ADVERTISING TECHNOLOGY

'WE TREAT META AS A BLACK BOX…MAKE IT STRATEGIC, NOT LAZY': META PULLS OUT OF MRC BRAND SAFETY ACCREDITATION, BUT DO BRANDS CARE?

Arvind Hickman

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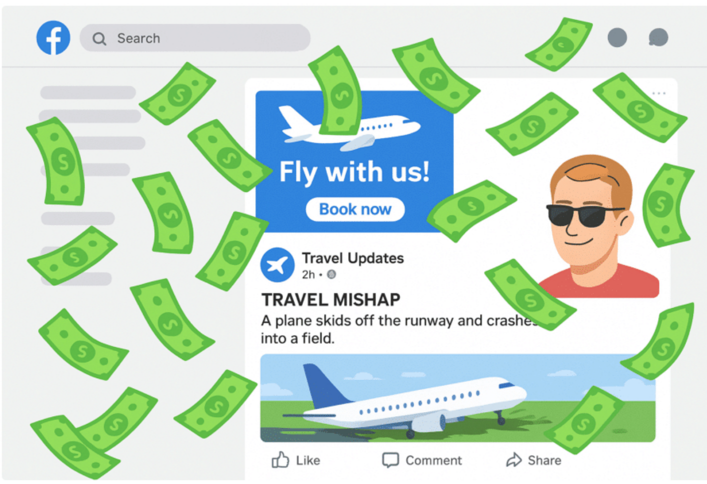

Industry leaders have questioned Meta's brand safety credentials, and marketers' apparent apathy towards it. Image created using ChatGPT.

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Brand safety was once the topic du jour in the advertising industry. Although brands are concerned about where their ads appear on news websites, on social media, brand safety concern rates have stabilised in recent years. Industry leaders have questioned whether social media platforms are treated differently to news publishers following a decision by Meta to avoid the MRC's first-party brand safety audit.

Last week, the influential US Media Ratings Council (MRC), which monitors digital platforms to ensure they are brand safe, revoked Meta's brand safety accreditation.

Meta said that it decided against an MRC first-party brand audit to focus its efforts on third-party brand safety audits.

Industry leaders have told *B&T* that this decision is unlikely to alter how much marketers invest in the platform, which has led to some questioning the double standards that exist between news websites and social media channels.

On Ticker Today with Ahron Young, TrinityP3 global CEO and founder Darren Woolley questioned whether Meta is truly committed to brand safety.

"These organisations, if they want ad dollars, have to be willing to be accountable to it and to be verified by an independent party," Woolley said in the video posted below. "We've

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to be verified by an independent party," Woolley said in the video posted below. "We've seen (what happens) with the X platform, which in many ways is a dumpster fire.

"My big concern though is that even though they've lost accreditation, billions of dollars of advertising will probably continue to flow in. Yet at the same time with this concern about brand safety there are a lot of marketers that are putting news media pages on a block list or a denial list because they're scared of having their ads appear (alongside unsafe content), an airline ad appearing next to a story about a plane crash is their great fear.

"And yet they don't seem to have the same concern when their ads appear on Facebook or Instagram amongst all sorts of (contentious posts)."

At Nine's recent Upfront in Sydney, publishing lead Tory Maguire addressed the brand safety of news sites versus social media, and challenged marketers to put their money in brand safe environments.

"Social media is an unregulated, unaccountable free for all. Misinformation spreads in seconds, and that makes journalism with integrity, real journalism, more important than ever," she said.

"Let's address the question of brand safety head on. The evidence is clear, advertisers do not inherit negativity from being alongside news, even the hard stuff on any platform. Global and Australia studies consistently show that brands in trusted news environments achieve stronger cut through, stronger recall and stronger outcomes."

Do brands care?

There have been times in the past when large brands boycotted Meta platforms, X and YouTube over brand safety fears, but today such moves appear to be further down the priority list.

In a 'Future of Programmatic 2024' report, published by WARC, brand safety was a concern for 60 per cent of marketers, while 76 per cent of respondents are spending 40 per cent or less of their budgets on open web advertising.

Bench Media CEO and co-founder Ori Gold told *B&T* that he was not surprised Meta does not want MRC verification of its brand safety.

"Since the Trump administration came into play, they took the leash off them a bit, and they're marching forward. So it fits the bill in terms of them wanting to write their own rules," he said, adding that Meta's u-turn could also be a negotiating tactic with the MRC.

"From our perspective and advertiser's perspective, we always treat Meta as a black box. Meta delivers scale and is second to none in discovery, in the way they engage new audiences and push them down the funnel. But we always advise brands and advertisers to make sure you diversify away from it, especially if you're in a sensitive category, or there's a change to the algorithm.

"When it comes to brand safety issues, Meta will do what they need to do for their own good, and not necessarily for brands."

—— *Nine's Tory Maguire recently defended the brand safety of news sites, while questioning why marketers seemingly turn a blind eye to brand safety on social media.*

Easy 'sugar hits'

Gold said that he doesn't expect to see a reduction in Meta budgets outside of certain categories that are sensitive to brand safety concerns.

He cited healthcare and financial services as two categories that are sensitive to brand safety on social media and advises brands that they shouldn't spend more than 20-40 per cent of their marketing budgets on Meta platforms, or any single platform.

Gold believes that there are plenty of good alternatives on the open web, such as credible news sites that can deliver just as much quality and return on investment when used properly.

"Marketing teams sometimes are not sure how to diversify away from it and how to not to necessarily get the Meta sugar hits; they just throw more money into social media because it's easy," he said.

"What we say is make it strategic, don't make it lazy. Meta, Google, they've made it very easy to throw more money into the black box, and usually it delivers good returns. But it doesn't mean that you cannot diversify your media to the open web."

Meta's brand safety pivot

Meta's brand safety focus has certainly shifted this year, particularly since US President Donald Trump took office.

In January, Meta replaced human third-party fact checkers with an AI-powered community notes feature that relies on tech and users to flag "hateful conduct".

In September, the social media company decided it did not want to be independently audited for brand safety, leaving the MRC with little choice but to revoke Meta only months after receiving accreditation.

Meta's VP client council and industry trade relations, Samantha Stetson, said the company remains committed to brand safety and suitability, and has been investing more in tools to keep ads safe.

"In June, we were pleased to be one of the only three companies in our industry to receive MRC re-accreditation for brand safety, which is a rare achievement. At the same time, advertisers have also shared with us – and the industry – that they want validation of third-party brand safety and suitability metrics," she wrote on LinkedIn.

"As a result, we've asked the MRC to focus their efforts on conducting a third-party brand safety audit. We know that audits like these take time, resources, and capacity, so in the meantime, we've withdrawn from this year's Brand Safety first-party audit, so that the third-party brand safety audit is our focus."

Arielle Garcia, COO of watchdog group Check My Ads, said this latest development is hardly surprising.

"They likely see it as an unnecessary expense, and perhaps as a liability, given their evolving posture and policies relating to brand safety and content on its platforms," she said.

said.

At the moment, it appears brands are happy to go along with Meta's brand safety pivot, providing its brand safety tools, scale and performance outweigh any potential downside. News publishers, on the other had, continue to play under different rules.

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