

Google rolls out ads to ease privacy concerns

January 17 2012, By Jessica Guynn

Google Inc., under scrutiny from privacy watchdogs for changes it made to its search engine, is launching a splashy ad campaign designed to alleviate privacy concerns.

Google is rolling out the Good to Know campaign in two dozen U.S. newspapers and magazines, including the Los Angeles Times, and in public places such as the subways in New York and Washington to encourage people to protect themselves and their information on the Web. The campaign offers practical advice and tips, including how to manage what kind of data people share with [Google](#) and websites.

Google, whose success depends on users feeling comfortable enough to spend huge chunks of their time online, originally launched the campaign in Britain in October.

The Internet search giant is trying to drum up publicity stateside as discomfort spreads with its new search feature called Search plus Your World, in which photos, updates and other private information from its Google plus social network are blended with search results.

Last week, the [Federal Trade Commission](#) widened its [antitrust probe](#) of the search engine to include Google plus, according to a person who is familiar with the investigation but requested anonymity because the person was not authorized to speak on the matter. The FTC is examining whether the company is giving preferential treatment to its own services in violation of [antitrust laws](#).

The FTC made the move after the [Electronic Privacy](#) Information Center, a Washington [advocacy group](#), filed a complaint about the search changes on privacy and antitrust grounds. Twitter Inc. has also complained that the new search feature harms competitors.

Google, which handles about two-thirds of all [search queries](#) in the U.S., is looking to blunt competition from [social networking](#) giant Facebook Inc., which has an alliance with [Microsoft Corp.](#)'s Bing search engine. Bing began displaying information from Facebook last year. [Facebook](#) has more than 800 million members, compared with more than 40 million for Google plus as of October.

Google's director of privacy, Alma Whitten, called the Good to Know privacy campaign "quite ambitious."

"Given who we are, we have a strong incentive to make the Internet a place that people feel safe to do interesting things," Whitten said.

Google, one of the world's biggest advertising companies, is increasingly using advertising on television and elsewhere to promote its powerful online brand offline.

With the Good to Know campaign, it's spending tens of millions of dollars to connect with users over privacy and security as regulatory storm clouds gather.

Google, which has come under fire for privacy blunders in the U.S. and Europe, is wrestling with heightened government scrutiny around the world.

Last year it agreed to settle FTC claims that it used deceptive tactics and violated its own privacy policies when it introduced the Buzz social networking service. The settlement is in effect for 20 years and covers

future situations such as Google's collection of Wi-Fi data. Google agreed to an independent audit of privacy procedures every other year. The Electronic Privacy Information Center asked the FTC to investigate whether consumers were harmed when users of Google's Gmail service had private email contact information automatically displayed when they enrolled in Buzz, which Google has since shut down.

Google is banking that the campaign will cast it in a positive light and help it sidestep some of the regulatory issues that stymied Microsoft's ability to innovate, said Danny Sullivan, editor of the SearchEngineLand website.

"Google is thinking, 'We had better do a better job explaining this or we will have Congress stepping in to regulate us in a way that might be harmful to our business,'" he said.

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