

Best Practices for PPC on Google AdWords

Your digital advertising efforts require extensive knowledge about how to handle paid search campaigns on Google AdWords and other similar networks. When you aren't an expert, you may find yourself at a loss on how to improve your Pay-Per-Click (PPC) / Cost-Per-Click (CPC) results. If you're having a problem with PPC, this checklist of optimization tasks can help you get your campaigns under control and back into positive ROI.

In this guide, we'll cover 21 actions you should take when working on your paid search and display advertising campaigns. These examples are provided for AdWords, but most items are applicable to Bing, LinkedIn, and Facebook ads as well.

Quick Definitions

- Account Structure:** Accounts are broken into **Campaigns**, which are then broken into **Ad Groups**. Ad Groups contain **Ads** that are shared by the Ad Group's **Keywords**, **Placements**, or other **Targeting Methods** (i.e., Display network topics, retargeting audiences, etc.).
- Campaign:** The top level for your account. At the campaign level, you set the budget, geographical targeting, and other important options. A Campaign contains "Ad Groups".
- Ad Groups:** A set of keywords, ads, display network targets, and bids. Each campaign is made up of one or more ad groups. The ads and keywords in each ad group should directly relate to that group's theme. Ad Group segmentation is crucial so that ads and keywords or other targeting align with each other – if you have an Ad Group targeting keywords for men's and women's flip-flops, then your ads will not be targeted to each gender, and thus not as specific as they could be, reducing Click Through Rates (CTR) and conversions. You set a default bid for each ad group.
- Keywords:** The search terms that visitors use to find your ads. A keyword is a type of **Targeting Method**.
- Placement:** A placement is another type of target (targeting method). A Display Network website where your ad might be "placed" based on the the content or other targeting options you may have selected.
- Ads:** Ads are used to attract visitors to your site. They should be simple, contain a clear message and have a headline and display URL that matches the ad group topic and keywords. Ads may be text-based or images.
- Display Campaigns:** Display network campaigns target users via Topics, Interests, Placements, Retargeting Audiences, Keywords, or other methods.
- Search Campaigns:** Search campaigns target users exclusively based on keywords that you select.
- Targeting Method:** The targeting of a campaign or ad group refers to the way you decide which people will see your ad. **Campaign-level** targeting options include geography, demographics, network (i.e., search network, display network or a combination of the two), and other high-level selections. **Ad Group-level** targeting options include keywords, placements, topics, retargeting audiences, and other secondary choices.
- Negative Keywords:** A set of search terms that you don't want to trigger your ads. For instance, if you're selling soccer shoes, you don't want your ads to display when someone searches for "ballet shoes", so you should have the word "ballet" as a negative keyword.
- Other Target Exclusions:** Exclusions are like Negative Keywords, but for other types of targets, especially Display Network targets. There are many types of exclusions, including "Placement Exclusions", "Site Category Exclusions", and etc. Basically anything you can target, can also be used as a negative target.

Overview

This guide provides 21 optimization tasks you should conduct in order to properly maintain your search campaigns on Google AdWords and similar advertising networks. We provide a brief overview of how to conduct each task and some quick tips for improving each item. If you need more in-depth info on any single item, try checking through our other guides or contact us for assistance.

We've ordered our task list by the regularity that we check these items ourselves, which generally matches the average near-term importance that we give to each item. Remember that everything is important, but there are some things you will do more than others. Here's the full list:

Things to Do Frequently on Google AdWords

1. Search Term Report / Negative Keywords
2. Bid Adjustments
3. Display Placement Review / Placement Exclusions

Things to Do Periodically On Your Site and Google.com

4. Website Review
5. Competitor Review
6. Search on Your Terms

Things to Do Periodically on Google AdWords

7. Keyword List Expansion
8. Campaign Segmentation
9. Ad Group Segmentation
10. Budget/Spend Comparison & Review
11. Network Expansion
12. Ad Copy Review
13. Ad Extension Review
14. Ad URL Tag Review / Adjust
15. Ad Performance Review / Split Testing
16. Pause Keywords, Ads and Ad Groups
17. Campaign Settings Review / Adjust
18. Campaign Labeling
19. Conversion Tracking Analysis

