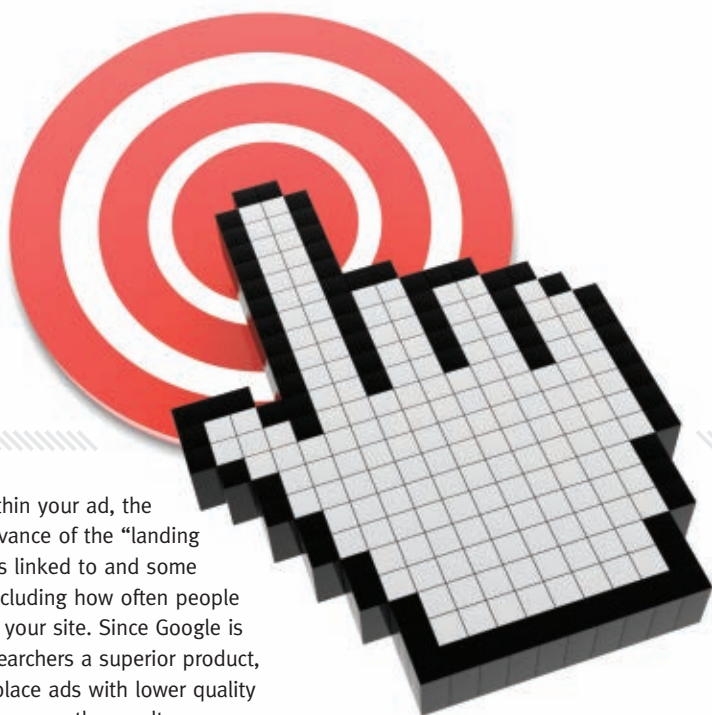


A Case for Paid-For Clicks

Integrators ought to consider investing in pay-per-click advertising as well as site optimization. *by Don Kreski*



OPTIMIZING FOR NATURAL and local search are not exact sciences. If you want real control over the key phrases you target, the wording the searchers see on the results page and the pages potential clients land on, you have to invest in pay-per-click advertising (PPC).

“Paid search is more flexible as well,” explains Tim Grant, director of search and social media strategy at Gamma Partners in Chicago. “We can set up a campaign and have results the next day. We also can test the way each of the elements work and easily change them.”

These advantages come at a price, of course: the fee the search engine charges you each time someone clicks on your ad. To set up a PPC campaign, you’ll bid against competitors in an auction that by and large determines your position on the results page. The bids on a given term may vary from 10 cents to several dollars per click, and only the highest bidders’ ads appear at all. Bidding goes on constantly, so you’ll need to check your position frequently. On the other hand, it’s a very flexible auction, giving you the option to set a maximum daily budget, so you can start small and build as your sales grow.

Understanding Pay-Per-Click

There are several things integrators need to understand to use pay-per-click effectively.

First, it’s important to realize that Google and Bing are the biggest players in this market — even Yahoo now draws its natural and paid results from Bing. Google is by far the largest, with roughly 70 percent of PPC traffic from computers and nearly 100 percent from mobile devices.

Your bid is not the only factor that determines the ranking of your ad in the paid search results. Google calculates a quality score based on whether you use

the keyword within your ad, the quality and relevance of the “landing page” your ad is linked to and some other factors, including how often people click through to your site. Since Google is trying to offer searchers a superior product, they will often place ads with lower quality scores farther down on the results page, even if the advertiser has bid a higher click price. Quality scores also affect the minimum bid you’re able to make, so low quality ads can cost you more even when there’s little or no competition for a given key phrase.

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Mobile is becoming an important factor in paid search. Marin Software recently published a study showing that 17 percent of all paid search is viewed on mobile devices, and they expect that to reach 25 percent by December 2012. You can set up separate mobile and PC campaigns in Google and Bing, running different ads for each and analyzing the results separately. Grant suggests separating PC and mobile campaigns if 10 percent or more of your clicks come from smart phones and tablets.

Setting Up a Campaign

According to Grant, there are four factors crucial to any PPC campaign.

