

PPC TRENDS

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By Danny Goodwin

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5 Ways to Optimize Google Ads with Call Tracking

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Ad Verification: The First Step of PPC Optimization

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CONTENT

10 IMPORTANT PPC TRENDS TO WATCH IN 2021

BY **DANNY GOODWIN**

In a normal year, PPC marketing is fairly unpredictable.

But 2020 was anything but a normal year.

Last year, nobody could have or would have predicted we'd be dealing with the impact of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic throughout 2020.



Instead, our PPC experts were busy talking about trends like automation, audience targeting, and privacy.

Hopefully 2021 won't throw quite as many curveballs at those of you doing PPC advertising and paid social.

So what will be the most important PPC trends in 2021?

As part of my fourth annual look at PPC Trends here on Search Engine Journal, I asked some of the top PPC experts for their insights.

Here are the top 10 PPC trends you need to know for 2021 – from paid search, to paid social, to remarketing, and beyond – according to 32 experts.





1 GOODBYE, DATA

Obfuscation of data, unfortunately, will be a continuing trend in 2021, according to **Julie F. Bacchini**, President & Founder, Neptune Moon.

Between Google Ads limiting access to search query data to the coming obliteration of tracking cookies as we know it, digital marketers are going to have to adapt in a pretty major way again in 2021,” Bacchini said. “The bottom line for 2021: be ready to be flexible.”

Amy Hebdon, Founder, Paid Search Magic, said similar.

“It’s been a slow burn for years, but this is Google Ads’ worst year on record for shifting away from transparency and limiting the data we have to make the best decisions for our accounts,” Hebdon said. “Barring any regulatory interference, we can expect Google to continue on this path indefinitely as it maximizes its own revenue and earnings.”

Brad Geddes, Co-Founder, AdAlysis, also expects Google to continue hiding data as it relies more on machine learning.

“I expect that trend to continue where Google forces advertisers to rely more on Google’s machine learning and data than on their own expertise,” Geddes said. “While this trend may help the small advertiser, Google will continue to hurt the larger and more sophisticated advertisers with these changes.”

So what can PPC marketers do to succeed in this environment?

“Imperfect data is no one’s favorite, but wise marketers will need to use incomplete data to see the signal from the noise,” said **Mark Irvine**, Director of Paid Media, SearchLab. “Rather than focus on the loss, wise marketers will still need to see what’s working best with the 80% of information they have and learn how to guide their campaigns to target more of that audience.

According to Irvine, that means:

- Writing more “good” ads than “bad” ads with responsive ad assets.
- Reviewing patterns of search queries, rather than individual search terms.
- Guiding automated bidding, rather than controlling bidding directly.

And, according to **Michelle Morgan**, Director of Client Services, Clix Marketing, it also means doing more with less.

“Companies are going to rely on PPC to drive larger portions of their revenue, while at the same time the channels are taking away functionality and data transparency,” Morgan said. “So we literally need to have a bigger impact for our clients with less control and insights into performance.”

Ben Wood, Strategy Director, Hallam, added that the erosion of hyper-specific user-level targeting will push more advertisers back to contextual targeting methods and raise the importance of compelling creative.

“The importance of effective persuasion techniques to sit alongside the precision targeting most of us PPC marketers have become more familiar with will be emphasized,” Wood said.



CUSTOMER JOURNEY

2 UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE & THE BUYER JOURNEY

As **Aaron Levy**, Group Director, SEM, Tinuiti, puts it: the days of PPC marketers controlling every ad and every bid based on words alone. What's this mean?

“We'll be forced to look at the whole picture of the audience we're aiming for,” Levy said. “While I mourn the loss of data we were so used to from our friends

at Google and Microsoft, I for one welcome the opportunity to be a better marketer, moving beyond just language-driven ads.”

In 2021, the most successful PPC marketers will be strategists focused on their target audience, said **Kristopher Jones**, Founder & CEO, LSEO.com.

“In an era where there is less control due to automation and AI, what matters is who sees your ads to ensure you’re driving qualified clicks,” Jones said.

Therefore, advertisers who align PPC marketing efforts with the buyer journey will come out ahead of the pack in 2021, according to **Melissa Mackey**, Search Supervisor, gyro.

“As an advertiser, expect to spend time thinking about your customer and how they decide to buy from you.

- How long does the process take?
- Where do they interact?
- What information do they need?
- What might they be searching for?
- How do you measure success at each step?"

And many other PPC experts agreed, including **Jonathan A. Kagan**, VP of Search, 9RoofTops.

"The number one thing for everyone to do is get control of your audiences," Kagan said. "Know who your target audience is. Know who is worth prospecting versus who is most likely to convert. Separate them, and manage them independently."

With less and less information being available related to the intent of a potential customer, marketers will need to evolve their approach and think more about engaging the right audiences, said **Justin Freid**, Chief Growth and Innovation Officer, CMI/Compas.

“A tactical example of this is how we have seen high adoption of Bing’s ability to integrate LinkedIn data into their targeting,” Freid said. “Yes, intent is important, but knowing you are targeting a qualified lead/customer is of equal value. This will also help us begin to look at the LTV (Lifetime Value) of customer vs. a single sale driven through paid search.”

Purna Virji, Senior Manager, Global Engagement, Microsoft Advertising, believes that in 2021, PPC will go back to basics, which means putting customers and communities first and marketing with purpose.

She highlighted two areas that are important for reaching your customers:

- **Keywords:** The goal here is to target potential customers based on their unique needs that map to the keywords they use to satisfy their unique dimension of diversity.
- **Images:** Choosing imagery is an important part of the process of constructing a meaningful and inclusive customer experience.

What does it all mean?

Here's how **Kirk Williams**, Owner, ZATO, put it:

The business that invests well into learning:

- Who their audience is.
- What they care about.
- Where they spend their time.
- What they want to hear.

...can then build a PPC campaign strategy targeting those audiences (social) and how they are searching (search).

This will inform:

- Landing page creation and content.
- Ad creative.
- Various Google Ads targeting metrics such as audiences, keywords, location, devices, and more.



3 EVEN MORE AUTOMATION

Like it or not, ad platforms are taking away more control from PPC marketers.

Steve Hammer, President, RankHammer, believes this trend is going to accelerate in 2021.

“This will force us to rely on feeding better data back into the platforms,” Hammer said. “That better data will need to factor much more than just binary metrics, even where we used to use them. Leads will need to consider quality and feed values back based upon this, or the platform will automate for those easy low quality leads.”

Robert Brady, Founder, Righteous Marketing, also believes we will continue to see the proliferation of more automation in PPC.

“So if you want greater success in your PPC efforts, get familiar with how the automation works,” Brady said. “Humans are still needed, but the platforms want their algorithms to have more leash.”

As pointed out by **Pauline Jakober**, Founder & CEO, Group Twenty Seven, results are the ultimate goal – regardless of whether they’re achieved by automated, manual, or a mix of both managed strategies.

“For areas of automation where we have lost control, PPC pros will likely have to accept, adapt, and move on,” Jakober said. “However, the positive

side of this forced adaptation is that it will give PPC pros more cycles to focus on strategies that build brand awareness and brand affinity.”

Meanwhile, **Frederick Vallaey**s, Co-Founder, Optmyzr, said one of the big lessons learned in 2020 was that automation, when used wisely, can actually save the day when all else falls apart.

He believes advertisers will use automation to save time while finding ways to use human intelligence to manipulate these systems to gain an edge over competitors.

“For example, advertisers will spend more time building checks-and-balances for the machines rather than doing account maintenance with automations like Smart Bidding and Responsive Search Ads handling tasks previously done by hand,” Vallaey said.

“Advertisers will look for ways to get notified when these systems deviate from expectations, either due to shortcomings of the tools themselves, or because unplanned events in the world are messing up the best-laid plans.”



4 DIVERSIFICATION WILL BECOME MORE IMPORTANT

Like it or not, ad platforms are taking away more control from PPC marketers.

Steve Hammer, President, RankHammer, believes this trend is going to accelerate in 2021.

One unintended consequence of the loss of control in Google will likely lead to more companies shifting PPC dollars to other search engines such as Microsoft Ads, according to **Brooke Osmundson**, Director of Paid Media, NordicClick Interactive.

“This platform still gives marketers the robust data it needs to make sound strategic decisions,” Osmundson said.

Christine Zirnheld, Digital Marketer, Cypress North, said one of the most important things PPC marketers can do in 2021 to set themselves up for success is diversifying their skillset beyond Google Ads.

