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First ads appear on YouTube clips

- Mark Sweney
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YouTube: an animated overlay covering the bottom 20% of a video will appear 15 seconds after a clip starts

Millions of YouTube users will see adverts on the site's video clips for the first time today, as the company launches in-video advertising in an attempt to cash in on its massive popularity.

YouTube will use a new form of "transparent" advertisements that cover the bottom portion of its videos with a Flash-based overlay that runs while the clip is watched.

But users will be able to click on the adverts to make them disappear if they find them too intrusive.

The launch of the new advertising format represents a critical step for Google-owned YouTube, which needs to make money from its key video content while not driving away users with too many annoying ads.

"We tested and trialled a number of advertising formats," said YouTube's director of media and platforms, Eileen Naughton. "We needed to be respectful of the community while offering something rich and engaging as a marketing platform."

The "TV-style" animated overlay, which will cover the bottom 20% of a video, will appear after 15 seconds of a clip has played.

YouTube says that the overlay is "80% transparent" and will run for around 10 seconds.

Advertisers include Fox, The Simpsons Movie, BMW and Hairspray.

The company has opted for the new system, eschewing the more widely used advertising method of pre-rolls - running an advert before a video is viewed.

YouTube said that, initially, the new in-video format will only run on video content provided by a select range of partners and not on videos uploaded by individuals.

The company is aiming to make the in-video advertising available to around 1,000 partners - such as the videos run by Warner Music and Ford Models - and selected members of the public who are part of YouTube's partner programme.

The in-video ads can be targeted by genre, demographic, geography and day part.

Ms Naughton said that "at the moment" YouTube wanted to offer advertisers a "controlled environment" to run ads against.

She denied that there was any potential problems running ads around regular user-generated content due to ads running against copyrighted or inappropriate content - an issue that recently caused Facebook advertisers to pull campaigns.

"The YouTube community polices itself effectively," she said. She added that YouTube doesn't have a lot of "questionable" content.

The company claims that tests show that less than 10% of viewers actively move to close the overlay when it appears and that there is a five to 10 times "click-to-play rate" compared with standard advertising formats.

Users can watch an ad, click to close it, or click on it and either launch another window to watch a video ad - in such a case the YouTube clip pauses - or go to a third-party website.

"This is one format that works for the audience and is best for the community," said the YouTube group product manager, Shashi Seth.

He added that eye-tracking studies had shown that other types of ads did not work as well because users are focused on the clips - for example pre-rolls, he said, had a high abandonment rate.

Advertisers will pay per 1,000 overlays served to consumers.

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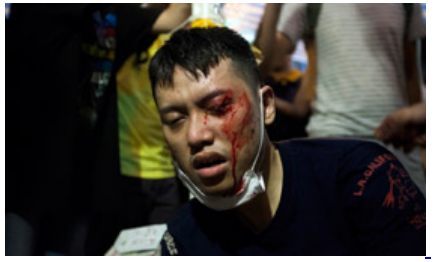
- 

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