Things to Do On Other Sites

20. Google Analytics Comparison
21. Long Term Planning / Review

21 Ways to Improve Your AdWords Campaigns

Things to Do Frequently on Google AdWords

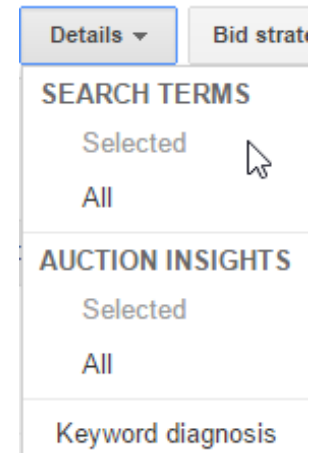
We'll start with some quick optimizations on AdWords. For these first three actions, focus on keywords and placements with high spend first, and work your way down into lower spend targets.

1. Search Term Report / Add Negative Keywords

Improving your negative keyword lists is a simple task which can be repeated frequently to ensure that you are getting well-qualified traffic. To find appropriate negative keywords, run a "Search Terms" report. This report will show you what terms people are using to find your ads. The report is likely to show a variety of keywords unrelated to your services. Add negatives based on these unrelated terms.

Conduct a "Search Terms" report in AdWords under the "Details" menu at the top of your keyword lists, *as shown on your right*.

You can run the report for terms you select via the checkboxes to the left of the keyword list, or you can run it for "All" the terms in the currently selected view (i.e., at the account, campaign or ad group level). Use this report to identify search terms for which you don't want to show ads and create negative keywords based around terms you'd like to exclude. A healthy negative keyword list will help keep your campaigns well targeted and your traffic quality high.



2. Bid Adjustments

Another relatively simple task, keyword bid adjustments can help you spend less when a keyword is not performing well, or can be used to move well-performing keywords into a higher position (a.k.a., "ad ranks"). Bid adjustments should be used in conjunction with negative keyword efforts – if a keyword is performing poorly, it might need its traffic narrowed via negative keywording in addition to adjustment of the bids.

Adjust your bids at the keyword or ad group level by clicking on the number shown in the Max CPC column of your keyword list, *as shown on your right*. You can use the tiny graph below the bid to see Google's estimates for how the keyword will perform at various bid levels.



<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	about.com
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	aboutorganics.co.uk
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	activebeat.com
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	activebeat.com

3. Display Placement Review / Placement Exclusions

Reviewing Display placements is the Display Network equivalent of viewing a Search Term report for Negative Keywords. There is a good chance that your ads are displaying in places where you are unlikely to find qualified traffic.

In AdWords, click on the Display Network tab and then click over to "Placements" on the subsequent list of menu buttons to view your placements.

Sorting your placement list by impressions is likely to show multiple placements with very low CTRs where your ads are wasted. Similarly, sorting by cost might show website placements where you're spending a good deal without conversions.

Things to Do Periodically on Your Site and Google.com

Next, review your website and use Google.com to run a few searches.

4. Website Review

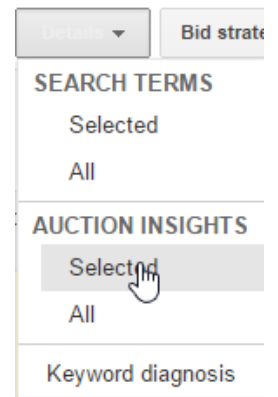
Review your website for missing keywords and recent changes. Going back to basics with a website review can greatly inform your AdWords campaigns. Frequent site and offer reviews will also help ensure that you are always using the best possible landing pages.

If you're having trouble with ad conversion rates, try matching your ad language with the language already in use on your site. During this review, you should also consider new Site Links and get customers as close to a conversion as possible. Finally, you might come up with new ideas for website improvements. If you need help with your landing pages, check out our landing page best practice checklist.

5. Competitor Review

Conduct a review of your competitor websites and offers. Doing this will give you all the benefits of the website review described above, but with additional information on your competition. Learn how your competitors describe their business, specialize their offer, and come up with new tactics, keywords, and ad copy to beat them.