“As Google continues to move away from actionable data and more toward machine learning, it will be vital for advertisers to be well-versed in other advertising platforms that allow them more control over their spending, reach, and messaging,” Zirnheld said. “In order to do the best work we can for our clients, we simply can’t rely on Google Ads as heavily as we once did.”

Put simply: Diversification is key for a winning PPC strategy, according to **Amy Bishop**, Owner & Digital Marketing Consultant, Cultivative.

“The more diverse your media mix, the more nimble you can be,” Bishop said. “A diverse strategy puts you in a good place to capitalize on opportunities to scale and/or redistribute budget as needed in the wake of an unforeseen shake-up.

Nikki Kuhlman, Senior Account Director, JumpFly, agreed.

“Test other platforms that help drive overall business,” Kuhlman said. “I’m starting to see this with clients more and more.

“I’m very much a ‘traditional’ PPC account manager, but have been talking with clients about diversifying their advertising beyond Google Ads Search and Display, and Microsoft Advertising. I’m also talking about testing YouTube, Verizon Media’s native ads, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, even TikTok if the audience fits,” Kuhlman added.



5 HARNESS THE POWER OF FIRST-PARTY DATA

How data is sourced is about to be disrupted, as noted by **Christi Olson**, Global Media SEM Lead, Microsoft. This is due to changes in global privacy policies and restrictions to third-party cookies across browsers.

“Search marketers will need to focus on data in 2021 and work with their companies and agencies to develop a data strategy to maintain privacy compliance and usability of data in this new landscape,” Olson said.

“With how dependent marketers have been on cookie-driven targeting technologies, I believe that developing new solutions not reliant on cookies is the key 2021 priority for marketers,” said **Ilya Cherepakhin**, Head of Performance Marketing, Milestone Inc.

“Businesses are able to get greater accuracy because they can segment first-party data with great customization – as closely as needed to manage business goals and align with wider organizational needs, and brand objectives,” Cherepakhin added. “While daunting, creating first-party, data-driven solutions are well worth the investment since they benefit multiple digital channels.”

Ed Leake, Managing Director, AdEvolver & Midas Media, said search engines don’t want you to track anything meaningful anymore. So being in a position to recover a good chunk of your traffic data is a big deal.

“With server-side analytics, you greatly increase tracking accuracy and for the most part, the web browsers can do nothing to stop it,” Leake said. “Improving your first-party data, much like last year, should be a priority.”



6 NEW INSTAGRAM OPPORTUNITIES

Akvile DeFazio, President, AKvertise, advises keeping an eye on Instagram.

“It is only a matter of time before they open up more ad placements for additional inventory through IGTV and Reels as they continue to quickly gain organic popularity,” DeFazio said.

Susan Wenograd, Director of Paid Acquisition, Nextiva (and Search Engine Journal's Paid Media Writer) echoed this, noting that ad formats like Stories have done exceedingly well, and they've gone after TikTok formats by launching Reels.

"They are going to continue to find ways to monetize the real estate on the platform," Wenograd said.

"They also need to entice creators - something they haven't historically done a great job of. ...We will likely see continued experimentation here."



BIG PICTURE STRATEGY WILL BECOME MORE VALUABLE

The industry changes fast. Knowing where to push, where to pull, and when is an important skill set, according to Bishop.

“As digital media geeks, most of us love to get lost in the data. But having a creative mindset and the ability to go big picture is important,” Bishop said.

“As the cost of inventory rises, you have to determine how to make your investment work smarter.”

Amy Hebdon, Founder, Paid Search Magic, added that in 2021, the best defense will be a good offense.

“The better your campaigns are structured, the less important negative ‘whack-a-mole’ is to the success of the campaign,” Hebdon said. “Group your campaigns thematically, and have ads and offers that specifically appeal to your audience.”

“Target your market based on their preferences and behaviors, not just observed variance in the data,” Hebdon added. “And of course, make choices that align with your objectives, not Google’s scores and recommendations.”



8 PERFECT THE AD MESSAGE

How well you articulate your message will be super important in 2021.

As Irvine noted earlier, it will be more important than ever to write more good ads than bad ads.

Many other PPC experts echoed this, including **Arianne Donoghue**, Founder, Tempest Marketing.

Donoghue noted that in 2021 it will be important to have a renewed focus on understanding who your customers are as people, rather than as data points.

“The right person – at the right time, in the right place – but with the wrong message, is a missed opportunity,” Donoghue said. “The creative is what drives that emotional connection and ultimately gets someone to engage. We often forget that.”

That’s why **John Lee**, Learning Strategist, Microsoft Advertising said skills around ad writing and execution have never been more important – or necessary.

Why?

“Complex, dynamic, and responsive ad units. Think RSAs, DSAs, and native/responsive display ads. These ad types are amazing and are driving growth in our industry,” Lee said. “And success requires developing new skills around planning, creative writing, and testing.”



9 ALWAYS BE TESTING

Speaking of testing – **Navah Hopkins**, Director of Paid Media, Hennessey Digital, provided probably my favorite quote in PPC Trends this year, and it is this: “get comfortable not being comfortable.”

If 2020 prepared us for nothing else, hopefully it prepared us for that!

Hopkins said the biggest trend for 2021 is to always be testing and never get comfortable with what you think you know.

“We need to treat our campaigns as a kid with a new allergy – put each variable up to scrutiny and only allow newly “proven” tactics to be part of your marketing mix,” Hopkins said. “If there’s one mantra we digital marketers need to have engraved in our hearts – it’s to test!”



10 A GREAT MOBILE EXPERIENCE

Surprised to see this in a list of trends for 2021? Don't be.

If brands want to win in 2021, they need to have an accessible site. This is, and will be, a huge area for 2021, according to **Duane Brown**, Founder & Head of Strategy, Take Some Risk.

“Despite the years of mobile being a thing, many brands still don’t have a website that has a great experience on mobile,” Brown said. “Many people have never visited their own site on a mobile device, let alone multiple devices.”

DISCOVER MORE PPC TRENDS & INSIGHTS FOR 2021

We've only just gotten started.

Ready for more?

You'll get more insights and tips straight from these 32 PPC experts on how to succeed at PPC and paid social in 2021:



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President & Founder, Neptune Moon



2021 is certainly going to be an interesting time in digital marketing.

Are we all tired of hearing about “these unprecedented times” yet?

Whatever the macro circumstances end up being, there are some trends that seem poised to continue to grow. Obfuscation of data, unfortunately, is feeling like it will be a continuing trend in 2021.

Between Google Ads limiting access to search query data to the coming obliteration of tracking cookies as we know it, digital marketers are going to have to adapt in a pretty major way again in 2021.

We are used to major disruptions in “how we do things” and will figure out how to get the best performance we can in whatever the new circumstances and rules we find ourselves dealing with...

A related trend to pay attention to in 2021 will be how the platforms change their rules.

The major ad platforms do not want significant government regulation to be brought upon them, so I expect them to try to do some things themselves that they hope will stave off that regulation.

I expect continued tightening of data access, as well as new rules and policies regarding ads themselves, to roll out.

Facebook has started some of this now, in advance of the fall election season.

Depending on the outcome of the election, we could see this trend accelerate (if there is increased fear of regulation) or slow (if the status quo is maintained).

Social platforms in particular may be vulnerable, or perceive themselves as vulnerable, to increased regulation if there is a widespread feeling that they played an undue role in any election outcomes.

The bottom line for 2021: be ready to be flexible.

Our industry often moves, adapts, and changes quickly, but the next 12-18 months might just test all of our endurance for major shifts!

ROBERT BRADY

Founder, Righteous Marketing

In 2021, we will continue to see the proliferation of more and more automation in PPC.

While this has been happening for some time, the major platforms are beginning to more actively remove the old manual workarounds and reporting that long-time practitioners have used.

Some examples include Google removing low volume search terms from reports and Facebook restricting the number of ads in an account based on spend.



So if you want greater success in your PPC efforts, get familiar with how the automation works.

Choosing the campaign objective will often put your campaign on a certain optimization trajectory that can't be changed and so you need to choose wisely.

Make sure you've set up your conversion events correctly so you're feeding accurate data back into the algorithms on what "success" is for your business.

And remember, humans are still needed, but the platforms want their algorithms to have more leash.

5 WAYS TO OPTIMIZE GOOGLE ADS WITH CALL TRACKING

BY **MEREDITH STACK**

DEMAND GENERATION MANAGER,
CALLRAIL (SEJ PARTNER)

Most marketers know their way around a few tried-and-true Google Ads optimizations.

Using negative keywords to weed out unqualified traffic? Check.

A/B testing headlines, landing pages, and offers? Check, check, and check.



