

The Art of the Pay-per-Click Start - Round 1 of 2.

Setting up a pay-per-click campaign is simple, right? Practically all paid search engines especially the top-tiered ones like Google Adwords and Overture provide extensive training materials. It is advertised that in less than three hours, you can select your keywords, write your ads and have a campaign either submitted for an editorial review at Overture or active on Google.

It sounds so unbelievably simple! But have you heard the saying "if it sounds too good to be true it probably is?"

Effective marketing strategies take experience, time and effort to achieve worth-while performance. Anyone can write a direct mail letter, buy a list of business addresses, add postage stamps and drop the letters in the mail. The actions involved in direct mail marketing are relatively ordinary. Yet highly experienced direct marketers who send and test millions of direct mail pieces each year achieve about a 1% - 2% average response rate. So what type of response rate would you expect an ordinary person to achieve? Likewise, the ordinary efforts setting up pay-per-click campaigns doesn't equate to website performance.

The start of a pay-per-click campaign initiates a process similar to those used in traditional marketing. The process involves strategic planning, creative development, measurable tracking and articulate execution. The success of your pay-per-click campaign is dependent on the thought that precedes the efforts and the continual re-assessment of the results following each set of efforts. Let me explain.

Strategic Planning - Knowing Your Target

Before setting up an account in Overture or Google Adwords, consider your target market relative to your product or service being offered on your website.

- What benefits does your product or service satisfy for your customer?
- What are the demographics and psychographics of you primary target market?
- What customer circumstances does your product or service support?

By intimately understanding your target market, you are able to start the keyword selection process. Your objective is selecting relevant keywords that connect your customer's preconceived expectation with your product or service.

Search behavior (consumer behavior in general) is difficult to predict. Start by reviewing your traditional marketing literature, listen to your sales people perform a client presentation or sales call, research your competitions' keywords (your competition includes all alternatives to your product or service) and review existing web log files to determine what product or service terms, customer circumstances, or common language your customers react to or attach to your product or service. Don't be surprised if these terms are different than what you logically expected.

Your goal is to generate a keyword list that tests the bounds of Overture's and Google Adword's relevancy standards. A longer keyword list is preferable at the start since you will ultimately filter it down based on performance.

Keywords Open Doors to "Wanting" Customers

Know that the keywords you select are doors that open you to new visitor opportunities - if you miss a door than you miss the potentially huge opportunity waiting behind it.

Do not rely on broad, advanced or phrase matches to catch additional keywords. It's true that these matching options increase traffic but they can devastate performance if you do not have a sophisticated keyword-level tracking system. One keyword under a broad matching option could represent 80% of your cost and deliver only 20% of the return.

Your Ad Serves as a Magnet Attracting Qualified Visitors to Your Website

By intimately understanding your customer you maximize your ability to write specific ads that attract qualified visitors and reduce click waste. Words are your magnets for attracting your target market to your website. Even one, single word can have an immense affect on your click-through rate.

For example, while working for a client, I ran two identical keyword ads on Adwords except one used the word, "tested" the other "proven". The "tested" ad pulled a 7% click-through rate while the "proven" one barely reached 1.5%. More so, the "tested" ad converted at a higher sales rate than the "proven".

Choosing the most compelling words and associating the strongest customer benefits is essential because the ad space allocated is so limited in Google Adwords and not much better in Overture. Although conventional wisdom dictates how to write a performance-driven ad like include free shipping, pricing or guarantees in the ad copy, it is difficult to know exactly what attracts the highest number of qualified visitors. The solution is testing all variables.

The Pay-per-Click Campaign Structure Sets the Stage for Individual Keyword-level Tracking

Setting up your pay-per-click campaign requires a hierarchical structure that is instrumental to individual keyword-level tracking. The natural structure in Overture enables individual keyword-level tracking under the standard matching option. Google Adwords' recommended structure however either throws off the ability to track at the individual keyword-level or disables the opportunity to use A/B split-testing per individual keyword.

Unfortunately, pay-per-click search engine's supply training materials focused on "driving traffic" and not on "driving performance". The difference between traffic and performance is economically significant. For Google Adwords, an incorrect campaign structure is one of the most common obstacles I have experienced while working with new clients to turnaround their poor to mediocre performing pay-per-click campaigns.

After your keywords are selected, your initial ads strategically written and your campaign structure setup, you have to add a tracking system. Overture's and Google Adword's conversion tracking tools are not recommended by most pay-per-click experts but if it's your only option than it is better than no tracking at all. It is more effective to have some insight to your keyword performance than operating in the virtual dark.

Once your campaigns are submitted to Google Adwords, Overture or any other pay-per-click search engine, your work has really just started. But we'll leave that for round two.

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