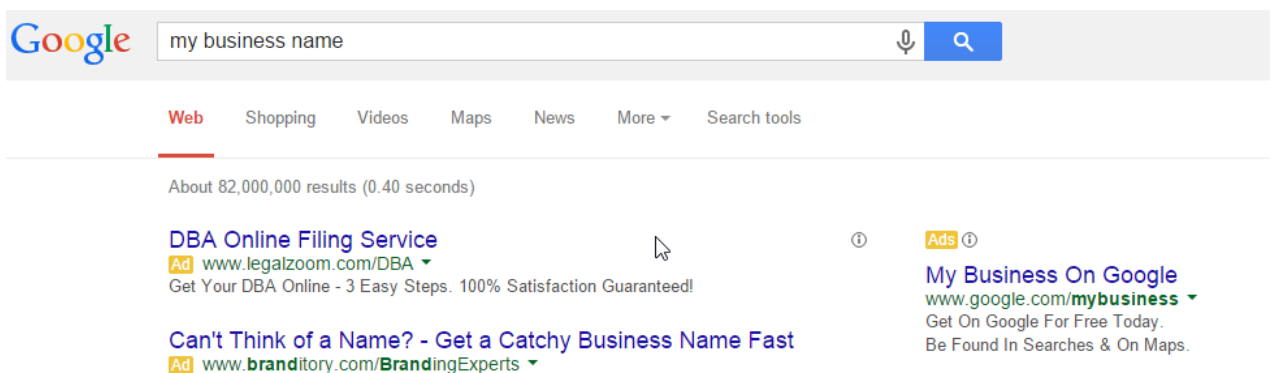
This review may also reveal website suggestions you can use on your own site, inform any competitor Ad Groups you might be running, and help you understand the industry better. Searching on your own terms may help reveal competitors, and looking at the Auction Insights can reveal who your direct competition is for your current search terms, which may turn out to be different than the market that you thought you were in. Run an Auction Insights analysis using the same Details menu clicked earlier to run a Search Terms report, *as shown on your right*.



6. Search On Your Terms

The best way to see when your ads are coming up is from the impression reports and search term reports in AdWords. Frequently searching Google for your own term can reduce the overall CTR of your keyword. Furthermore, remember that you're costing yourself money every time you click on one of your ads. Therefore, searching for yourself isn't a good way to tell if your AdWords campaigns are 'working'.

With all this in mind, it can be a good idea to occasionally search for a particular keyword of interest to see which ad shows up. This will help you ensure that the right ad is showing up for the right keyword. Instances where this would be a problem would be if you had similar or duplicate keywords in multiple campaigns or ad groups, or if your campaigns aren't properly negative keyworded.



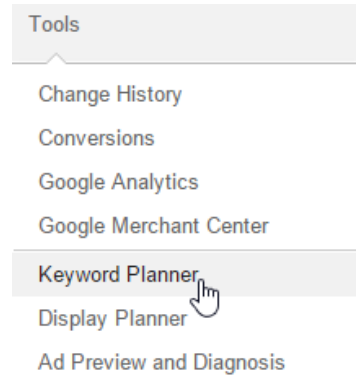
Things to Do Periodically on Google AdWords

We now return to AdWords for less frequent (but still important) actions to take on various campaign elements.

7. Keyword List Expansion

Adding more keywords is probably the best way to increase high quality traffic. Then again, it's also a great way to increase unqualified traffic and spend more money, so be wary. Looking at the Search Terms report, as described above in Section 1, "Search Terms Report", will provide ideas for search terms that are qualified and might have already converted in the past. Viewing the AdWords Keyword Planner will give you lots of keywords of very varying quality. If you've recently completed your website and competitor reviews you hopefully have some new ideas on terms that can get you the traffic you're looking for.

Access the Keyword Planner tool at the very top of your AdWords account under the "Tools" menu, *as shown on your right*.



8. Campaign Segmentation

It is important that you segment your campaigns properly for future analysis and optimization. You can segment your campaigns in many different ways depending on your needs.

