

Banished by the search engines

WhenU Banished By Google, Yahoo! ClickZ News

By [Janis Mara](#) | May 14, 2004

Adware firm WhenU has been yanked from Google and Yahoo!'s search results after being accused of trying to artificially raise its ranking by using a prohibited measure known as "cloaking."

A Google search for "whenu.com" returned the result, "Sorry, no information is available for the URL whenu.com," early Friday morning. A Yahoo! search returned related sites, but not whenu.com.

The alleged scheme was reported to Google and Yahoo! by Ben Edelman, a Harvard PhD student and anti-spyware activist, according to Edelman's Web site. According to Edelman's investigation, some aspects of which were confirmed by ClickZ News, WhenU apparently used cloaking techniques in an effort to drive traffic to media coverage favorable to the company.

The scheme included the setting up of an elaborate ring of Web sites -- which contained gibberish content designed to be read only by search engines and not by humans. When people clicked on those sites' listings in search results, in many cases they went not to the sites themselves, but to news coverage favorable to WhenU. The gibberish sites were linked to in hidden code on the WhenU.com Web site, presumably in an effort to boost their rankings.

As with many Web terms, definitions of cloaking [[define](#)] vary. Google provides its own [definition](#) of the term on its site. Part of the definition includes, "The Web server is programmed to return different content to Google than it returns to regular users."

Avi Naider, WhenU's CEO, blames an outside search optimization firm for the problems. Naider said WhenU learned of the issue Thursday and "instructed the outside firm to reverse their actions." The CEO did not name the firm, which he said was hired to do only legitimate optimization.

"We were alerted to this issue today [Thursday] and immediately addressed it. Those Web sites have been taken down," Naider said. "We anticipate being back up listed with the major search engines very soon."

Neither Google nor Yahoo! could be reached for comment by press time.

Naider's efforts to get back in the good graces may meet with difficulty, According to Google's policies, the company, "...may permanently ban from our index any sites or site authors that engage in cloaking to distort their search rankings."

Whether it is reinstated on Google or not, this latest development is a setback for WhenU. It also comes at a very inopportune time. Like its fellow adware firm Claria, WhenU has long sought to distance itself from the controversy that has dogged it. The company is currently involved in a [legal battle](#) against the state of Utah, in an effort to get the state's new anti-spyware statute overturned. The company has previously been involved in [other litigation](#) related to its pop-up ads.

WhenU's ads are distributed to a network of 25 million active users who downloaded WhenU's software with other software such as free screensavers. This distribution method has been lumped in with spyware [define](#) in the past.

However, WhenU maintains that users are notified when its programs are being installed, and that they are easy to uninstall. Spyware is often unknowingly downloaded and installed.

Edelman, the student who blew the whistle on WhenU, is a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard and a former fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard Law School. According to Edelman's Web site, he originally noticed what he described as a few WhenU cloaking sites in the fall of 2003, but didn't initially realize the scope of these activities. Edelman's site discloses that he has served as an expert or consultant for companies adverse to WhenU in legal actions

The anti-spyware activist believes that cloaking was undertaken by WhenU to favorably shape public perception of the company. During his investigation, Edelman said he found at least 13 bogus sites using prohibited methods in a bid to secure "multiple positions in search engine results bearing WhenU's name."

"When successful, these methods push critics' sites to lower positions in search engine rankings and give additional exposure to pages favorable to WhenU," Edelman posted.