CallRail

But what about using [call tracking](#) to reveal the source behind every call, online or off? Reveal keywords that are driving leads? Or make sure you're spending your budget on the right ads?

Call tracking enables attribution and more. Done right, it can help you market smarter.

HOW CALL TRACKING WORKS

Prospective customers can be a wealth of information. The more you can get to know them, the better your marketing will be.

Call tracking can reveal how someone found your business and heard about your offer. So how does it work?

Here's an example.

Let's say Atlanta HVAC is using digital ads and direct mail to promote their latest offer – a discount on heating services that's running through the end of the year. Their budget is limited, so they want to make the most of their marketing investment.

Using call tracking software, they can assign a unique phone number to each ad and mailer. When the phone starts ringing, they know exactly which tactic is the source of each lead.

Call tracking software, like [CallRail](#), offers a few additional features. It automatically records incoming calls, so you can hear how customer calls are handled and find out additional information about what made them convert.

You can also use recording data to optimize your marketing strategy and tactics, including your Google Ads campaigns.

Through campaign-level tracking, you can view and monitor all your digital marketing programs in a single dashboard. This includes Search Partner Marketing, remarketing, and campaigns in your other PPC platforms.

Call tracking software does this by integrating to your PPC platforms of choice (Google Ads, Bing, Facebook, etc.) and pulling that data into a unified hub.



This makes it much easier to see which channel works best for your marketing, whether it's organic Google search results or paid efforts like Google Ads.

Likewise, session data (how long a visitor was on your website and pages they visited) can be pulled from your call tracking software to match the ad with the keyword that drove a caller to your website.

As a result, you get a clearer picture of which ad campaigns are driving results and the information you need to enhance those that are underperforming.

With greater insights into your online and offline marketing efforts, you can level up your marketing strategy by:

- Being able to attribute marketing's contribution to ROI.
- Improving personalization across your entire marketing ecosystem.
- Gaining a holistic view of your customers' buying journey on your website.
- Elevating your retargeting tactics with improved accuracy.
- Enhancing your sales enablement efforts.



SO, HOW DOES CALL TRACKING WORK WITH GOOGLE ADS?

Part of running a pay-per-click (PPC) strategy with Google Ads is tracking your conversions' sources.

But if you're only looking at clicks, you're not getting the full picture. You're missing conversions related to inbound calls.

Again, call tracking software allows you to assign a unique phone number to each visitor who lands on your website.

Data collected from each visit can then be fed into your total Google Ads conversions, allowing you to follow your leads' full digital journey on your website from beginning to end.

Matching pages visited, Google ads clicked, and keywords and campaigns can free you to



make marketing decisions in real-time without the guesswork.

For example, you can suppress ads for leads that have converted and use retargeting for those that have not.

Call tracking helps you accomplish this by allowing you to export all converted callers associated with a specific Google Ads campaign, which you can upload back into Google to update your ad targeting efforts.

Likewise, you can use call data to inform your lead scoring. Understanding conversion signals helps you easily build out future ad campaigns and ad groups.

You can also listen to call recordings or use a feature like CallRail's keyword spotting tool to highlight the most commonly used keywords. Use them to optimize your ad, landing, and website copy to gain more traction.



WHY CAN'T I JUST USE GOOGLE'S CALL TRACKING FEATURES?

It's true, Google's forwarding numbers let advertisers track calls generated by Google call extension ads or call-only ads.

In addition to measuring calls at a broad level, Google's call tracking feature provides information such as the phone call duration and the caller's area code.

While [Google forwarding numbers](#) can be useful in gaining some insight into the success of Google's Ads campaigns, it doesn't provide all of the metrics that a data-driven marketer needs to optimize their marketing strategy.

For example, Google's latest call recording feature can indeed prove cost-effective for small to medium-sized businesses (SMBs) looking to gain extra insights from their calls.



However, there are some limitations to this new release that you simply wouldn't have with third-party software.

Here are four considerations to take into account:

- 1.** Call recordings are only available for 30 days.
- 2.** Only works with U.S.-based numbers.
- 3.** Does not track calls from other PPC platforms like Bing, Facebook, or LinkedIn.
- 4.** Lacks granular data around individual website journeys that could be obtained with a tool like visitor tracking.

While you may save a little money, all the data you've collected is limited and a waste if not pulled out of the console in time.

With more robust call tracking software, this is a non-issue. Plus, you get a better read for which channels actually work best for you because Google only focuses on calls generated via call-only-ads and call extensions.



Also, call recording data and analytics collected are always available to you, and you're not boxed into a specific geographic area.

HOW TO OPTIMIZE YOUR GOOGLE ADS CAMPAIGNS USING CALL TRACKING

Keeping an eye on how your Google Ads campaigns are performing is key to ensuring success. And when you combine Google Ads with call tracking, you can maximize the impact of your marketing efforts.

Here are five ways you can optimize Google Ads with call tracking:



1. BID ON BETTER KEYWORDS

When you use call tracking software that records calls, you can listen to them to determine the quality of those calls while pinpointing commonly used keywords.

And if you're using a tool like CallRail Conversation Intelligence, those keywords can be surfaced automatically via [keyword spotting](#).

You can then compare those keywords to the ones you're bidding on and adjust your strategy (and budget) accordingly, which leads us to the next point.

2. ENHANCE LEAD SCORING THROUGH CALL RECORDING

Because you can listen to the conversations via call recording, you can also extract the commonly used phrases that signal that a lead is ready to convert.



In turn, you can take those findings to enhance your lead scoring model by using those phrases as the parameters to qualify a lead.

If a lead uses specific phrases that you select, call tracking will flag that lead as high potential and route those leads to the right sales rep – letting you know that you have a sales-ready lead on your hands.

Not only is this useful for letting your sales team know of a potential customer, but it also helps attribute what marketing efforts worked and didn't.

3. OPTIMIZE AD COPY

By listening in on lead conversations, you get more clarity into the pain points and issues they're trying to solve.

You can use this information, along with the keywords commonly used, to optimize your ad copy.

Go a step further by digging into the sources that generated your leads and tailor your messaging based on your learnings.

Even looking into your offline conversion data, like those who called from a billboard or print ad, can give you insights into how you can enhance your campaigns.

4. IMPROVE YOUR LEADS' BUYING JOURNEY

Knowing which ad and keyword triggered your lead to convert is important, but what's more significant is gaining insight into their digital journey on your website through visitor tracking.

By understanding your lead's digital footprint and how they navigated your website, you can fine-tune your other marketing channels to better resonate with your target audience.

For example, if you look at your call tracking data and see that the first page most leads go to after converting on a Google ad is your pricing page, then you might want to consider beefing up that page.



Alternatively, you may want to do a more bottom-of-the-funnel campaign centered on pricing or generate more content around pricing.

The same insights can be gathered from your leads offline journey as well. A unique phone tracking number can be added to print ads, billboards, and more, which gives you a better picture of your leads' buying journey.

This knowledge equips you with the data you need to optimize your campaigns, content, and SEO strategies.

5. CREATE MORE TARGETED CAMPAIGNS

Using call tracking is not only beneficial for current campaigns. They're even more impactful for future ones.

If you notice specific trends, like calls coming from a specific location or phrases that keep coming up, you can use all that information to inform your next Google Ads campaign.

Not only can this help you drum up warmer leads who are looking for a business like yours, but you also have the certainty that your efforts will work.



BRINGING IT TOGETHER WITH GOOGLE ADS AND CALL TRACKING

It's safe to say that Google Ads has multiple features that offer insights into your marketing campaign's performance. But tapping into [call tracking](#) takes it a step further.

That's because call tracking offers a true read into what your customers are thinking, which helps you become more strategic with your marketing efforts.

If you're already using Google Ads and call tracking together, then look into available integrations that can help you harness and maximize the offerings of this combination.

If not, consider plugging the gap in Google Ads attribution with call tracking to boost your bottom line.

DUANE BROWN

Founder & Head of Strategy, Take Some Risk

2020 has been a whirlwind experience.

It can be hard to think about let alone predict what 2021 has in store for us.

There are two areas that I think really stand out and will be a bigger focus for brands moving forward: mobile and the last mile.



Mobile

Despite the years of mobile being a thing, many brands still don't have a website that has a great experience on mobile.

Many people have never visited their own site on a mobile device, let alone multiple devices.

If brands want to win in 2021, they need to have an accessible site. This is and will be a huge area for 2021.

The Last Mile

If you are in ecommerce, direct-to-consumer, or even in the business-to-business (B2B) and sell a physical product, making sure you can deliver that product and make the last mile work for your brand is something all marketers but especially those in PPC should care about.

If we can not get our brands to deliver a product in people's hands, we won't have anything to sell. We won't have a reason to run PPC ads.

