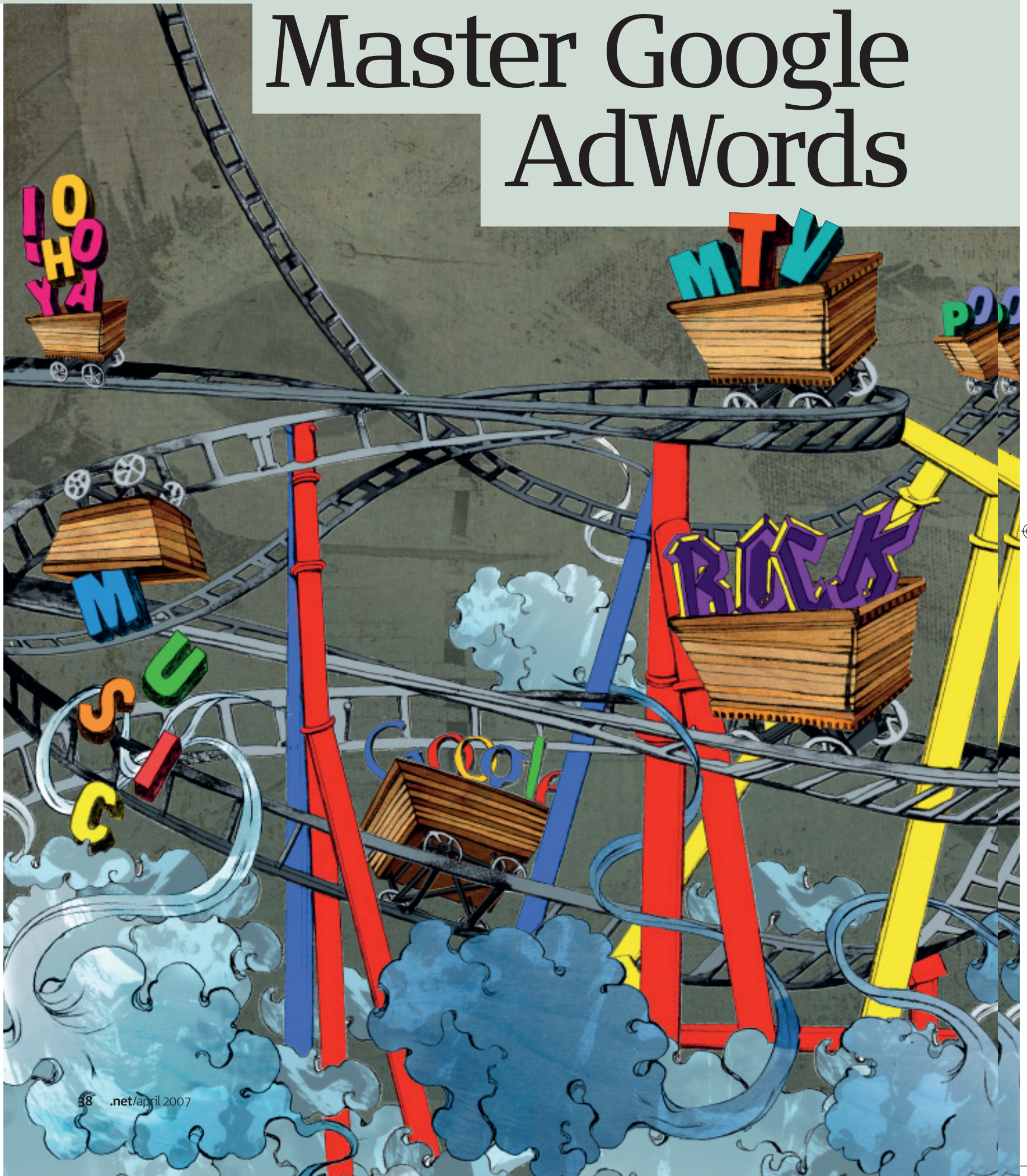


Master Google AdWords



Google AdWords is a phenomenon that's transformed internet marketing. Advertisers allocate vast sums to it, yet many are daunted by rising keyword costs and click fraud. Does it lead to an advertising goldmine or is it more fool's gold? **Mark Buckingham** investigates

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Until a few years ago, like many internet marketers, I was focused on search engine optimisation, the practice of priming a website's content and link popularity for improved rankings. If I'd known then that a pay-as-you-go advertising system would soon become an indispensable resource for millions of businesses, heralding a new era in online marketing, I would have invested not only in Google's sponsored advertising from the beginning, but in its stock. From the moment I created my first ad campaign and saw the almost instant results, I was hooked.