Keyword Selection — As with natural

search optimization, the terms you target will be the biggest factor in determining your success. “If you are targeting the wrong key phrases, all the rest of your work is going to be in vain,” Grant explains. You need to be brutally honest about the terms that are working for you. You may want to sell more digital signage systems, for example, but if your website — or your business — is not set up to handle signage inquiries, you may not see the results you want.

“Long-tailed” key phrases can be much more cost effective than shorter, more generic terms. For example, if the video conferencing systems you sell are always installed, a phrase like “installed video conferencing system” may bring in more leads from people ready to buy from you than the generic “video conferencing,” as well costing far less per click.

Drafting the Advertisements — “A very common mistake that PPC advertisers make,” says Grant, “is using the same ad copy for every keyword.” He explains that your ad must quickly and visually connect with potential clients. “The easiest way to make that happen is to use the search phrase itself as your headline.” The ads themselves are very short, so there’s a bit of an art in giving just enough information to lure people to your site versus the eight or 10 other ads on the page.

There’s also a need to clarify your offerings. The phrase “sound system” can mean

anything from a car stereo to a performing arts system.

You can also specify the geography where your ads will appear, either by zip code or by specifying the number of miles from your office. If you install A/V systems only in Phoenix and Flagstaff, you don't want to pay for clicks from people in New York.

Creating Landing Pages — Once you have an ad that will attract the right customers, it should link to a page that will grab their interest. "For the best results, you need to create custom landing pages for each of the most important terms you're targeting," says Grant.

A good landing page makes it extremely obvious what you're offering. "You want a page with the key term in your headline, a clear, concise explanation of what you offer, and a strong call to action. Remember, the goal is not just getting people to your website but getting them to act once they've arrived."

Tracking Results — Google and Bing each offer tools to track "conversions," that

is, how many people who enter your site from each ad submit a "contact us" form or submit an order from your shopping cart.

These tools are not very robust, but they can give you a measure of your return on investment on a keyword by keyword and ad by ad basis. "You want to adjust your campaigns based on these numbers at least monthly," Grant suggests—daily or weekly while starting up a new campaign.

Common Mistakes

Grant explains that he sees a lot of confusion with PPC budgeting, especially from people who set up their own campaigns. "You really need to take the time to figure out all your options. Otherwise you'll see the search engines take over some of the management process. For instance, they may lower your rankings to keep you from going over your daily budget."

Smaller advertisers tend to spread themselves too thin. Since Google alone accounts for about 70 percent of all searches, a good strategy is to start with Google and then

consider Bing only after you've built a successful AdWords campaign.

Regional integrators need to be aware of their geographic targeting options. "It's not a perfect system, but you can set up your campaign so that people only within certain zip codes or at a given distance from your office will see your ad," Grant notes.

Some advertisers are unwilling to spend enough money to get the results they need. "A large number of studies have shown people spending more time searching for new vendors on the Internet than by any other means," Grant explains. "If you want to bring in more business, you have to make an investment in your website and in search engine marketing."

Grant believes that investment should be in more than one aspect of search, with the idea of ranking well in natural search, local search, pay-per-click and perhaps other areas as well. "You want to land on the same results page with as many listings as possible," he explains. **CI**

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3 Questions to Test Your PPC Campaign

ONCE YOU HAVE YOUR CAMPAIGN set up and conversion tracking in place, it's easy to tell if the keywords you've targeted are working. Ask yourself three questions.

1. Is the key phrase right for us?

The best way to tell is to run the search. If you see results relevant to what you sell, you probably belong among them. But if the results are irrelevant or mixed, consider eliminating the term.

2. Did you examine your ad?

If your key phrase is relevant, but you're not getting a lot of clicks, examine your ad. Test ads with different phrasing and see if your click rate improves.

3. Did you examine your landing page?

If you're getting a lot of clicks but not many conversions, examine your landing page. Searchers have very high expectations. Make sure you create a landing page specifically for that term, and rewrite it if necessary.