The battleground for 2021 will be in the streets and in the warehouses across this country and around the world.

This may not be the job we signed up for, but if there is a roadblock stopping customers from having the best experience possible after clicking on our ads, we need to help brands remove that roadblock.

A portrait of Ilya Cherepakhin, a man with short brown hair and a light blue shirt under a dark jacket, smiling. The portrait is set within a circular frame with a light blue border, which is partially overlaid by a purple geometric shape in the top right corner of the page.

ILYA CHEREPAKHIN

Head of Performance Marketing, Milestone Inc.

This March, Safari became the second browser to block third-party cookies (after Firefox).

With Google still planning to follow suit and start deprecating third-party cookies in 2022, time is quickly running out for businesses to plan for a cookie-less future.

With how dependent marketers have been on cookie-driven targeting technologies, I believe that developing new solutions not reliant on cookies is the key 2021 priority for marketers.

Many marketers have not developed them yet and a new industry-wide standard has not been conceived.

But the clock is ticking with now just over a year left.

I agree with marketers who are solving this challenge by harnessing the power of first-party data to counter this.

Models using one's own data achieve a more precise audience targeting.

Businesses are able to get greater accuracy because they can segment first-party data with great customization – as closely as needed to manage business goals and align with wider organizational needs, and brand objectives.

Furthermore, a business managing its own first-party data segments can update and optimize them as often as needed.

This is an unprecedented level of transparency and customization that is not available with 3rd or second-party data.

While daunting, creating first-party, data-driven solutions are well worth the investment since they benefit multiple digital channels.

Paid ones – like programmatic, search engine marketing, and paid social, will be the primary beneficiaries due to their reliance on data for targeting.

However, owned and earned media channels will also benefit from now playing a greater role in audience analysis. Email, organic social, direct, and referred traffic seed data collection efforts.

New solutions will lead to these channels to be better integrated into overall digital planning and drive more insights.

Incrementality is one such insight.

Many marketers still focus their digital efforts on transaction and revenue growth without analyzing the true incrementality of their efforts.

By leveraging first-party data – having a clearer view of traffic coming from owned and earned channels, how paid channel audiences perform, and integrating CRM synergies – brands can more easily prioritize net new user acquisition.

Moving away from cookies and towards first-party data puts businesses in more control of their data and allows more synergies across a business.

Finally, businesses will likely prioritize moving away from cookie-driven solutions due to rising privacy and regulatory concerns.

Non-cookie based solutions put businesses into a better position to address these ever more burning issues.

AKVILE DEFAZIO

President, AKvertise



In August 2020, eMarketer [reported](#) it expects there to be a 10.5% decline in the total U.S. retails sales this year due to social distancing measures as a result of COVID-19.

But ecommerce will likely grow by as much as 18% by the end of 2020.

While we typically see an increase in ecommerce sales each holiday season and the advertising

landscape temporary changes, I believe that with this significant shift in where purchases will take place, even when things quiet down a little bit in Q1 of 2021.

We may very well see that we are able to spend more and drive more conversions through our paid search and paid social campaigns.

With this in mind, keep an eye on what social channels are doing such as launching new offerings, features, and ad placements, and begin strategizing with your teams and clients so you can dive into new and relevant options first.

Keep an eye on Instagram in particular as it is only a matter of time before they open up more ad placements for additional inventory through IGTV and Reels as they continue to quickly gain organic popularity.

AD VERIFICATION: THE FIRST STEP OF PPC OPTIMIZATION

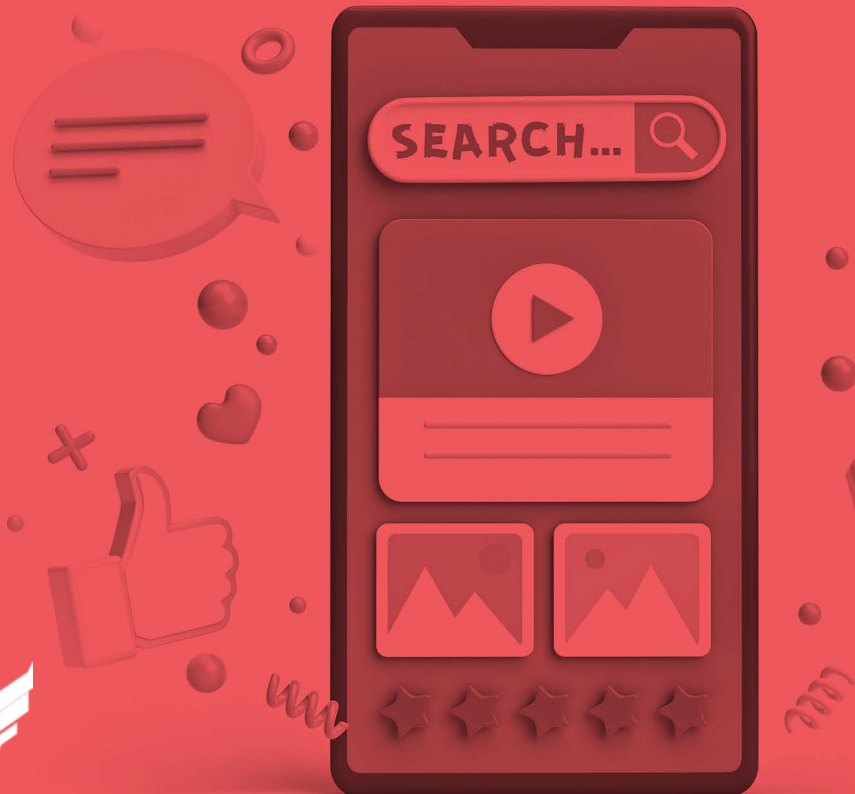
BY **LUKE TAYLOR**

FOUNDER AND CHIEF OPERATING
OFFICER, TRAFFICGUARD (SEJ PARTNER)

The beauty of PPC advertising is that you can show your ads to your target audience and pay only when they engage with them. At least, that is how it is supposed to be.

Today, over half of all internet traffic is generated by bots. And from the ads served to and clicked by real people, many are not genuinely engaging with the advertising.

trafficguard 



This faux engagement not only consumes your ad spend, but also muddies your data – the very data you use to drive improvements in all of your advertising and marketing efforts.

Marketers often look at fraud prevention as a tool to mitigate risk and prevent loss of budget to ad fraud – and that is certainly one very important use case. However, innovative marketers all over the world are starting to recognize the power of verification as a tool for advertising optimization.

In this article, we will breakdown the types of click fraud and invalid traffic, how it impacts advertising performance, explore how verification can be used to improve PPC campaign performance, and discover how fraud prevention can help you increase your advertising reach without increasing your ad spend.



WHAT IS CLICK FRAUD?

We used the term click fraud in the title of this article because it is a widely used and accepted term but technically speaking, the real problem is invalid traffic – which encompasses click fraud, but is much broader.

Invalid traffic is any advertising engagement that isn't out of genuine interest in the advertised offering. Invalid traffic can be malicious (that's ad fraud), non-malicious or accidental. Regardless of whether it is malicious, non-malicious or accidental, all invalid traffic takes ad spend and provides zero return on investment.

Throughout this article, when we discuss fraud prevention, we are using it as a tidy way to refer to the prevention of all invalid traffic.



Sources of invalid traffic include:

- **Website scrapers and crawlers** deployed to gather intelligence from advertising, search results, and websites. If you have ever used an online tool to see what keywords your competitors are bidding on, or get competitive pricing/position analysis – the intel provided in these tools is typically gathered by scrapers.
- **Click farms** where groups of people are organized to click ads.
- **Crowdsourcing and incentivized ads** are usually publisher-generated invalid clicks where the site's audience is encouraged to show their support by clicking ads or are otherwise incentivized to click an ad with a reward. These tactics help publishers inflate the advertising engagement of their site to increase their own advertising revenue.
- **Botnets** are networks of devices that are coordinated remotely via malware to generate ad fraud. On the surface, because each engagement

originates from a distinct device, botnet traffic looks like legitimate traffic. This traffic can be purchased online as another way for publishers to inflate their audiences; a way for competitors to exhaust your ad budgets; or a variety of other sabotage tactics.

- **Accidental clicks** induced by poor user experience or user error are also invalid traffic. Google's policies specifically prohibit page layouts and styling that make it hard to distinguish advertising from native content. Traffic that results from these practices and others that lead to accidental clicks, either intentionally or unintentionally by the publisher, is considered invalid.
- **Click bot software/malware** lives on individual devices and generates clicks from that device unbeknownst to the device's user.

