More Data, More Problems: Explaining the DOJ's Push to Get Google to Share More Ad Data

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The Justice Department's proposed antitrust remedies for Google's Search trial could force the tech giant to crack open its walled garden and give buyers more data on where their ads run.

Of course, this is not the first time that buyers have clamored for more visibility over where their ads show up.

Like a lot of topics legal and adtech-related, it can get wonky. So here's the run-down of what buyers currently get, what they want, and whether they can actually get it.

What is the DOJ proposing, exactly?

Under the DOJ's plan, somewhat vague in its language, Google would be required to provide advertisers with readily accessible placement and performance reporting in Google Analytics and Ads Data Hub for ads placed through or purchased

through Google.

Naturally, buyers are keen to get their hands on more data from Google.

“Given lack of full visibility, how could you really know as a brand that you’re certain where you show up all the time,” Calvin Nichols, head of paid search at Wpromote, told ADWEEK.

Ok, what do advertisers get at the moment?

Currently, Google provides advertisers with partial visibility into where ads are placed—whether on search results, YouTube, or Google Maps—but not a complete breakdown, according to two current and one former ad buyer who have bought Google ads.

But buyers said that Google’s Performance Max, where buyers automate goal-based campaigns that run across Google inventory, including search, display, and YouTube, is the least transparent mode of buying.

In Pmax reports, downloaded from Google Ads and delivered via an Excel spreadsheet, buyers can see impressions, views, clicks, and CPM data, broken down by performance across display, video, and app campaigns in aggregate, rather than by platforms like YouTube or Search.

“As Google blurs lines with campaign types that serve across different networks, they are playing in their own sandbox,” said Stasia Fulginiti, director, paid search + YouTube at Rain the Growth Agency.

Google has conceded some control here, like giving advertisers visibility into YouTube videos where Pmax ads appear.

Nichols said Wpromote allocates 40-60% of clients’ media budgets to lower-funnel Pmax campaigns.

A Google spokesperson told ADWEEK: “We have and will continue

to increase transparency for Performance Max advertisers in privacy-safe ways. Our current reporting helps advertisers understand their ad placements and optimize performance based on actionable data."

So Google is increasing transparency in some ways, but will it actually give up the suggested placement and performance data?

Arielle Garcia, chief operating officer, Check My Ads, notes that more transparency could be possible: "In both trials, we've seen Google seemingly, begrudgingly, crack open the black box a little bit—that trend is only going to continue. It's not like we're seeing the antitrust scrutiny wane at all."

Google said at the time that it would appeal the remedies.

Since then, it looks like Google has been trying to dilute the impacts of the trial. This month, it reportedly pushed the DOJ to rescind breaking up the company.

"As we've publicly said, we're concerned that the current proposals would harm the American economy and national security," Google communications manager Peter Schottenfels said in a statement.

According to all three sources, there's no technical barrier preventing Google from offering granular reporting across its platforms.

But regardless of whether Google can (or wants to) be more transparent with its data or not, the more practical question is whether buyers can receive this level of detail, given that only a select few buyers would have the resources and the time to make sense of the something like the much-requested URL-level reporting, according to an article from Digiday.

"It's a lot of data for advertisers to discern through," Fulginiti said. This added granularity means advertisers face

extra work—and more time spent analyzing information to make informed decisions, according to Nichols.

“That’s not the point,” counters Garcia. “This is about the powerlessness of advertisers when they don’t have that access. It’s their spend, data, and prerogative to use it as they see fit”.

What exactly has been making advertisers feel powerless?

Advertisers, when buying across Pmax and all Google platforms, still lack access to key elements like log-level data and full-page URL-level data in Ads Data Hub. URL-level data is a hot topic lately following Adalytics‘ research finding global brands such as Sony and PepsiCo may have inadvertently funded child sexual abuse material (CSAM) online.

In Pmax reports, a category labeled ‘Total Other’ lumps ad delivery across Gmail, YouTube, Discovery, and other inventory outside of Google’s O&O into a single line item. This often outperforms the placements that they can see across display, video, and app campaigns, which has vexed advertisers.

Google previously withheld placement reporting for its Search Partner Network (GSP)—ads that run across hundreds of non-Google websites—but began offering that data last year.

Still, Pmax reports don’t break down placement across GSP, Google Video Partners (GVP), or the Google Display Network (GDN), all of which extend Google’s ad reach beyond Google-owned platforms. This means advertisers have to manually visit each non-Google O&O to identify the types of placement and get its performance, said Garcia.

A Google spokesperson told ADWEEK that GSP sites are now included alongside Display and Google’s owned-and-operated placements in Pmax reports.

So there have been improvements?

Sure. Google, for its part, has introduced tools like the Ads Transparency Center, which offers insights such as campaign targeting criteria.

But that doesn’t go far enough, sources said.

“We expect more detail on that URL level reporting—where our ads are displayed across the networks, beyond current high-level metrics,” Fulginiti said. “That could be a real game changer for transparency and to determine whether a placement is worthy of our dollar.”

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