

Google to end first-click-free policy: News CEO

Google is planning to end its “first click free” policy that enables users of its search engine to bypass paywalls on news websites, News Corp chief executive Robert Thomson has told a media-business conference hosted by Goldman Sachs in New York.

The policy has long been a point of contention among publishers, and Mr Thomson has led a sustained campaign against it.

He told the conference Google was ready to end the program and allow publishers to choose how users access their sites from its search results.



News Corp CEO Robert Thomson.

“That will fundamentally change the content ecosystem, and not just for us but for

many publishers. It will allow the creation of coherent, viable subscription models," Mr. Thomson said. "There's a lot more to negotiate, there's a long way to go, but their willingness to end first-click-free should be celebrated by all publishers."

Google has long encouraged publishers to be part of the program, which allows search users to access a limited amount of content on subscription-based news sites free of charge. Some publishers say the policy has hurt subscription growth, while some say their sites are penalised in Google's search rankings if they do not participate in the program.

A News Corp spokesman said that The Wall Street Journal opted out of the program this year and saw its traffic from Google search fall 38 per cent, and from Google News 89 per cent, last month compared with a year earlier. This was because its stories were demoted in search results, the spokesman said.

Mr Thomson singled out Google chief executive Sundar Pichai for mending relations between the two firms. "Sundar deserves a lot of credit for taking a different approach," he said.

Google's move to end the first-click-free program is part of its larger effort to help publishers boost subscriptions. Google has tested changes to first-click-free with the New York Times and Financial Times.

The company is also testing other tools, such as sharing its data with publishers on which users are likely to buy subscriptions and using its online-payments system for subscriptions.