This extensive arsenal of invalid traffic generators is used to serve a variety of motivations. These motivations include:



SABOTAGE

When the perpetrator wants to sabotage the advertising efforts of the advertiser. This might be unhappy customers, disgruntled employees or even your competitors.

With the assistance of the above sources, these saboteurs can drain your budget and steal the top placements for coveted keywords. By exhausting your ad spend, they also reduce your advertising return on investment by ensuring fewer people see your ad.

FINANCIAL

When perpetrators stand to gain financially by sending invalid traffic to your advertising.

This could be a publisher wanting to inflate engagement by purchasing bot traffic to interact with advertising on their site or by hiding ads under other clickable elements to induce accidental clicks.

With invalid traffic interacting with ads on their sites, publishers can easily make their audience look



larger and more engaged than it is to attract more advertising revenue.

Other financial motivations include various intelligence and analytics solutions that scrape search results, advertising, and websites to populate their data sets.

ACCIDENTAL

Aside from sabotage and financial motivation, there are also invalid engagements that occur by accident.

For example, when users by habit, double click on adverts or repeatedly navigate through advertising.

There are a lot of ways that invalid traffic enters the ecosystem and lots of motivations bringing it in.



HOW IS INVALID TRAFFIC IMPACTING YOUR PPC ADVERTISING?

Ad fraud doesn't discriminate between small businesses and big businesses. A business with a \$500/month budget is just as exposed as the one with a \$500k/month budget.

So, what is happening when invalid traffic is infiltrating your advertising campaigns?

LOST AD SPEND

The first and most obvious impact of invalid traffic is lost PPC ad spend.

TrafficGuard audits for new clients reveal anywhere between 10-30% of PPC budgets being wasted on ad fraud when fraud prevention is not in place.



ADVERTISING EFFECTIVENESS IS PROPORTIONATELY LIMITED

The most significant cost of invalid traffic is the lost opportunity associated with wasted ad spend.

Say you have \$1000 ad spend a month, your CPC is \$1 and for every 20 clicks, you get a conversion, giving you a cost per conversion of \$20.

Without fraud prevention, up to 30% of your spend could be wasted on invalid traffic. That is \$300 of spend with \$0 return on investment.

With fraud prevention in place, if that \$300 generates genuine engagement instead of ad fraud, you would stand to gain 15 additional conversions (\$300 divided by your cost per conversion of \$20).

With an average conversation value of \$50, that could be as much as \$750 additional revenue every month.



So you can see here, the biggest cost isn't the budget wasted on ad fraud, but the additional 43% revenue that the wasted \$300 should have generated.

OPTIMIZATION EFFORTS ARE HAMPERED

Your advertising metrics are what you use to determine where best to allocate your marketing budget and forecast results for your marketing efforts.

If the data you use to make these decisions is skewed by the presence of invalid traffic, then the decisions you base on this data will also be compromised. As TrafficGuard's Head of Data Sciences says, rubbish in, rubbish out.

Without fraud prevention, there will always be invalid traffic in your online advertising – it's just about determining where it is in order that you can optimize away from it.



3 WAYS TO USE VERIFICATION FOR SUPERIOR PPC OPTIMIZATION

1. Prevent as Much Fraud as Possible (Without Stopping Real Traffic!)

In the PPC world, fraud prevention means adding IP or placement exclusions in Google Ads to instruct Google Ads not to bid on traffic from those sources.

By preventing your ads from showing to sources of invalid traffic, substantially less invalid traffic is able to infiltrate your campaigns giving you more accurate reporting for optimization while also preventing wasted ad spend.

Every dollar not wasted on invalid traffic helps you reach more real people in your target audience. Preventing invalid traffic is the first and easiest step in PPC campaign optimization.



2. Get the Real Picture

Whether you analyze your campaigns in Google Ads or with other analytics tools, the presence of invalid traffic remains.

So if you are using your Google Ads data to analyze performance and determine the best performing keywords, ad groups or advertising creatives, invalid traffic is potentially misdirecting your efforts.

Something most fraud protection solutions don't like to admit is that even with prevention, there will always be some invalid traffic in your PPC campaigns.

That is because some sources of invalid traffic also deliver genuine traffic that could be real customers – so it's important that these sources aren't stopped from seeing your ads.

Despite this, you still need to know what is real and what is invalid – because any presence of invalid traffic skews the metrics you use to guide optimization.



Using a comprehensive solution like TrafficGuard with granular, real-time reporting can help you get the complete picture and enable you to use verified traffic data to guide your optimization efforts.

Compare campaigns, ad groups, keywords, and creatives within the TrafficGuard portal to get an understanding of true performance with verified traffic.

3. Don't Show Your Ads to the People Who Are Going to Your Site Anyway

There is no question that bidding on your own brand name and defending that search real estate from competitors is essential to most successful search strategies.

However, for some specific types of businesses with high-frequency visitors, search advertising can be the front door that people use over and over again to enter your site.



Ecommerce and services provided through web apps are particularly vulnerable to this type of budget draining behavior.

The main purpose of brand campaigns is to make it as easy as possible for potential customers still in the decision-making phase to get to your site and give them less opportunity to be distracted by a competitor's ad.

But already loyal customers click ads too – because they appear at the top of the search results, so it's the easiest way to get to your site.

Some customers are habitually navigating through your ads to get to your website oblivious to the fact that they are clicking ads.

This engagement, while clearly not malicious, is still recognized as invalid by industry standards including Google itself, who restrict layouts that promote this behavior in their publisher guidelines.

So how do you rectify this without compromising the main purpose of your brand campaigns?



Using TrafficGuard's behavioral reporting you can get an understanding of the frequency that individual users arrive to your site via advertising.

Then using custom invalidation rules, you can set a threshold to exclude your ads from displaying to these users.

This threshold varies widely for different types of business so it is important to have a solid understanding of what is normal and abnormal in your own traffic. Fortunately, it is very easy to get this insight into your traffic using TrafficGuard's behaviour reporting.

By setting this threshold, less budget is wasted displaying advertising to people who are already heading to your site meaning more budget is available to help your campaigns reach more new customers.



CONCLUSION

Successful PPC optimization relies on data. The presence of invalid traffic renders campaign data unreliable, misdirects optimization efforts, and ultimately prevents your PPC advertising from reaching its full potential. This means that verification is one of the most important steps in your optimization efforts.

By preventing invalid traffic, you automatically get better performance by stopping your ads from being shown to sources of invalid traffic that have no potential to deliver ROI for you.

Additionally, by verifying your traffic, you ensure that all your testing and optimization isn't influenced by invalid traffic, driving better performing advertising campaigns, and helping you smash your campaign goals.

Take the first step to understanding your traffic quality for better campaign optimisation with a [free TrafficGuard account](#).





ARIANNE DONOGHUE

Founder, Tempest Marketing

I'm going to double-down on some of the predictions I made last year as we're continuing to see these areas move forward.

And that's going to accelerate going into 2021.

For me, the biggest trend that's going to carry through into 2021 is all about **privacy and tracking.**

While Apple didn't introduce their planned IDFA changes with the roll-out of iOS14, they've simply kicked the can down the road to early next year.

I believe that when this comes in, it's going to massively shift consumer behavior and prompt conversation that spills over from apps into the rest of the digital marketing ecosystem.

This is going to push forward a few other trends that we've been seeing.

Marketers are increasingly realizing that their digital channels can't sit in a silo.

And if we start to lose some of the data that's underpinned our industry for the last 20 years, then there's an awful lot that we can learn from our colleagues in "traditional" marketing.

We're going to need a renewed focus on understanding who our customers are as people, rather than as data points.

I think often in PPC we're guilty of focusing on the creative first and message last, and this has to change.

The right person – at the right time, in the right place – but with the wrong message, is a missed opportunity.

The creative is what drives that emotional connection and ultimately gets someone to engage.

We often forget that.

Finally, I think we're seeing a shift in approach that's also coming from breaking down silos.

Rather than looking to sell services to clients, we're starting to sell solutions – a small but very important distinction.

It's becoming more about getting a full overview of the businesses we're trying to help.

Looking at how we can support them with all of the services and skills at our disposal.

Rather than just selling them SEO because it's what they think they need.

We're becoming more consultative, which in an age of growing automation, can only be a good thing!

JUSTIN FREID

Chief Growth and Innovation Officer, CMI/Compas

Privacy will continue to be a driving factor in how we as marketers engage potential customers.

The two main ways we will see that affect us are:

Audiences vs. Intent

We have already seen Google take keyword data away from us multiple times – from “(not provided)” to the recent changes made by Google related to lower volume keyword search data being removed.



