Marketers rethink brand safety by focusing on context

Article

"You're spending a lot of money. Do you know where your ads are?'" Jonah Goodhart, co-founder and CEO of Mobian, said on our "Behind the Numbers" podcast, evoking the classic PSA.

Meta announced in January it would replace fact checking with Community Notes, worrying advertisers about brand safety.

- 53% of US marketing professionals see [social media](#) as the biggest threat to their brand safety this year, according to a September 2024 YouGov survey.
- "[Purposely misleading content] is starting to become the norm on some social platforms, which is not beneficial to anyone in the ecosystem," said our analyst Paul Verna.

As platforms cut back on rules, advertisers struggle to reach social media users while protecting their brands. They set higher standards for brand safety but also question its worth in today's divided world.

The end of false security

Meta has always hidden from advertisers where their ads appear. Community Notes simply brings this problem to light, Verna said.

"There's a comfort level that brands had in knowing, or at least convincing themselves, that [Meta] had a content moderation system in place that was going to prevent some of the worst adjacencies from happening," he said.

Beyond individual ad campaigns, our analyst Jeremy Goldman pointed to the overarching reputations of social platforms—and how their wider public image might impact media budgets.

"If you're a brand marketer, you make decisions around brands. Do you want to be associated with the brand of Meta or of X?" said Goldman. "You ultimately just want to feel good about your business partners."

What consumers understand

Marketers disagree on brand safety. While social platforms show more divisive content, Goodhart believes users can "tell ads from content."

- A recent Forrester survey shows 59% of marketing leaders think consumers care less about brand safety than before, and 53% say they themselves worry less about it.
- The Wall Street Journal reports Microsoft's blacklist contains 2,000 words, and the Washington Post's ad chief Johanna Mayer-Jones says their study found 40% of their content gets flagged as "unsafe."

Better tools needed

Brands should focus on context rather than using broad blacklists, Goodhart said.

- He mentioned a Time Magazine story about a "very violent death" of a star that tech systems blocked for all advertisers.

Advertisers rarely learn what content gets blocked and why—a major problem, he said.

"I think it's about being transparent, proactive, and actually using technology that can identify nuance," said Goodhart.

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