13 June 2013 Last updated at 18:14

Yahoo files patent for social influence-based advertising

By Leo Kelion
Technology reporter

Yahoo has published a patent detailing how ad charges could be based on a viewer's "social influence".

The US firm suggests that marketers could bid against each other to target users perceived to have a high degree of authority among their peers.

It suggests a score could be based on the number of followers a user has on social networks and the number of times they are mentioned in others' posts.

One marketing expert suggested it could prove popular with the industry.

The patent for "social reputation ads" was filed with the **US Patent and Trademark Office in December** 2011, but has only just been published.

Authority score

Yahoo notes that marketers can currently specify where on a site their ads are placed to help target a specific type of user. The use of cookies - which monitor browsing habits - can also help them fine tune their aim.

The patent suggests taking this to the next level by identifying users with higher, or lower, than normal sway over others.

"The level of social influence may be based upon factors such as the number of followers of the user, the number of contacts of the user, and/or the title of the user," it says.

It adds that the score could further be tweaked by looking at:

The number of posts, reposts and retweets they make
The type of products they "like"
The lists they subscribe to
The amount of times others write about them
How influential their own followers are

"In this manner, an advertiser may be billed a higher amount for advertisements provided to users having a higher social authority score than for advertisements provided to users having a lower social authority score," the patent adds.

Firms including Klout, Kred and Proskore already offer ratings of how influential internet users are.

Marketers can make use of these to directly target high-ranking individuals by sending them messages via Twitter or LinkedIn.

But one industry consultant suggested Yahoo's suggestion could help expand this to a much wider audience.

"This is a new, creative way for marketers to use a multiplier effect to influence how their brands are perceived to ideally lead to sales," said Allyson Stewart-Allen, director of International Marketing Partners.

"It's a practice not widely used by brands currently but may well become a new standard, especially as 'word of mouth' is the holy grail for brands since the credibility of that medium is so much higher than paid-for media."

However, one privacy campaigner had concerns.

"This is a further extension of the arms race we are seeing between a handful of multinational businesses to collect more data on us in order to sell advertising," said Nick Pickles, director of Big Brother Watch.

"We are not customers, we are a product to be monitored, packaged up and sold on to the highest bidder.

"The development of this kind of more detailed profiling is exactly why we need stronger consumer privacy protection. People still don't have a real understanding of just how much information about them is being collected online and it is why until stronger laws are enacted companies will continue to keep people in the dark."

A spokeswoman for Yahoo told the BBC that patents are important to the firm.

"Innovation is critical to the future of Yahoo," she said.

"We regularly submit patent applications on innovative ideas that map to our current or anticipated business needs. In this instance, this patent is still in the application process and hasn't yet been approved by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office."

More Technology stories

Google beams internet from balloons
[/news/technology-22905199]
Google is launching an experiment to beam the internet to remote areas of the world from near space balloons.
Facebook reveals US data requests
[/news/world-22916329]
Scrabble app changes anger players
[/news/technology-22905191]