

Google Loosens Restrictions With Cannabis Ad Pilot in Canada

Google Launches Pilot Program Allowing Cannabis Advertising in Canada

Google is taking a step into uncharted territory for the cannabis industry. On Monday, the company announced a 20-week pilot program that will allow licensed cannabis businesses in Canada to run ads on its platform, marking the first time the tech giant has formally opened its advertising system to federally legal cannabis operators.

A Test Run for Future Policy Updates

According to a notice on Google's website, the pilot is designed to "explore user interest and inform potential future policy updates." During the trial period, cannabis product ads may appear on Google Search but will be strictly limited to federally licensed operators in Canada who comply with national regulations.

This shift signals Google's willingness to experiment with cannabis-related advertising in one of the world's most established legal markets. The Canadian cannabis industry, legalized nationwide in 2018, has long sought mainstream advertising opportunities as part of its growth strategy.

Restrictions Still in Place

Despite the pilot program, Google maintains strict controls over cannabis promotion globally. The company currently prohibits ads that promote the use or sale of cannabis or provide informational content about cannabis products. Even with Canada's fully legal framework, participation in the pilot is narrowly limited to companies with federal licenses, ensuring that advertising aligns with Health Canada's regulatory environment.

While Google eased restrictions on hemp and CBD advertising in 2023, cannabis itself has remained off-limits. Businesses have occasionally found ways around these restrictions—some by carefully wording promotions to avoid triggering Google's automated filters—but such efforts remain inconsistent and risky.

Cannabis Advertising Challenges

For cannabis businesses, advertising has been a persistent hurdle. Strict federal and corporate policies have left operators with few mainstream avenues to promote their products. Many companies rely on in-store marketing, word-of-mouth, or cannabis-specific media outlets to reach consumers.

Other major platforms have also held firm on cannabis restrictions. Meta's social media networks, including Facebook and Instagram, have been particularly aggressive in limiting exposure. In December, many cannabis businesses reported being "shadow banned"—a practice in which posts are hidden from followers without notification. Shadow bans can last days or weeks, making it difficult for companies to maintain visibility and engagement.

Industry Implications

If Google's pilot proves successful, it could reshape the digital marketing landscape for cannabis businesses in Canada and potentially set the stage for similar allowances in other legal jurisdictions. For operators, access to mainstream advertising channels would mean expanded consumer reach and a chance to compete more effectively with the illicit market, which faces no such marketing restrictions.

However, the program is temporary and tightly controlled. Google has not indicated whether the pilot will expand to other regions, nor has it committed to making cannabis advertising a permanent part of its platform. For now, it represents an experimental step forward in a space where most global tech firms remain cautious.

The next 20 weeks will likely be closely watched by both industry stakeholders and regulators. If successful, the pilot could pave the way for broader reforms in how cannabis businesses communicate with consumers online.

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