

Google search ads rile its big customers

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As Google Inc. pushes to sell ads crucial to its revenue growth, some of its largest advertisers are growing angry with the way the company oversees its sponsored searches.

The problem is a tactic known as "piggybacking," in which smaller advertisers use major players' brand names, slogans or other trademarked words in the text of search ads to lure Web surfers to their own sites.

While Google and other search engines have policies against this maneuver, some marketers say the practice often goes unchecked. The brick-and-mortar world has long-established laws in this area, but the legal situation is less clear for the Internet and has only recently started to be tested in the courts.

Tensions over piggybacking have been simmering for a couple of years. Companies such as Marriott International Inc., InterContinental Hotels Group PLC, AMR Corp.'s American Airlines and Northwest Airlines Corp. say the use of their names and slogans in the text of other companies' search ads confuses potential customers and increases their cost of doing business. They are particularly upset with Google, which is the dominant player in the search business. It controlled 71.2 percent of the search market last year, according to research firm eMarketer Inc.

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