If you're currently running all of your ad groups in a single campaign, you should split this into multiple campaigns. This will help you get better results by improving the budget allocation between various keyword and target groups depending on their performance and subject matter.

For example, if you're selling shoes, your campaigns might be broken up by type of footwear, i.e., formal-wear, sneakers, sports shoes, flip flops, and etc. These campaigns might then be broken into ad groups that differentiate based on gender and brand. Alternatively, if you're selling a local service in different cities, you may divide your campaigns by geography, or if you're selling a cloud-based application, you may divide your campaigns based on profitability of each topic or target group.

More on Campaign Structure and Budgets

Since both Budgets and Targeting are set at the Campaign level, campaigns tend to have different goals and performance targets. For example, a campaign promoting a live product demo should probably have different CPA and spend targets than a campaign promoting the product itself, or a campaign promoting a free trial download. If you're selling multiple products, each product will also have different performance targets.

Therefore, the way you structure your campaigns is usually directly tied to the way you allocate budgets internally at your company.

Here are some quick rules of thumb for structuring your campaigns:

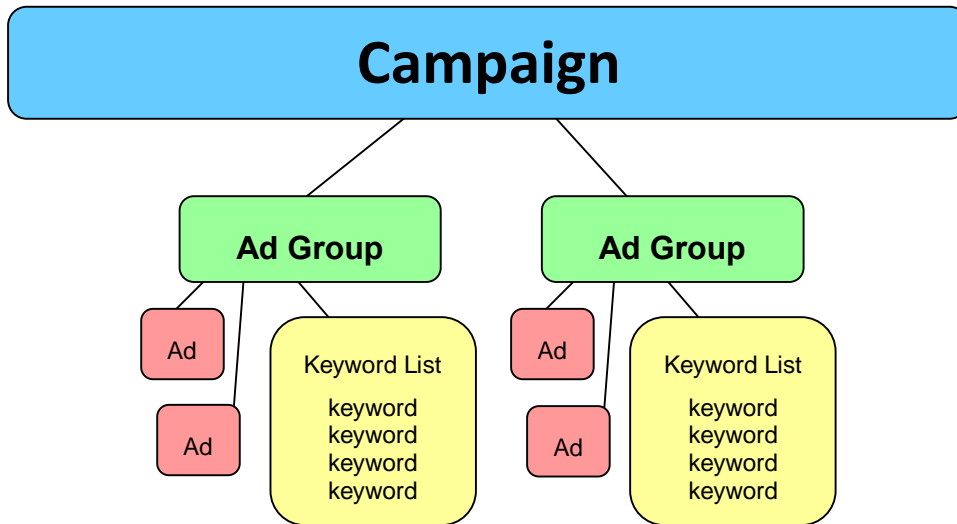
1. You should ALWAYS split Display Network campaigns from Search Network campaigns.
2. You should ALWAYS split Branded traffic into its own campaign.
3. If you have different marketing budgets and Cost Per Acquisition (CPA) goals on different product categories, you should create unique campaigns for each product category.
4. Alternatively, if you have different marketing budgets and CPA goals for different regions of the country, you will create different campaigns for each region.
5. If you are trying to generate sales on your website, as well as leads, you will want different campaigns for the sales landing pages and the lead landing pages.