Whereas optimisation can take months to generate search engine prominence, pay-per-click (PPC) advertising offers the savvy advertiser immediate gains, with the potential to test new markets, promote special offers and create brand awareness at the click of a button. For some, it's a compelling pursuit. For the less attentive and effective marketer, however, there's a risk of wasted investment.

AdWords is Google's flagship advertising system and is its chief source of revenue: its advertising network accounted for almost 99 per cent of total revenue (\$2.66billion) in the third quarter of 2006. Launched in the US in 2000 and in the UK in 2002, AdWords covers 237 countries and 44 languages, enabling subscribers to attain a real-time geo-targeted global reach, engaging web users during the search process.

Search and dominate

Despite its multifaceted nature and increasing range of ad formats, the essence of AdWords is simple: subscribers bid for exposure in the sponsored links section to the right (and sometimes at the top) of any given relevant search results page on Google, and, if selected, its search and content syndication network. Advertisers create brief text ads, set a maximum cost-per-click (CPC) for their keywords and keyphrases and only pay when their adverts are clicked on. Their maximum bid helps determine whether their ads appear above or below that of their competitors'. Google only charges the minimum amount required to display the ad.

As the search market grows, so does Google's dominance. According to Google, approximately 80 per cent of US internet users (and hundreds of millions more globally) view AdWords ads each month. In August 2006, Google was responsible for over 68 per cent of UK clickthrough traffic (from 706 million total searches across the major engines) in a market where there were almost 16,000 UK searches every minute. In the US, 3.1 billion search queries, roughly half of all queries, were conducted on Google in November 2006

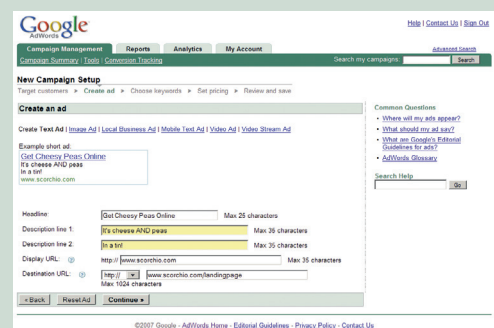
(both sources: Nielsen//NetRatings). Other survey results indicate that Google's reach from users surfing the web at home is actually 78 per cent.

AdWords' success doesn't need to be the province of the seasoned online marketer or those with generous budgets and hours to spare. A key to AdWords' growth is its relative ease of use. Google provides a range of tools and resources to help advertisers fine-tune and manage their campaigns, as Sean Cornwell, product marketing manager for AdWords at Google's UK HQ, explains: "It's not necessary to understand all the advantages of AdWords. For certain advertisers, the starter edition is sufficient in terms of simply driving more traffic to their website, if that's their goal. And when they achieve a certain level of comfort, they can graduate to the full edition at any time."

I asked Sean what the chief advantages are for those new to AdWords: "The simple benefits are what make it so powerful. It's highly targeted, accountable, ROI-driven advertising – you only pay when a user goes to your landing page. Advertisers can see immediately the benefits that they're getting from their advertising. It's very flexible, too. An advertiser has full control; they can set their budget and there's no minimum spend or time requirement."

By the very fact of its widespread popularity, those who don't advertise via this medium may find themselves losing out to their competitors.

Spencer Dyment-Shone, head of online marketing for Loot (loot.com), the classified ad portal, agrees that PPC is an essential component of the marketing mix. "It's almost impossible to envisage planning an online campaign without PPC. The responsiveness, measurability and predictability of PPC eclipses all other marketing channels."



After naming your Ad Group, it's time to get creative with your ad text. Don't forget to include your primary keyword in your title or description, and direct users to a relevant landing page

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Illustration iLovedust iLovedust is a small multi-disciplinary graphic design studio. It produces creative solutions for print and web
www.ilovedust.com

"An advertiser has full control; they can set their budget and there's no minimum spend or time requirement"

Sean Cornwell

>> With limited characters per line, getting your message across quickly key. 'Clickability' is the key. Short, sharp, informative adverts are more likely to grab a searcher's interest and it's good practise to include the primary keyword or phrase for your group in your ad's title or description. Try split-testing different ads to see what works. Even a minor change in your title or syntax can garner better results.

