conditions from Google that those advertisers deem to be bad for its businesses, like willfully paying for video views that are bots.

Reply

Eric Madison from **Independent** replied, September 30, 2015 at 10:39 a.m.

That makes complete sense, and I agree. Thank you!!!