9. Ad Group Segmentation

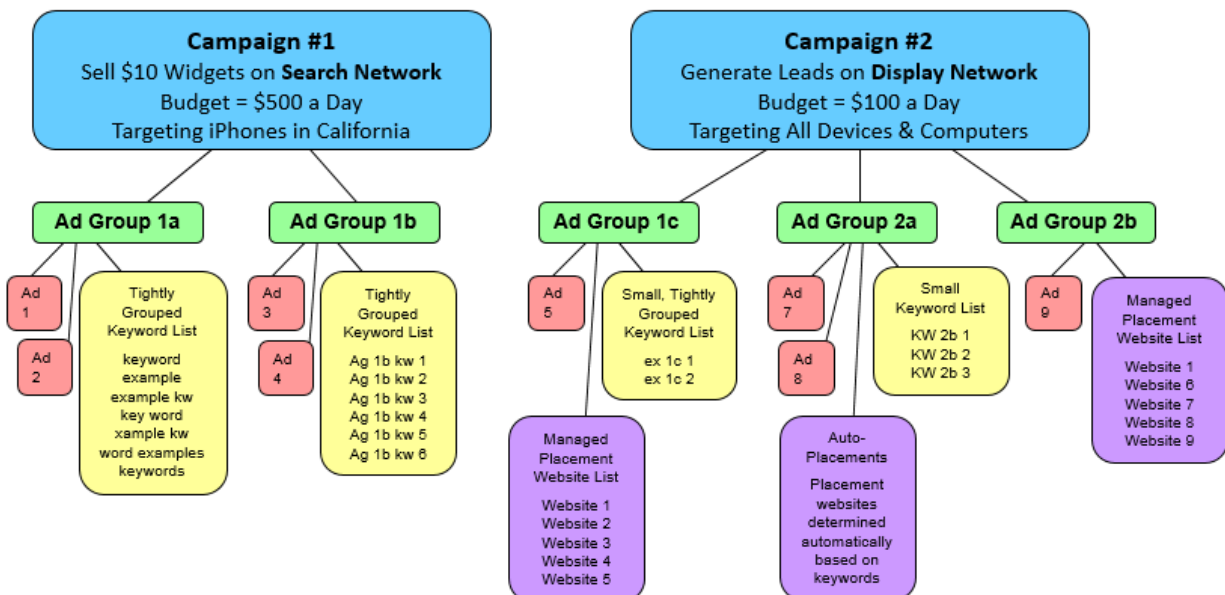
Similarly to campaign segmentation, properly structuring your ad groups will help you keep tight control on traffic, allowing you to optimize bids better and keep on top of where our traffic is coming from, where your money is going, and what's performing well or poorly. Remember that too many Ad Groups in a campaign are hard to keep track of and could wind up being counterproductive, so an ad group segmentation project may lead to a campaign resegmentation as well.

We've provided the following two diagrams to better explain Ad Group and Campaign structure.

Most Basic Campaign and Ad Group Structure



More Complex Account Structure with Search and Display Campaigns and Ad Groups



10. Budget/Spend Comparison and Review

Periodically review the budgets on your active campaigns and compare your budget allocation decisions to the ROI for each campaign. If you need help determining this, turn to our ROI calculator spreadsheet, *shown on your right*. If the ROI is high in a low budget campaign, you should reallocate this budget. Contact us to access this ROI Calculator right away.

Ultimately, you should be able to answer these questions: Are you hitting your budget goals? Are you spending it well? What would an increase in budget achieve? How does your spend look compared to the budget? Do you need to spend more? If you've just completed a keyword expansion or bid optimization effort, you may need to adjust bids accordingly.

Post Campaign Analysis			Need Help? Expand the Hidden Columns "C" and "D" for Tips, Examples, and Information on How the Trade Are Calculated	
Monthly Per Source				
Variables You Can Edit	\$, # or %	Automatically Calculated	\$, # or %	
How Much Do You SPEND for this Source?	\$10,000.00	Total Revenue Minus Advertising Cost (ROI)	\$ 1,000.00	
How Many VISITS Came from this Source?	1000	Cost Per Visit / Click (CPC)	\$50.00	
How Many LEADS Came from this Source?	50	Cost Per Lead Acquisition (CPA)	\$200.00	
What OTHER MARKETING COSTS Do You Have for this Source?	\$1,000.00	INCOME from this Source	\$25,000.00	
How Much REVENUE Is Generated from an AVERAGE SALE?	\$1,000.00	NUMBER OF SALES from this Source	25	
What is the LEADS TO SALES RATE?	50%			
Yearly for this Source				
Variables You Can Edit	\$, # or %	Automatically Calculated	\$, # or %	
Total yearly Spend:	\$120,000.00	Yearly Revenue Minus Advertising Cost at This Rate (Annual ROI):	\$156,000.00	