With less and less information being available related to the “intent” of a potential customer, marketers will need to evolve their approach and think more about engaging the right audiences.

A tactical example of this is how we have seen high adoption of Bing’s ability to integrate LinkedIn data into their targeting.

Yes, intent is important, but knowing you are targeting a qualified lead/customer is of equal value.

This will also help us begin to look at the LTV (Lifetime Value) of customer vs. a single sale driven through paid search.

Walled Garden Dominance

Connected to the theme of privacy and walled gardens limiting who they share, consumer data will further drive their dominance.

Companies such as Google, Facebook, Amazon, and eventually Apple will drive further distance between themselves and companies that previously tapped into their data for targeting and inventory purposes.

Those companies that are able to strike strategic data-sharing agreements with these companies will see themselves have a significant competitive advantage against other networks/agencies, etc.



BRAD GEDDES

Co-Founder, AdAlysis

Over the past year, I've seen two trends with successful advertisers that we think will continue into the new year.

The first is that advertisers who are refreshing their ad messages on a regular basis with current, relevant information are performing well above the typical "create and ignore" ad messages that most advertisers employ.

The second is a large increase in using third-party data or ad customizers to customize their messages at scale. We only expect sophisticated advertisers to employ these trends.

My more traditional prediction is all about Google hiding data and relying on machine learning.

My prediction last year was that Google would take away some data and force advertisers to rely on machine learning.

We've seen that come true with match type changes and the removal of valuable search term data.

I expect that trend to continue where Google forces advertisers to rely more on Google's machine learning and data than on their own expertise.

While this trend may help the small advertiser, Google will continue to hurt the larger and more sophisticated advertisers with these changes.

STEVE HAMMER

President, RankHammer

Like it or not, the PPC platforms are taking our tricks and controls away from us. I can't help but feel this is going to accelerate.

This will force us to rely on feeding better data back into the platforms, as well as being better with our fundamental marketing messages.

That better data will need to factor much more than just binary metrics, even where we used to use them.



Leads will need to consider quality and feed values back based upon this, or the platform will automate for those easy low quality leads.

We'll also need to articulate our message very well so the target finds it appealing but those that might be similar will avoid the click.

Coarsely speaking, it means we'll need better analytics and better ad copy, but less of a focus on quality score.

Above all, we need to really understand our target and those that are outside of the target.

As an aside, I've always hated Quality Score as a key focus.

Conversions are the quality an advertiser should care about – not what platforms consider quality – because what the platforms consider as quality is revenue maximization.



AMY HEBDON

Founder, Paid Search Magic

There are lots of pandemic-induced search trends that marketers should continue to pay attention to as we go into the next year. But I'm not giving Google a pass.

It's been a slow burn for years, but this is Google Ads' worst year on record for shifting away from transparency and limiting the data we have to make the best decisions for our accounts.

Barring any regulatory interference, we can expect Google to continue on this path indefinitely as it maximizes its own revenue and earnings.

Agencies and advertisers that expect or are prepared for anything less will be at a severe disadvantage.

How can marketers ensure success when we keep losing opportunities for insights and optimizations?

The best defense really is a good offense. The better your campaigns are structured, the less important negative “whack-a-mole” is to the success of the campaign.

Group your campaigns thematically, and have ads and offers that specifically appeal to your audience.

Target your market based on their preferences and behaviors, not just observed variance in the data.

And of course, make choices that align with your objectives, not Google’s scores and recommendations.



NAVAH HOPKINS

Director of Paid Media, Hennessey Digital

The biggest trend for 2021 is to always be testing, and never get comfortable with what you think you know.

The rules of engagement changed a lot during 2020.

Between the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19, the rollout and rollback of ad channels/tools, and the increased scrutiny on ad tech from a legislative standpoint, we digital marketers cannot rely on a proven rule book anymore.

Instead, we need to treat our campaigns as a kid with a new allergy – put each variable up to scrutiny and only allow newly “proven” tactics to be part of your marketing mix.

Some of my “proven” rules that underwent scrutiny include:

Heavy Use of Two-Word Phrase Match Keywords

Based on client accounts, both Google and Microsoft have increasingly blocked budget going to phrase match keywords, especially if there’s an exact or broad/mod broad variant.

Phrase matched keywords had an average 28% higher CPA in our accounts (compared to exact match).

Important to note this was across 20 accounts in mostly legal verticals.

Using Auto/Smart Bidding & Dynamic Search Ads (DSA) for Data Acquisition

With the recent decrease in search terms visibility, the benefit of running a DSA campaign has gone down for most SMBs.

There's still value in ecommerce and for sites with lots of landing pages (via feed mapping).

Since we can't see the way people are searching and at what price, the data gathering strategy is all but dead.

COVID wreaked havoc on advertising confidence, and the push-me-pull-you nature of ad spend meant bidding strategies didn't have the consistent flow they were used to.

As a result, search bidding strategies often under-spent on otherwise proven campaigns.

This is especially true of Target CPA and Maximize Conversions.

If there's one mantra we digital marketers need to have engraved in our hearts – it's to test!

Here are the main functions and strategies I'm testing with our clients.

Going Back to Almost All Manual Bidding for at Least 30 Days in New Campaigns

This lets us have visibility into auction prices, as well as force ad networks to invest the way we want them to.

Building in Prequalifying Display Campaigns & Language on Our Landing Pages to Improve True Conversion Rate

Due to close variants and lack of visibility of search terms, building in protections is more important than ever.

For our legal clients, this means running a “Do You Have A Case” campaign that targets placements and tangential purchasing behavior that could align with our clients’ prospects.

Our search campaigns can then focus on audiences who have already been exposed to that messaging.

Local Service Ads as the Dominant Spend for Service Industries

While the set-up process is terrible, there is undeniable value in being able to pay per lead.

Additionally, these campaigns require little oversight, which means they’re much more accessible for the average SMB.

All in all – get comfortable not being comfortable.

MARK IRVINE

Director of Paid Media, SearchLab

I hate to get semantic (and I know search marketers love to get semantic), but there is a difference between “smart” and “wise” marketers.

And that difference may be the biggest source of diverging trends.

Although we have more data than ever before, that data is increasingly imperfect.

We may not be able to see the exact variant of the



ad someone saw, the precise bid we placed in an auction, or even all the search terms our ads showed for.

A lot of smart marketers are looking at this loss and calculating how far from perfect their campaigns are as a result.

Perfection is often a bad goal, but it becomes a worse one in 2021 as automation and privacy concerns continue to deteriorate perfect data sets.

Knowledge may help us calculate that imperfection, but wisdom will help us accept it.

Imperfect data is no one's favorite, but wise marketers will need to use incomplete data to see the signal from the noise.

Rather than focus on the loss, wise marketers will still need to see what's working best with the 80% of information they have and learn how to guide their campaigns to target more of that audience.

That means:

- Writing more “good” ads than “bad” ads with responsive ad assets.
- Reviewing patterns of search queries, rather than individual search terms.
- Guiding automated bidding, rather than controlling bidding directly.

PAULINE JAKOBER

Founder & CEO, Group Twenty Seven

Marketing automation will continue to be a hot topic in 2021.

Many marketers will maintain a healthy skepticism of automation but will also increasingly adopt scripts and other methods of automation once they've been proven to outperform previous efforts.

As always, results are the ultimate goal, regardless of whether they're achieved by automated, manual, or a mix of both managed strategies.



For areas of automation where we have lost control, PPC pros will likely have to accept, adapt, and move on.

However, the positive side of this forced adaptation is that it will give PPC pros more cycles to focus on strategies that build brand awareness and brand affinity.

Opportunities will also be rich for video advertising in 2021.

Marketers will increasingly incorporate this form of advertising into their PPC programs to connect with new customers and stay connected with existing ones.

Throughout the coming year, it's imperative that marketers continue to educate their executives and clients on the value of investing in their brand.

Once brand equity drops, it's a long and difficult road back – particularly in our current environment.



KRISTOPHER B. JONES

Founder & CEO, LSEO.com

In 2021, the most successful PPC marketers will be strategists focused on their target audience.

With automation in campaigns being the new normal, PPC marketers are losing control.

Just recently Google Ads started hiding some search query data, which limits negative keyword strategies

and could hurt campaigns with high CPCs (legal, tech).

That, coupled with last year's update of close variants being added to exact match keywords, and it's easy to see that PPC marketers have to be more strategic so that there isn't wasted ad spend.

The good news though is that audience targeting on search is becoming more prevalent compared to a keyword strategy.

Google is pushing Dynamic Search Ads, Shopping, Discovery, and Smart Campaigns – all of which rely heavily on audience targeting.

