

# FTC Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Office of Consumer and Business Education

## Being Frank about Search Engine Rank

You're using your favorite search engine, ready to find the most appropriate sites for your needs. You type in your search terms, and up comes a list of the most relevant sites, right? Not necessarily, says the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the federal government's consumer protection agency.

Often, search engines look for your search term within the web pages they've collected and indexed. The results reflect the search engine's determination of how relevant the site's content is to your inquiry. But some search engines will rank sites higher in your results if the site pays a fee, regardless of its relevance to your terms. FTC officials say it's a savvy surfer who knows how search results are sorted and ranked. It can make a difference in which search engines you choose to use and how you interpret the results.

If you use Internet search engines, the FTC wants you to know that:

- **Some search engines have programs for paid placement and paid inclusion.**
  - **Paid placement** means websites or URLs pay search engines for *higher rankings* or more prominent placements in search results.
  - **Paid inclusion** means websites or URLs pay *to be included* in a search engine's pool of results available for display, but not to be more prominent.
  - Sometimes, third-party partners, like other search engines or guide sites, provide listings to search engines. If a partner has its own payment arrangements with a website, it could affect the results on the search engine you use.
- **Many sites indicate whether a placement is paid for.** If the search engine separates some search results as "Sponsored Listings," they may be paid for placement. But keep in mind that results may be grouped under other labels. Look for terms like "featured listings," "recommended sites," "search partner" or "products and services." If those sites are ranked higher than others or placed in a more prominent location than others, it could be a tip-off that the search engine uses a paid placement program.
- **You may find an explanation** of the type of paid placement or paid inclusion program the search engine uses. If such a program is in use, the explanations should be easy to find and understand. If they're not and the omission bothers you, let the search engine know.
- **Paid inclusion programs do not guarantee higher rankings** for listings and may provide features that are useful. For example, paid inclusion programs may provide consumers with better choices if the programs allow search engines to review URLs more quickly or review websites more deeply than they would otherwise.
- **You have a choice.** Before you decide which search engine to use, consider whether the use of payment programs for placement or inclusion is important to you.

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, visit [www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov) or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261. The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft and other fraud-related complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.