Pre-Campaign Analysis			Need Help? Expand the Hidden Columns "C" and "D" for Tips, Examples, and Information on How the Trade Are Calculated	
Monthly Per Source				
Variables You Can Edit	\$, # or %	Automatically Calculated	\$, # or %	
How Much Do You Want to SPEND for this Source? (MONTHLY BUDGET)	\$1,000.00	Total Expected Revenue Minus Advertising Cost (EXPECTED ROI)	\$ 48,000.00	
How Much Do You Historically Spend Per Visit? (COST PER VISIT or CPC)	\$1	Expected VISITS	1,000	
What is Your Visit to Conversion Rate? (CONVERSION RATE)	10%	Expected LEAD CONVERSIONS	100	
Expected Cost Per Lead Acquisition (CPA)		Expected INCOME from this Source	\$50,000.00	
What OTHER MARKETING COSTS Do You Have for this Source?	\$1,000.00	Expected NUMBER OF SALES from this Source	50	
How Much REVENUE Is Generated from an AVERAGE SALE?	\$1,000.00			
What is the LEADS TO SALES RATE?	50%			
Yearly for this Source				
Variables You Can Edit	\$, # or %	Automatically Calculated	\$, # or %	
Total yearly Spend:	\$12,000.00	Expected yearly Revenue at This Rate:	\$76,000.00	

11. Network Expansion

It is important to periodically consider your network options. Do you advertise on the Display Network? Should you? Ultimately retail and B2C businesses will probably benefit more than B2B and services organizations. Businesses interested in lead generation and selling higher priced items probably shouldn't consider the Display Network until they've exhausted their keyword expansion efforts. However, for many businesses, this could be a good place to invest in advertisements.

Furthermore, you should be asking yourself if you're using remarketing? Remarketing campaigns tend to convert with a good CPA, but ensure that they're set up properly. Remarketing campaigns that are B2C should have a shorter membership duration, while businesses who specialize in generating leads should have a longer membership duration.

12. Ad Copy Review

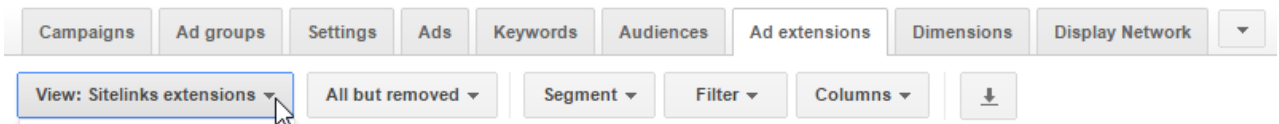
To perform an Ad Copy Review, look over your ad text to ensure that it matches your keywords, website and core messaging (in that order or importance). The amount of space available to make your pitch is very small, and the ad copy needs to be as sharp as possible. We have found that the best method for performing an ad copy review is to export your ad copy into a spreadsheet and manipulating the data here. Do this by clicking on the little downward arrow located directly underneath the 'Dimensions' tab in the AdWords interface.

If you're having trouble making new ad copy fit, try turning 'and' to '&', 'shipping and handling' to 's/h', 'learn about' to 'info on', and many other shortcuts to maximize space.

13. Ad Extensions Review

Google is now giving more prominence to Ad Extensions in the calculation of quality scores. Therefore, it is important that you check in on the use of Ad Extensions in your campaigns. To view or modify your extensions, click through the extension options in AdWords, *as shown below*, or simply search on your terms and see which extensions are currently associated with your ad.

All online campaigns



Site Links are an easy option for improving most ads, whereas Google Review, Places and Plus Extensions require a lot more set up. If you're interested in receiving phone calls, try Call Extensions.

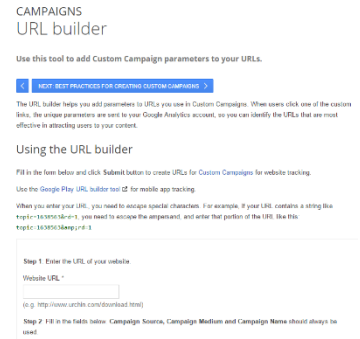
14. Ad URL Review / Tag Review / URL Adjustments

It is important that you periodically audit the URLs on each of your ads to ensure that you have properly applied the correct landing pages across each of your ad groups.