The skills to succeed

It's not enough, however, to churn out vast numbers of related keywords and expect them to perform adequately. "This may have been the case six years ago when PPC was still relatively new in the UK, and ad quality standards and minimum bids were substantially lower across the board," confirms Spencer Dymont-Shone. "With so many companies competing for exposure, effective PPC management is certainly more involved than that, though it's not rocket science. The simple truth is that, the more targeted keywords are to the pages, and thereby the products and services being promoted, the more useful they'll be to end-users."

It's not just your advert text that matters either. If your website lets you down, you'll never accrue the level of conversions you hope for. If you're unskilled at writing striking, engaging text, employ a good copywriter to get the best from your ads and landing pages to ensure the presentation of your site is up to scratch and intuitive to use.

"The more targeted keywords are ... the more useful they'll be to end-users"

Spencer Dymont-Shone

Google Analytics Take the guesswork out of your online advertising

To measure the effectiveness of your AdWords campaigns, it pays to know what works. Analytics tracks conversions, dovetailing with AdWords to give users in-depth information about your visitors' behaviour. The importance of knowing where your visitors come from and what they're doing on your site will enable you to determine how effectively your website is performing, and will help you measure ultimate profitability.

Analytics' chief advantages are its flexibility and accountability. Analytics enables you to test different goals to discover whether what you think works actually delivers as desired. Users can create different conversions to test – whether a click, a newsletter sign-up, an enquiry, a purchase and so on. Additionally, it enables users to set 'funnel' goals that mimic an expected conversion, run A/B split tests, observe visitor drop-off points and bottlenecks, and ascertain other important information, such as what search terms visitors use to arrive at your site.

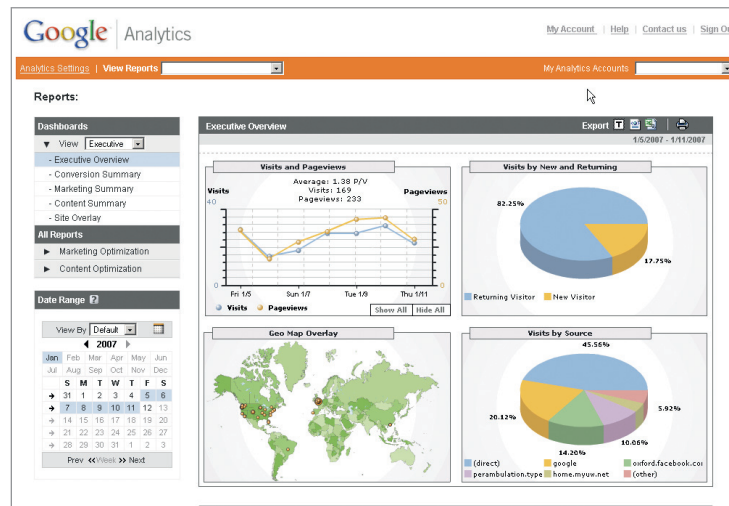
It's imperative to be completely objective in evaluating whether your site offers a user-friendly

experience. Brian Clifton, head of Google Analytics Europe, says: "A lot of marketers tend to focus on getting traffic – that's obviously important – but if the ROI is low, they tend to blame the source of the traffic and often neglect that they need to look at visitor behaviour and ask whether there are hurdles or barriers."

A little analysis can go a long way. "I've seen examples where conversion rates have increased tenfold simply because they've conducted the analysis and realised that their booking system, for instance, isn't as good as first thought, or that it isn't clear to a new visitor what to do next," adds Brian.

Google has also recently launched Website Optimizer, another self-service multivariate testing tool that I'm sure will soon be a popular destination for those seeking to optimise the content of landing pages.

Some have reported minor teething problems integrating Analytics, but it's worth persevering with. Above all, keep testing what works for you and your audience.



