

Google providing car insurance quotes in latest expansion

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Google is helping California drivers shop for car insurance as part of a new service that could foreshadow the Internet company's latest attempt to shake up a long-established industry.

The feature unveiled Thursday compares auto insurance quotes from up to 14 carriers that are participating in the comparisons. The policies can then be bought online or through an agent. Google will receive a cut from the insurance sales. The Mountain View, California, company says the size of the commissions won't influence how it ranks the price quotes.

Google Inc. plans to provide car insurance quotes in other states and sign up more carriers, too. The list of initial participants in California includes MetLife, Mercury Insurance and 21st Century Insurance. Some of the largest auto insurance providers, including Farmers, State Farm, Allstate, Progressive and Geico, haven't joined Google's service.

Progressive and Allstate's esurance.com also provide auto insurance price comparisons.

The major auto insurers may be leery of Google, which has been using the power and profits from its dominant Internet search engine and other popular digital services to challenge the status quo in other industries.

Google already has designed a driverless car that is still being tested on a private track and is financing various projects in medical research. It's also building high-speed Internet access networks in cities scattered across the U.S. and preparing to sell wireless data plans directly to consumers later this year.

Google is probably using its auto insurance comparison service to learn more about how the industry works so it can eventually underwrite and sell policies on its own, said Forrester Research analyst Ellen Carney. "They are getting all the data that they need to do it," Carney said. "I think there is definitely more to come here."

The debut of Google's insurance price comparison service validated a prediction that Carney made two months ago about Google's intentions.

In a blog post, Google said it is just trying to give people a better understanding of financial products. The company already has been offering a tool that compares credit cards.

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