Microsoft Ads is pushing similar campaigns and even integrated LinkedIn Ads targeting.

All of this boils down to PPC marketers knowing the avatar of their target audience to be successful in 2021 and further.

In an era where there is less control due to automation and AI, what matters is who sees your ads to ensure you're driving qualified clicks.

A circular portrait of Jonathan A. Kagan, a man with short reddish-brown hair, wearing a light blue collared shirt. The portrait is partially overlaid by a purple decorative shape in the top right corner.

JONATHAN A. KAGAN

Founder & CEO, LSEO.com

Going Keywordless

It is hard to find a scenario, where we haven't seen a deprioritization of the keyword in search.

The reality is, we don't truly need to rely on a keyword to be able to run an SEM program.

From Shopping to DSAs and Local, all of these operate without keywords.

Because of this, any search marketer who is worth their weight needs to rethink their approach, and focus on elements they can control.

Those include:

- Ad asset/copy/creative.
- Audiences and remarketing lists, demographics.
- Geography, time, and device.
- Product and site content.

If a search marketer can take all of these, and merge them together – the best ad with the ideal audience, in the right geo, at the right time, on the right device – then lack of a keyword control becomes a negligible issue for the search marketer.

To pull this all off, the number one thing for everyone to do is get control of your audiences.

Know who your target audience is.

Know who is worth prospecting versus who is most likely to convert. Separate them, and manage them independently.

The #2 most important is negatives.

Largely negative keywords have not gone away, and negative audiences play an equally important role. Do not ignore them.

YouTube

It is easy to discount YouTube as only online video or social, or just not your problem as a search marketer.

But in reality, nothing could be further from the truth.

Between opting search into the partner network, to the Shopping ads accompanying the videos, YouTube is more important than ever.

Not to mention, it has increased in usage and consumption since the pandemic started.

Since March, YouTube has been one of the fastest-growing paid media platforms.

Couple that with the Google video builder (beta), and it is easier for SMBs and brands with minimal resources to launch YouTube.

On top of it, the shift to a DR capability on the platform has turned YouTube from a nice-to-have to part of your needed digital marketing tool kit.

If you haven't already, start building audiences for YouTube. The need to remain ever vigilant on the audience targeting continues.

But once you have, let it roll.

The down funnel traffic it generates for your SEM and SEO efforts will be vital when it is time to count up the revenue.



NIKKI KUHLMAN

Senior Account Director, JumpFly

How do you predict the trends for 2021 when 2020 has been so full of upheaval?

But honestly, I think two of the trends I predicted last year will continue into 2021.

Automation

Whether we like it or not, it's up to PPC marketers to be the gatekeeper and weigh the cost benefit to the account – loss of data versus results.

The “encouragement” to use Automation and Smart Bidding in Google Ads will continue and will get pushed even harder.

But what 2020 has taught us – at least for our clients, is automation still struggles with keeping up.

I’ve taken just about as many clients off Google’s Smart Bidding options as we’ve put on because the systems couldn’t keep up or react to what was happening.

As for Smart Shopping, if it doesn’t work there are no other options but to turn it off when it doesn’t work properly.

Also, the lack of transparency has been a big issue, especially when COVID-19 first hit and product needs changed rapidly.

The loss of the ability to see what terms people were searching on for Smart Shopping campaigns was a serious problem.

I'm all for change when it works out in the best interest of our clients, but the lack of transparency (especially around search terms that our clients pay for) is troubling and problematic.

Attribution

Do more with seeing how your overall marketing works together.

It's not easy, but understanding that it's not a straight shot from click to conversion is important for growth.

All marketing works together, especially if you are doing social and other platforms.

Paid search doesn't exist in a bubble and what you do in one platform affects another – Google Ads advertising affecting Amazon store sales, for example.

Evaluating your paths in Analytics, finding an attribution model that works, using a CRM system that tracks all traffic – whatever it takes to understand what brings someone from awareness to conversion is important.

Diversification

Test other platforms that help drive overall business.

I'm starting to see this with clients more and more.

I'm very much a “traditional” PPC account manager but have been talking with clients about diversifying their advertising beyond Google Ads Search and Display, and Microsoft Advertising.

I'm also talking about testing YouTube, Verizon Media's native ads, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, even TikTok if the audience fits.



ED LEAKE

Managing Director, AdEvolver & Midas Media

Last year I predicted three key things:

- Cost inflation.
- Automation (by choice, or otherwise).
- Bolstering your first-party data.

The COVID-19 outbreak essentially cemented all three of these for us.

Google has seen its revenue drop 10% and has taken, what some might consider draconian measures, to ease the burden.

A prime example being the stripping of data from query reports owing to “privacy” concerns and levying a feudal tax on UK and EU advertisers.

My area of expertise is Google Ads.

That remains my focus for 2021, even if sometimes it can feel like Google would rather I just hand them the money and walk away.

For me, the removal of a significant portion of query data signals the start of a sea change. Google isn't concerned about appeasing marketers, that's for sure.

We as marketers have to assume this trend will continue, and our job is partly to second-guess what comes next.

There are always solutions and workarounds, albeit not quite as good as before.

2021 will see the death of the text ad. Or at least, how we know it today.

Responsive and automated ads will become the new normal and possibly even the only option available.

Considering the financial climate, Google might consider handicapping campaigns that don't adhere to their best practices – compelling you to adopt certain features and structures.

But I won't mention the loss of manual bidding, even 2021 can't be that cruel to us.

Server-side analytics is my next focus.

This is a big one and there's not a lot I can say in such a short space other than – if you haven't already, you need to be looking at it.

Google is already addressing a GTM beta to run Analytics server-side and hopefully, the technology will become the norm.

Why is it so important?

Because other search engines – Firefox, Safari, and ad blockers – don't want you to track anything meaningful anymore.

With server-side analytics, you greatly increase tracking accuracy and for the most part, the web browsers can do nothing to stop it.

Improving your first-party data, much like last year, should be a priority.

Being in a position to recover a good chunk of your traffic data is a big deal.

This is true of optimization, budget allocation, and remarketing, especially when it comes to improving the accuracy of your lists and exclusions.

2020 has taught us one thing: The rate of change is ever-increasing and, as marketers, we must remain on our toes.

So, even if your hands feel tied, know that we're all in the same boat.

To quote Omar Little, "It's all in the game, yo. All in the game."



JOHN LEE

Learning Strategist, Microsoft Advertising

This has been another busy year for PPC – platform updates, new features, and the like.

However, this has been a year like no other I can recall. Around the world, people have been impacted by a pandemic, social unrest, and economic upheaval.

This has had a profound effect on our lives personally, professionally, and collectively.

All of this is on my mind as I think about what success in PPC looks like moving forward.

As such, I am viewing success from two perspectives:

- PPC practitioners who find themselves in an ever more competitive job market.
- A digital advertising industry that is evolving and shifting to match dynamically changing consumer behavior online.

With these perspectives in mind, I believe that PPC folks will need to start, or continue, their evolution into fully-rounded marketing practitioners to find success in 2021 and beyond.

Please consider the following:

Skills Around Ad Writing & Execution Have Never Been More Important or Necessary Than Before

Why?

Complex, dynamic, and responsive ad units.

Think RSAs, DSAs, and native/responsive display ads. These ad types are amazing and are driving growth in our industry.

And success requires developing new skills around planning, creative writing, and testing.

Yes, that's right. A/B testing has changed.

Research & Planning for Your Brand's Personas and Buyer Journey Are Required – Not Optional

Remember all that stuff I mentioned about ad writing?

Yeah, you can't write great ads for the right audience at the right time if you don't have personas and buyer journey locked down.

Beyond the ad copy, how are you actually targeting your audience?

Keywords, sure. Interests, fine.

Have you done your homework on in-market or affinity audiences?

Are you properly accumulating, protecting, and leveraging your first-party data?

Technical & Analytical Know-How Are the Backbone of Digital Advertising. Period.

PPC hiring managers would agree that those who can troubleshoot a data feed or tracking pixels are in short supply.

And let's be honest... digital advertising = all the data.

The ability to track, analyze, and most importantly, make sense of all facets of performance data will continue to bolster your resumes and your campaign's bottom line.



AARON LEVY

Group Director, SEM, Tinuiti

2021 will be a year of ends, and beginnings.

I believe the era of keywords has already ended or is on a steep decline.

I won't predict that 2021 will be the year keywords actually die, as I believe they've already been deprecated to the point that they're now an arrow in the PPC targeting quiver, and no longer the primary one.

I predict that 2021 will signal the end of two major components of how PPC managers work and the beginning of a new era.

