

# Google allows publishers to strengthen 'pay walls'

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In a move that could help improve relations between Google Inc. and the media industry, the Internet search company is offering publishers a way to build more solid "pay walls" around their online stories while still appearing in search results.

In an official blog post Tuesday, Google said it will let publishers limit the number of restricted articles that readers can get for free through its search engine.

The change could remove one significant hurdle publishers face as they contemplate charging readers online. Many newspapers are considering such fees because online advertising on free sites hasn't offset the precipitous decline in print ad revenue that has come with the recession and competition from the Web.

The Wall Street Journal is perhaps the best example of how the new tool could help.

The newspaper charges for access to most articles on its Web site, but its pay wall is "leaky." Readers can grab the first sentence from a preview of the story, punch it in to Google and access the full story in the search results.

The Journal could simply block Google from indexing its stories, but that would cut traffic to its site significantly. Less traffic means less ad revenue.

The problem has infuriated executives at News Corp., which owns the Journal.

News Corp. Chairman Rupert Murdoch told a conference organized by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission on Tuesday that media companies should charge for content and stop news aggregators such as Google from "feeding off the hard-earned efforts and investments of others."

The change to Google's "First Click Free" program would allow publishers to limit the number of paid articles a reader could access through its search engine to five per day.

That could assuage the anger of media titans like Murdoch, allowing news outlets to stay relevant by appearing in search results while still trying to wring fees from readers.

A News Corp. spokesman declined comment Wednesday.

In Google's blog post, Josh Cohen, senior business product manager, stressed that publishers and Google could coexist.

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"After all, whether you're offering your content for free or selling it, it's crucial that people find it," he said. "Google can help with that."

Cohen said that Google will also begin indexing and treating as "free" any preview pages — usually the headline and first few paragraphs of a story — from subscription Web sites. People using Google would then see the same content that would be shown free to a user of the media site. The stories would be labeled as "subscription" in Google News.

"The ranking of these articles will be subject to the same criteria as all sites in Google, whether paid or free," Cohen said. "Paid content may not do as well as free options, but that is not a decision we make based on whether or not it's free. It's simply based on the popularity of the content with users and other sites that link to it."

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Andrew Vanacore reported from New York.

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