

BUSINESS NEWS

APRIL 16, 2018 / 12:03 PM / 8 DAYS AGO

Exclusive: Google unveils vetting process for drug rehab ads

Paresh Dave



SAN FRANCISCO (Reuters) - Google told Reuters Monday it would resume accepting ads from U.S. addiction treatment centers in July, nearly a year after the Alphabet Inc ([GOOGL.O](#)) unit suspended the lucrative category of advertisers for numerous deceptive and misleading ads.



FILE PHOTO: Silhouettes of laptop and mobile device users are seen next to a screen projection of Google logo in this picture illustration taken March 28, 2018. REUTERS/Dado Ruvic/Illustration - RC1F87EA23D0/File Photo

Treatment centers now will be able to run ads after being vetted by Portland, Ore. firm LegitScript, Google said.

Interest in treatment for abuse of opioids and other prescription drugs has soared in recent years amid what authorities have described as a nationwide epidemic.

Scammers found that Google ads were an easy way to defraud treatment-seekers in an industry in which regulations vary greatly by jurisdiction, authorities and patient advocacy organizations have said.

Google suspended alcohol and drug treatment advertising on search pages and millions of third-party apps and websites in the U.S. in September, the week after tech publication The Verge posted a lengthy story about scams. Google expanded the prohibition globally in January.

The move cut off at least \$78 million annually worth of advertising in the U.S. alone, research firm Kantar Media estimated.

Most advertisers can buy ads through Google with few hurdles to clear. But Google has adopted additional vetting for locksmiths, garage-door repairers, drug makers and online pharmacies following public pressure. Google has said it also will begin seeking more documentation from political advertisers this year.





FILE PHOTO: The Google logo is seen at the "Station F" start up campus in Paris, France, February 15, 2018.
REUTERS/Benoit Tessier/File Photo

The addiction treatment rules apply to in-person facilities, crisis hotlines and support groups.

LegitScript will evaluate treatment providers beginning Monday on 15 criteria, including criminal background checks and license and insurance verification. They must also provide "written policies and procedures demonstrating a commitment to best practices, effective recovery and continuous improvement," according to LegitScript, which will charge \$995 upfront and then \$1,995 annually for vetting.

The National Association of Addiction Treatment Providers and the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse support the standards, John Horton, chief executive of LegitScript, said in an interview last week.

Alphabet Inc
GOOGL.O NASDAQ

1073.81
-3.51 (-0.33%)



Horton acknowledged the “extra step” may frustrate rehab centers.

“It’s unfortunate, but this is one way the market gets cleaner and people get the help they deserve,” he said.

Marcia Lee Taylor, chief policy officer of the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids, to whom Google has donated advertising space, said earlier efforts to certify treatment services have failed because there was no “business incentive to answer all these invasive questions.”

Tying access to the world’s biggest online advertising system to certification makes applying worthwhile, Taylor said.

The new rules do not affect free business listings on Google Maps, which also have been susceptible to fraud. Google said it is continuously developing ways to combat Maps spammers.

Reporting by Paresh Dave; Editing by Greg Mitchell and Nick Macfie

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