If you aren't using auto-tagging, you also need to ensure that all of your ads are properly tagged with the most appropriate URL extension. If you need help with this, search Google for the "Google Analytics URL Builder", *as shown here*:

Furthermore, if you've recently reviewed your website, you might have noticed some new destination URLs which could be utilized as new or better landing pages. This is a good opportunity to apply these new URLs.

Coupled with an Ad Copy Review, auditing your URLs and tags will help ensure that your tracking, ad messaging and landing page are all properly aligned.

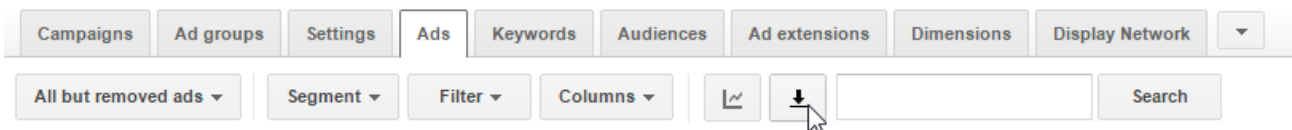


15. Ad Performance Review/Split-Testing

Running an ad performance review will show you the results of split tests and help identify the best performing ads.

You'll need to export your ad data and create a custom report to conduct this review. To do this, click on the little arrow pointing at an underscore below the main set of AdWords menu tabs, as described above in "Section 12, Ad Copy Review", *and shown below*.

All online campaigns



Once you have the data in a spreadsheet, you can subtotal your ad performance by groups based on different lines of ad text to quickly ascertain the winners of ad copy a/b split tests.

16. Pause Keywords, Ads and Ad Groups

Ultimately, you may need to pause some of your ads or search terms based on performance, product availability, seasonality, or other concerns. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, and you can always unpause (reactivate) them at a later date if you decide it wasn't a good idea.

If your campaigns are limited by budget, this means that your ads are being served unevenly, and some of your most important ads may not be getting full budget coverage. Therefore, it would be a good idea to pause some ad groups, or restructure them into a different campaign in order to make sure that your most desirable keywords are always showing ads. Pausing keywords and ad groups is a great way to quickly make this happen.

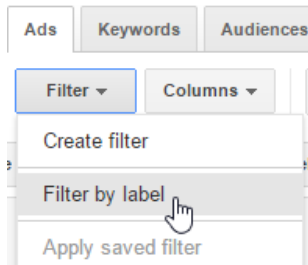
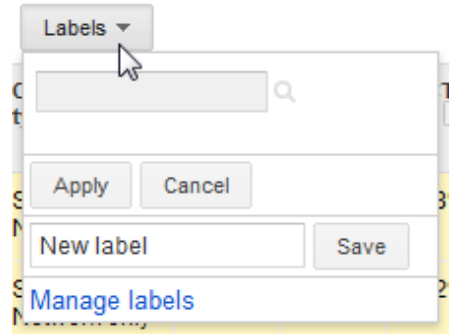
17. Campaign Settings Review and Adjustments:

You need to regularly audit your campaign settings to make sure you are targeting the most appropriate geographies, that your advertising schedule is best-suited to your needs, that your network settings are correct, your device targeting, and that your ad rotation methods are set appropriately. After checking on how mobile traffic performs in Analytics, you may want to change you how bid on mobile devices.

18. Labels and Filters

Labels are an essential way to ease keeping tabs on a large account with lots of campaigns and ad groups. Create labels such as “branded”, “search”, “retargeting”, and etc., to enable quick filtering for future reporting.

You can label campaigns, ad groups, keywords and ads. Select a few items you want to label and the ‘Labels’ button will become clickable, *as shown on your right*. Then you can select labels to apply, or create a new label. The example has no labels currently. Fill in the box that says “New label”, and click “Save” to create a label.



Next, use the “Filter by Label” option in each view (i.e., campaigns, ad groups, keywords, ads) to compare target audience, geo-targeted campaigns, keywords groupings, and more.

