YouTube wants viewers to 'leanback,' stay longer

The Associated Press

YouTube is trying to become as brainless and painless to watch as the boob tube. In the process, the Web's leading video site hopes to learn enough about its viewers to replace their remote control.

Those ambitions came into sharper focus Wednesday with debut of a YouTube format called "Leanback." The feature picks out high-definition clips most likely to command a person's attention and then automatically serves up one video after another.

YouTube, based in San Bruno, believes viewers will feel like they're watching television if they don't have to search the website for another clip every few minutes.

As it learns more about viewers' preferences, YouTube envisions a day when coach potatoes eventually won't need their remote controls because Leanback will do all the work for them.

"We want to remove the 'What next?' question" for viewers, said Kuan Yong, Leanback's product manager.

YouTube previewed Leanback in late May when its owner, Google Inc., announced its plans for an Internet-focused TV. Wednesday marked the first time users were able to experiment with the concept. The feature will be among the options available on Google's Internet TVs when the Sony-made sets go on sale in the U.S. this fall.

Because Leanback still requires a Web browser to watch the high-definition video, YouTube expects most people initially will watch the format on their computers.

But YouTube is exploring ways to make it easier to bring Leanback to television screens. One obvious way would be making Leanback available on Web-connected devices, including video game consoles, Blu-ray players and specialty gadgets such as the Roku player, that can be easily plugged into TVs. YouTube executives said they were talking to some makers of Web-connected devices, but didn't offer any details Wednesday.

Leanback is part of YouTube's effort to evolve from a mere Website into a "video operating system" that's as ubiquitous and as easy to use as TVs. That objective also motivated a Wednesday upgrade of YouTube's mobile website that's supposed to make watching video on the go more appealing and convenient.

Although YouTube serves up more than 2 billion videos worldwide, most people spend relatively little time on the site. By YouTube's calculations, it occupies about

15 minutes of the average consumer's daily viewing time compared with five hours on TV.

Besides making its site easier to watch, YouTube has been trying to line up more compelling content from movie and TV studios to supplement the millions of kooky, amateur clips in its library. YouTube also offers a video rental option, but that might not be immediately available on Leanback.

Getting people to stick around longer would give YouTube more opportunities to sell more advertising and increase its revenue. Google doesn't disclose YouTube's financials, but Caris & Co. analyst Sandeep Aggarwal estimates the video site will bring in ad revenue of about $525 million this year. That would account for about 2 percent of Google's projected ad revenue of more than $27 billion.

Leanback will offer the best experience to YouTube users who log in to their personal accounts while watching video.

Drawing upon that history, Leanback's formula will choose videos most likely to appeal to each individual viewer. The format also offers channels devoted to specific categories, such as sports, entertainment and education, stripped across the bottom of the screen. The arrow keys on a computer keyboard are needed to navigate thorough Leanback's different options.

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Online:

http://www.youtube.com/leanback

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