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The Right Keywords for Each Stage in the Buy Cycle

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Depending on whether your customer is in the research, evaluate or decide stage, make sure your keywords are most effective.

It is easier now than ever before to enter into the search engine marketing world and start a paid search program. You create a list of keywords that apply to your business, throw them in a Google campaign and hit "Launch." You wait for results to skyrocket and your website analytics to surge.

But what happens when that's not the outcome?

Usually you become overwhelmed with the range of options for tweaking the campaign -- you can change groupings, match types, negative keywords, daily ad caps, positioning, creative treatments, tracking URLs and more. So, let's backtrack. The best way to ensure a successful program is to build your pay-per-click (PPC) campaign with your return on investment (ROI) in mind from the beginning. Start with your goals and build the search strategy to match, beginning with keywords that effectively coincide with your prospects' purchase cycles.

The majority of final purchases stem from brand or product-specific searches (iPod Nano 8 GB). But for most consumers, that's not how the purchase cycle starts. In the initial awareness and information gathering stages, the original search phrase is more along the lines of "mp3 player" or "iPod info."

Once the user is in the mode of researching available products, she may have evaluated and compared various options. Her searches now are "Sansa mp3 players," "iPod Nano vs. Mini" and "Zune music players."

Finally, when she makes her choice and is ready to buy, she searches for "Sansa clip deals," "Apple store" or "Microsoft Zune 80GB."

From the awareness to the decision phase of the buying cycle, search behavior changes. In order to connect with the consumer, and ultimately create those desirable ROI-impacting conversions, your PPC program must coordinate with the search cycle. Identify a search cycle based on influencers, decision-makers and purchasers. To appear to the entire audience, think RED: Research. Evaluate. Decide.

Research

Potential customers in this phase of the search cycle have realized they have a need or a





problem and are conducting online research to find the solution. What needs do your products or services fill, or what problems do they alleviate?

When crafting these keyword phrases, remember they should be general and situate your brand competitively for a broad array of terms. Utilize your negative terms to hone in on the right audience, and remember, not every prospect is the same. Keep each unique target audience and how they might search in mind; create personas if several, very distinct audiences exist. A student certainly researches new technological gadgets differently from a baby boomer. And influencers utilize longer search strings than decision makers do. Cover each audience constituent as a subcategory when compiling your "Research" keywords.

Evaluate

Once a consumer has done the research she searches with more targeted terms in order to evaluate multiple providers. Search terms should include your product or service offerings by name as well as language attesting to their benefits. These can be expensive, highly competitive terms, but it's important to distinguish your offerings from your competitors'.

Also take the opportunity during this phase to build brand trust and develop a relationship with searchers. This consumer may not be ready to buy, but she is looking for information. And a positive experience with your company might make or break whether she shows future interest. In fact, your search keywords and ad creative are included in her evaluation of your company.

Decide

Here's where you need to focus on your brand name, detailed product or service names and long-tail searches. Consumers are sometimes very specific in their searches, and long-tail terms are inexpensive to implement. Brand keywords should include what your company is best known for. Do you have a notable tagline or offer a solution others don't? These count as brand terms, too. Just remember, prospects may not choose you during the decision phase if you haven't established yourself during their research and evaluation stages.

Once you've compiled your RED terms, you'll have a well-rounded, goal-oriented program and you can move forward with your search program, building ad text around each stage and allocating budget accordingly. Beyond the basic pillar of your search program's setup, you can build its engagement platform (including messaging, landing pages and offers), and of course, put the proper programs in place to measure the results. Measuring value is critical to closing the loop in your program, and to proving the ROI of your search program.

Fears of budget cuts are common in a down-turned economy. However, [eMarketer predicts that U.S. online advertising will continue to grow](#) through 2008. Online ad spending will rise by 23 percent in 2008, and advertising overall will grow by 3.3 percent. Paid search is expected to increase the most -- by 40 percent. Why? Because it's measurable.

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