

This time, ProPublica, we disagree

Our view on age-based targeting for employment ads

By Rob Goldman, Vice President of Ads

In the last year ProPublica has uncovered a number of different flaws in our advertising systems. Several of them were serious failures on our part. It's why we apologized and took immediate action to prevent them in future.

Today ProPublica has raised new concerns about companies, including our own marketing team, using Facebook to show recruitment ads to specific age groups. We have carefully reviewed their concerns — and this time we disagree.

First, our own advertisements. Facebook tailors our employment ads by audience. For example, we may use pictures of women or older people depending on the context. These individual ads are part of broader-based recruitment efforts designed to reach all ages and all backgrounds. We completely reject the allegation that these advertisements are discriminatory.

Second, targeting employment ads by age generally. U.S. law forbids discrimination in employment based on age, race, gender and other legally protected characteristics. That said, simply showing certain job ads to different age groups on services like Facebook or Google may not in itself be discriminatory — just as it can be OK to run employment ads in magazines and on TV shows targeted at younger or older people. What matters is that marketing is broadly based and inclusive, not simply focused on a particular age group. In addition, certain employers want to attract retirees, or recruit for jobs with specific age restrictions like the military or airline pilots.

Facebook helps educate advertisers about the legal requirements they face so that they understand their responsibilities. We've also begun requiring businesses that show employment ads on Facebook to certify that they comply with the law before we show their ads. And our “why am I seeing this ad?” button has set the industry standard for ads transparency: it's why ProPublica was able to identify these ads in the first place.

We take abuse of our systems incredibly seriously. We proactively look for bad ads, and investigate concerns when they are raised. We know we have more work to do — as previous investigations by ProPublica have shown. And we're investing heavily in more people and better technology so that we constantly improve over time.

But in this case we disagree with ProPublica. Used responsibly, age-based targeting for employment purposes is an accepted industry practice and for good reason: it helps employers recruit and people of all ages find work.