Left: Google Analytics' Executive Overview dashboard provides a useful snapshot, including visits and page views

Google Analytics

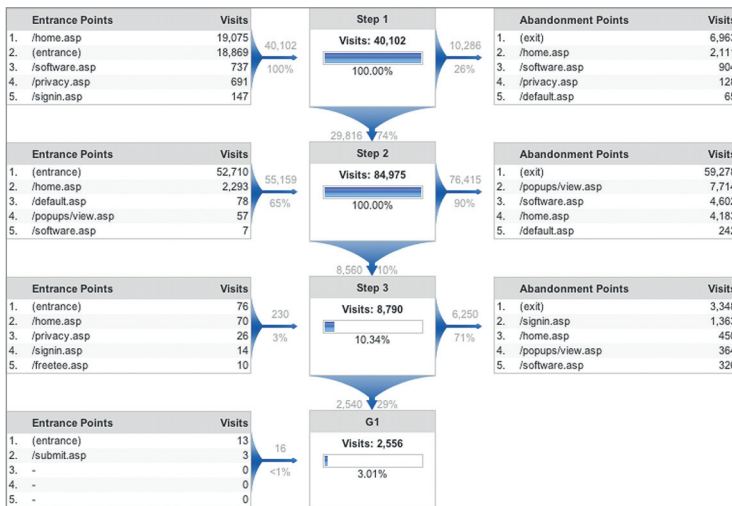
Measuring profitability is another key to AdWords' success. Google Analytics is free ROI measuring and tracking software, interlocking with AdWords (or used independently), and was launched in November 2005, released to the general public several months later. Before its arrival, it was somewhat of a headache for anyone wanting to measure and evaluate the ROI from their AdWords expenditure without relying on third party software.

Paul Walker, MD of Bodypower Sports, has spent nearly £1.2million on AdWords since its inception in 2002, investing approximately 60-70 per cent of its marketing budget in AdWords. Despite this investment, there are still some doubts: "In terms of traffic, AdWords has been a great success," says Paul. "However, the increased cost of PPC has put a question mark against the profitability. It has allowed us to grow the business by approximately 22 per cent, though our profitability suffered due to the increase in PPC costs. Unfortunately, due to the lack of analytics last year, it's not possible to see the ROI data and calculate the effect on our profitability. From 2007, those analytics are now in place going forward."

Analytics can be used to evaluate the quality of traffic stemming from Google's content network. "The additional traffic from AdWords to our website has been fantastic," says Paul, "yet, we're unsure of the quality of the traffic, especially from Google's affiliate websites. Hopefully, Google Analytics will enable us to see the conversion rates and to filter out any poor performing affiliate sites."

Brian Clifton, Google's head of Analytics Europe, explains how it works: "It's a tool to measure the success of your website. AdWords is about bringing visitors to your website, but what about the user experience? Ultimately, what commercial websites want are conversions, and Analytics gives our customers accountability and transparency in terms of what they're doing with Google. You can use it as a sort of benchmark or thermometer, if you like."

Matthew Tod adds: "Measuring single-access ratio (the number of people who look at one page and leave your site immediately) is the most important thing you can do beyond the basic AdWords reports. Google Analytics is free and works very well. To improve, look beyond just the AdWords report and use Analytics to figure out how good the customer experience really is. The numbers don't lie."



“A very important part of it is that you won’t get it right first time”

Sean Cornwell

Above: Analytics enables you to set funnel navigation steps that show the percentage of users in the desired funnel at each step

Emphasising the gains enjoyed by those who evaluate and optimise their campaigns and their websites, Sean Cornwell says: “AdWords and Analytics give you all the data, metrics and reports about how your campaigns are performing, and I think a very important part of it is that you’re not going to get it right first time. Those advertisers who frequently test and optimise their campaigns get the most benefit on the whole.”

Speculate to accumulate

In order to make AdWords work for you, you have to set a realistic budget. A common mistake is to set your daily budget too low. AdWords operates on the basis of the ‘law of large numbers’ – it’s obviously not possible to successfully plot trends with only a few samples. Given that advertisers only pay for each click received and not impressions, you won’t necessarily use up your maximum daily budget. In my experience, an average daily expenditure of 60-75 per cent of an advertiser’s daily budget is not uncommon. AdWords’ success can make it an expensive option for those less savvy, as Spencer Dymont-Shone observes: “Increased competition tends to fuel spiralling



Setting up an AdWords campaign is relatively easy. First, name your campaign and corresponding group and then select customers by language and location



Sean Cornwell, product marketing manager for AdWords, says: “The simple benefits are what make it so powerful”

Performance enhancement

As an experienced search engine marketing consultant, I help clients optimise their AdWords campaigns. Primarily, I look for logical structure and organisation. The following pointers could work in your favour ...

