Kinderstart sues Google over lower page ranking

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SAN FRANCISCO, March 18 (Reuters) - A parental advice Internet site has sued Google Inc. (GOOG.O: Quote, Profile, Research), charging it unfairly deprived the company of customers by downgrading its search-result ranking without reason or warning.

The civil lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court in San Jose, California, on Friday by KinderStart.com seeks financial damages along with information on how Google ranks Internet sites when users conduct a Web-based search.

Google could not immediately be reached for comment but the company aggressively defends the secrecy of its patented search ranking system and asserts its right to adapt it to give customers what it determines to be the best results.

KinderStart charges that Google without warning in March 2005 penalized the site in its search rankings, sparking a "cataclysmic" 70 percent fall in its audience -- and a resulting 80 percent decline in revenue.

At its height, KinderStart counted 10 million page views per month, the lawsuit said. Web site page views are a basic way of measuring audience and are used to set advertising rates.

"Google does not generally inform Web sites that they have been penalized nor does it explain in detail why the Web site was penalized," the lawsuit said.

While an entire sub-industry exists to help Web sites feature prominently in Google results, the company is known to punish those who try to trick the system into boosting their search rankings.

The lawsuit notes that rival search systems from Microsoft Corp.'s (MSFT.O: Quote, Profile, Research) MSN and Yahoo Inc. (YHOO.O: Quote, Profile, Research) feature Kinderstart.com at the top of their rankings when the name "Kinderstart" is typed in.

The complaint accuses Google, as the dominant provider of Web searches, of violating KinderStart's constitutional right to free speech by blocking search engine results showing Web site content and other communications.

KinderStart contends that once a company has been penalized, it is difficult to contact Google to regain good standing and impossible to get a report on whether or why the search leader took such action.

The suit was filed the same day a federal judge denied a U.S. government request that Google be ordered to hand over a sample of keywords customers use to search the Internet while requiring the company to produce some Web addresses indexed in its system.

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