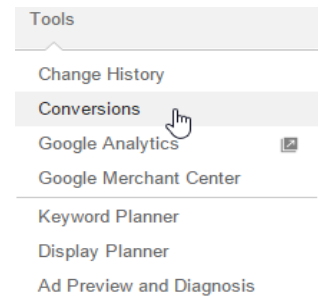
Access Filters using the “Filter” menu located directly beneath the “Ads” tab on the main tab list in the AdWords interface, *as shown on your left*.

Save your most commonly used Filters for future access. This is particularly useful for ad reviews because you can label the ads in your split tests.

19. Conversion Tracking Analysis

Before leaving AdWords, check out your Conversion tracking information under the main AdWords tools menu, *as shown on your right*.

You will find a list of all the conversions set up in your AdWords account. If a conversion type is “Reporting” and has conversions listed then everything is good. If a conversion type is “Unverified” or showing “No activity recorded within the last 30 days”, you may need to analyze your conversion process and ensure that the correct tracking codes have been placed on your “thank you” confirmation pages.



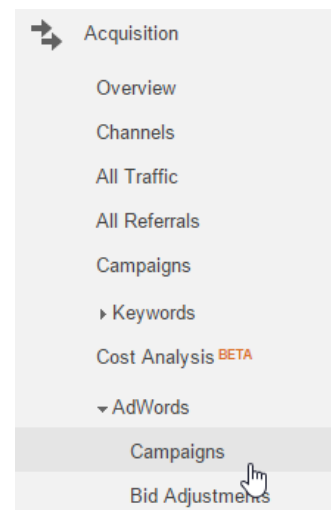
Things to Do On Other Sites

20. Google Analytics Comparison

Cross reference the AdWords section of Google Analytics (GA) under the “Acquisition” menu of GA, *as shown on your right*. Assuming that your accounts are correctly linked and tagged, GA can provide valuable additional detail on how users interact with your site after clicking on your ads.

Start by checking your traffic by campaign to see how your ad campaigns are translating into site goal conversions. If you see no campaigns or conversions, check your AdWords auto-tagging settings and account linking options under the Admin menu and as well as your linked accounts in GA.

Many of the other reports in GA can also contribute to how you structure and optimize your campaigns. For instance, a geographic report The Mobile Traffic Report can also provide insights into how you should set-up your Enhanced campaign settings.



21. Long Term Planning/Review

Finally, it is vital that you periodically pick your head up out of the weeds of AdWords optimization and ask yourself the bigger questions about your long term strategy for your paid SEM campaigns.

For example, if you aren't currently meeting your traffic or Cost Per Acquisition (CPA) goals, do you have a plan to meet them soon? What will your account look like in six months? Are there any new product launches for which you need to be preparing landing pages and campaigns? Any approaching holidays you can take advantage of?

What Else Should I Be Considering? What If I Need Help?

Ultimately, almost every element of a digital advertising program discussed above could be expanded into its own full guide, and we only had space for so much in these ten short pages. Therefore, we'll wrap up this guide with a list of some additional questions you should try to answer when trying to improve the results of your paid advertising campaigns:

- Have you audited your entire paid click-to-conversion process?
- Are you running a branded campaign to control your search market?
- Are you using competitor campaigns to take advantage of the natural crossover between brands?
- Have you successfully linked AdWords to Google Analytics?
- Are you running into trademark infringement issues with your ads?
- Do you have a contact at Google that you can speak to about these issues?

CPC marketing is complicated! If you're still lost or you're not sure what we're talking about with the above questions, or if you just need help, reach out to us today at <http://strongpages.com/contact/> for a free consultation on your digital marketing program.

In our next guide, we'll cover the best practices for SEO.

About Strongpages

Strongpages is a leading digital marketing agency with a deep history of developing digital strategy and managing successful online marketing programs. Strongpages has generated significant results for our client's brands – ranging from startups to the world's largest retailers. We're dedicated to helping businesses of all kinds leverage this mission-critical channel to fuel their business in the digital age.

Our expert resources represent leaders in strategy, search technology and online marketing, combined with hands-on leadership expertise that helps translate program data into actionable business intelligence. This unique combination gives clients unparalleled results – improving targeted, qualified lead flow to your sales funnel and driving immediate deal opportunities and revenue growth.

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