> Get organised

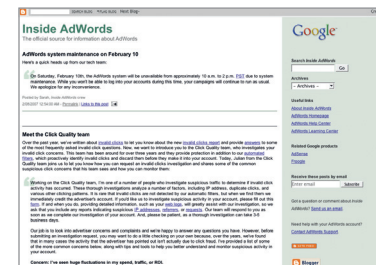
Ensure every ad group is as targeted and granular as possible. Your keywords should be in specific groups, corresponding to each advert which, in turn, point to a relevant landing page on your site. Keep your campaigns tidy and check for broken links. Monitor your account to identify what’s working and what’s not. This helps you optimise your campaigns and ensure their smooth running. Do this and your Quality Score [QS] is likely to be higher, too, which could lower the cost of sustaining your intended ad position.

> Data gathering

While every advertiser wants to reap quick conversions, the time it takes to attain them can prove invaluable for gathering data. Cast your net wide to see what’s popular. If a keyword or phrase is generating scores of impressions but few clicks, try upping your bid prices or move them to another group. After a testing period, consider deleting keywords that are not performing. You can always try them again later.

> Give Analytics time

Be patient when first using Google Analytics. Once you’ve inserted your tracking code and created conversion goals, you’ll need to wait a few weeks to accrue a reliable spread of data. A useful link for all AdWords users is adwords.blogspot.com



> Optimise for search engine visibility

The fact that AdWords gives you an insight into real-time search trends can be used to augment your search engine optimisation across your website, enhancing your conversions rate as well as potentially boosting your site’s rankings. However, steer well clear of spurious, ‘black-hat’ SEO techniques and consider employing an expert copywriter to ensure the depth and quality of your website’s content is up to scratch.

> Target

Take advantage of Google’s flexible targeting functionality. Try testing different regions or towns closer to home and not just the whole of the UK. Unless you run a nationwide or international service, this could mean you enjoy a greater number of conversions and save money, too.

> Split-test your text

Try testing a handful of different adverts for each group. You’ll soon see which ads perform better. A subtle change in syntax may be all that’s needed to appeal to searchers and, again, better quality conversions.

> Select the right keywords

While every advertiser wants coverage for their most popular keywords, it can quickly use up your budget. By focusing on the niche keywords and phrases that your customers will use, you can still harness a healthy conversion rate. However, don’t be too specific or too general, and avoid duplication of keywords where possible.

> Have a budget plan

While it’s possible to acquire good results for just a few pounds each day, if you focus on niche keywords, spending a little more initially to identify what works is advisable before scaling back your budget. However, it’s imperative that you’re certain of your ultimate objectives.

Dos and don'ts

- > **Do** use a spread of “Phrase”, “precise” and “broad” matching with your primary keyphrases and ‘negative’ matching to help avoid unwanted clicks.
- > **Do** consider other PPC providers: Yahoo Search Marketing and Microsoft adCentre can help you cast your net further.
- > **Don't** forget to monitor the source of your email and telephone enquiries – as well as Google Analytics – to help judge your campaign's success.
- > **Don't** dangle a carrot and mislead your visitors with too-good-to-be-true special offers. You'll waste clicks and sully your reputation, and you risk having your ads suspended.
- > **Don't** rely only on Google's keyword tool. Be creative, use the language your customers use and think niche: brainstorm, evaluate your competition and use other keyword resources. Above all, test, test, test!

>> bid inflation. This seems to signal the demise of the true AdWords ‘amateur’, as specialist knowledge and advice becomes evermore necessary to avoid burnt fingers and bruised budgets. Google does have a habit of surprising us all!”

For some, like Andrew Birtley, chief executive of winedirect.co.uk, it clearly pays to take the plunge: “We relaunched our website just 10 days before Christmas and spent £5,800 over nearly four days.

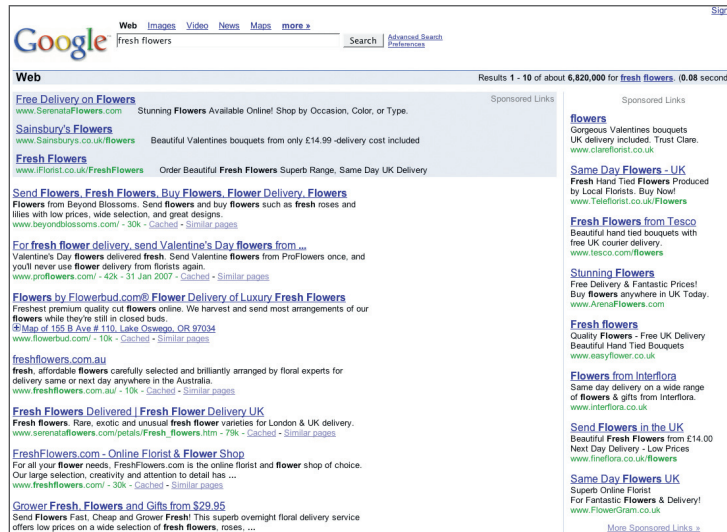
“We expected a decent return, but didn't predict that we'd be flooded with orders”

Andrew Birtley

We expected a decent return, but didn't predict that we'd be flooded with orders,” he says. “Some of the best results came much later. In those first few days, 300 of our 8,000 unique visitors spent about £40,000 with us. But many of the others came back a week, even four weeks later. They liked what they saw and returned to buy when they were ready.”

Combating click fraud

Some claim that PPC marketing figures are overinflated and promise a false dawn, distorted as they must be by click fraud, by which a person, computer program or script imitates a legitimate user by clicking on an ad without having actual interest in the link. While unwilling to disclose its anti-click fraud detection techniques, Google's resident expert on click fraud, Shuman Ghosemajumder, says: “Invalid clicks



Your AdWords ads, labelled as ‘sponsored links’, will be displayed down the right-hand side, and often at the top of any relevant results pages, triggered by the keywords corresponding to the search query

consistently make up fewer than 10 per cent of all clicks on the Google advertising system. Google takes this issue very seriously and has devoted significant resources and expertise to developing proactive, technically sophisticated measures to filter invalid clicks before advertisers are charged for them. As a result of our continued efforts, the percentage of invalid clicks that may escape detection is very small. In the interests of customer service, we investigate every click fraud claim made by our advertisers, and will credit them retroactively as appropriate.”

Data Protection concerns

Other doubters wonder what Google does with the information it collects. Brian Clifton assured me that data is never collected to target individuals. “Privacy is something we give time and attention to and we build it in from the ground up. In terms of Analytics, Google does absolutely nothing with that data. Customers ask us how their conversion rates compare with other advertisers in their sector, but there's nothing we can do, because we don't look at the data. Maybe that's a service we could offer one day perhaps, but it would be purely on an opt-in basis and very transparent.

“There are two sides to the privacy debate,” he adds. “Ultimately, we're providing a service and we want to help you improve your online marketing – that's how we get our return. The other side is that website owners have an obligation in terms of privacy, in terms of tracking their visitors, so they need to be transparent about what they're doing. But the big differentiator, and I can't speak for every product, is that our data is collected in aggregate form. We don't

say, ‘Brian has visited the site at this particular time in this order and has done this, this and this.”

Further irks include campaigns being paused for random system-generated quality control review and, some say, without explanation. While Google claims that all ads must comply with its quality control standards, these can occur without warning. Paul Walker experienced this frustration: “Two weeks after converting our original dollar account into sterling, we had our new account suspended pending a review for almost 48 hours, during the Christmas rush! No compensation was offered for this situation.”

While this gripe may be unavoidable, frustrations could be avoided by familiarising yourself with AdWords' policies. Taking time to peruse the AdWords Learning Centre, the official Inside AdWords blog, and the many other resources available, is time well spent.

There's no doubt that AdWords isn't fail-safe. Its main competitors, Yahoo Search Marketing (formerly Overture) and Microsoft adCenter certainly merit consideration. Yet, AdWords is evolving and there are exciting opportunities ahead for its advertisers, especially with new formats such as click-to-call and click-to-play video ads. While I believe that SEO is still a vital process, neglecting the power of PPC can be a costly mistake for businesses. The opportunities AdWords offers are ostensibly limited only by budget, time and imagination. Test, iterate and optimise and you may well fast-track your way to profitability. ●

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Text with clout Break boundaries without breaking the bank

Text with impact and eye-catching presentation is your unique selling point over and above that of your product in this medium. Without it, users may not even discover you.

Make your text and the aesthetic impression of your landing pages balanced and engaging. Not enough information and your visitor will be at a loss where to go next. An excess of detail and you risk information overload. Exude competence, yet understand and cater to your visitor's aspirations. Use call-to-action messages and present your copy for optimum readability. Keep your copy direct, precise and, above all, avoid any clutter that obscures what you have to offer. Likewise, garish graphics can encourage the reader to go elsewhere.

Field-test your landing page for relevant feedback to discover whether it's user-friendly, content-rich, and pertinent to your adverts. If in doubt, get your site and text optimised by an experienced organic SEO specialist and a copywriter. I have many happy clients as a result of such a working partnership.