The Death of ‘Static’ Text Ads, Including Both ETAs and the Last Few Remaining Standard Text Ads

I believe expanded text ads (ETAs) will be retired sometime in 2021, replaced fully by responsive text ads (RTAs).

If I had to put a date on it, I believe they’ll be done in July or August, in time to standardize RTAs before Q4.

RTAs will become more powerful, and I expect we’ll have significantly more options to pin and optimize RTAs going forward based on a series of signals (keyword groups included).

I Predict the End of Manual Bidding as an Option

It’s been the “last option” for platforms for quite some time.

And I expect it will be fully retired in favor of smart bidding, eCPCs, and other metrics focused on a performance outcome beyond the click.

Instead, I believe 2021 is the era automation is fully cemented.

I don't mean binary options like we've been used to in the past, but more a future focused around Smart options from Google, Bing, and other major platforms.

PPC has been creeping closer and closer to how display was bought via early demand-side platforms (DSPs) in the late 2000s.

You, as an advertiser, feed as many intent signals as possible to an automated bid platform. The bidding platform will translate those inputs into a bid for a target and will learn/adjust accordingly.

Gone are the days of us controlling every ad and every bid based on words alone. Instead, we'll be forced to look at the whole picture of the audience we're aiming for.

In turn, data will move from a commodity to a currency.

The advertiser with the most data readily available for platforms to act on will be the one who wins the day or year.

While I mourn the loss of data we were so used to from our friends at Google and Microsoft, I for one welcome the opportunity to be a better marketer, moving beyond just language-driven ads.

MELISSA MACKEY

Search Supervisor, gyro



2021 is going to be all about recovery.

The coronavirus pandemic has shaken up our world and has forced us to rethink every aspect of our lives – including how we market products and services online.

PPC advertisers in 2021 are going to be focused on working smarter, not harder.

Even the smallest of advertisers are going to be laser-focused on using PPC to drive business goals.

Smart advertisers will be looking at their marketing funnel and honing in on what works best for each stage of the buyer journey.

Sophisticated advertisers have done this for years, but the pandemic has forced every advertiser to understand exactly how their customers interact with them at every step along the way.

As an advertiser, expect to spend time thinking about your customer and how they decide to buy from you.

As an advertiser, expect to spend time thinking about your customer and how they decide to buy from you.

- How long does the process take?
- Where do they interact?
- What information do they need?
- What might they be searching for?
- How do you measure success at each step?

Advertisers who align PPC marketing efforts with the buyer journey will come out ahead of the pack in 2021.

It's no longer enough to throw campaigns at the wall to see what sticks.

Working smarter will be the key to a quick recovery in 2021.

A portrait of Michelle Morgan, a woman with long brown hair, smiling. She is wearing a pink top and a dark blue jacket. The portrait is set against an orange background and is framed by a light blue circular border.

MICHELLE MORGAN

Director of Client Services, Clix Marketing

Business Advisors

Our job is to drive PPC success, but we're going to be looked to as overall business advisors more and more.

Whether due to social issues, a worldwide pandemic, or privacy issues, companies are only getting more confused about what they should be doing online.

Since we're the ones on the phone with them regularly, we're the ones who are going to get those questions, so be prepared to answer them however you feel comfortable.

Do More with Less

Although I'd like to think the world will go back to "normal" in 2021, I think user behavior has changed during the pandemic and many people are now more comfortable doing business online.

Companies are going to rely on PPC to drive larger portions of their revenue, while at the same time the channels are taking away functionality and data transparency.

So we literally need to have a bigger impact for our clients with less control and insights into performance.

CHRISTI OLSON

Global Media SEM Lead, Microsoft



Not just in 2021 but for the foreseeable future, data and the importance of it – and the role it plays within the PPC space – will be one of the most important trends and pressing questions we can expect to see and debate about.

Data is the renewable resource that drives not only digital marketing's flywheel but all of the decisions we make for how we set up, manage, and optimize our paid search campaigns.

It fuels everything from:

- Addressability: Creating audience profiles, audience targeting, and personalized experiences.
- Accountability: Tracking and measurement of marketing campaigns to optimization and driving better ROI/ROAS.
- Automation: How we leverage and use AI at scale.

The reason it's going to become one of the biggest trends and more important to search marketers in 2021 is because how data is sourced is about to be disrupted.

Why?

Due to changes in global privacy policies and restrictions to third-party cookies across browsers.

Also, the identifiers for advertisements (IDFA) restrictions on iOS in early 2021 that will restrict third-party tracking across apps and mobile devices.

In addition to search advertising platforms like Google making the decision to reduce advertiser visibility and available data from the Search terms data insights.

These changes will impact both addressability and accountability and potentially automation outside of a platform's walled garden.

That is why search marketers will need to focus on data in 2021 and work with their companies and agencies to develop a data strategy to maintain privacy compliance and usability of data in this new landscape.

As search marketers start to evaluate their data strategy in this new landscape they'll want to think about.

The Privacy Conversation Around Data Ownership, Data Storage & Data Usage

This conversation spans both personal and individuals rights all the way down to advertiser rights around data.

There isn't a clear cut answer for this question, and there is going to be a large debate around who owns the data – the advertisers or the publishers.

Keeping up With Privacy Compliance & the Impacts of Changes to the Data We Collect & Use, Plus What Is Deemed Consent

There are changes happening with respect to GDPR around data collection and consent given through cookie banners on websites.

Please remember, I'm not a lawyer and so I'm trying to understand the impacts of these changes myself and can't give legal guidance.

Previously, any engagement with a website was considered consent to authorization for some level of cookie collection and use.

However, with the most recent changes users will now be required to give specific consent for cookie capturing in different cookie categories including essential cookies and non-essential cookies.

And that consent must be freely given, specific, informed, and unambiguous.

The breakdown of these types of cookies include and are not limited to:

- **Required and essential:** Cookies required for essential website functions.
- **Analytics:** Cookies that allow third parties to use analytical data and platforms.
- **Social media:** Cookies used to show ads and content based on the users social media profiles and activity on websites.
- **Advertising:** The use of third-party cookies to show users advertisements on page.

Users can choose to allow or reject specific cookies.

Can you see where this is going with regard to potential impact on tracking?

First-Party Data

There will be a prevalence of marketers and publishers using registration walls that essentially grant the rights to use their ID to collect and track data.

Logged-In Activity

Users will log in to identify themselves with their IDs and marketers will be able to use their logged-in activity.

Publishers and Brands Working More Closely Together
Partnerships between publishers and brands to identify opportunities to share and gain first-party data at scale.

Walled Garden

All of the above will potentially lead to a growing divide between the big tech companies and publishers to create their own closed ecosystems where they can leverage their first-party data to advertisers who are on their platforms.

In my new role as the SEM Lead for Microsoft and our internal campaigns, I'm going to be spending a substantial amount of time on our data strategy.

- How we capture data, the impact of privacy updates and compliance, and what it means for our ability to track performance.
- How we can continue to create best in class PPC campaigns with all of the above-mentioned updates and changes while making sure our internal plumbing is connecting and providing the best picture possible on data and performance.

I think that others will be re-evaluating their strategy and plumbing as these changes happen.

I believe all brands will have a continued and vested interest in SEM automation.

And how to leverage the tools available from the search engines and third-party platforms to make the day to day aspect of search a little easier for SEM managers.

Another trend I see coming stems from the social initiatives we saw this summer.

There has been an ever-increasing focus on inclusion across advertising – and it's time that those inclusion initiatives make their way into the world of SEM/SEO.

Words truly do matter and as search marketers, we can embrace inclusive language in PPC.

How we do that was uncovered in the Psychology of Inclusion and Effects in Advertising research done by Microsoft Advertising and my colleagues MJ DePalma and Kelli Kemery.

The research uncovered trends and language-based cues that can signal inclusion.

This includes understanding our audiences and the words they use based on their unique dimension of diversity.

This can be used to develop an inclusive lexicon library that is then tapped into for keyword modifiers, ad copy, and our site content.

For example, my daughter has a rare genetic condition called XP and when I'm searching for clothing I'm looking for "UV blocking" or "UPF 50+."

These can be included as a keyword modifier to help me find products and services that meet her specific needs. Another example of this can be seen in the LGBTQI+ community when looking to source products and services.

They may tend to use the phrase "gay-friendly."

Uncovering the unique phrases used by your potential customers and target customers can help you personalize messaging and services specifically for the community.



BROOKE OSMUNDSON

Director of Paid Media, NordicClick Interactive

Additional Loss of Control (Audiences First, Keywords Second)

2021 will be another year of less control for PPC marketers.

We have already seen a loss of control by the means of machine learning, specifically in bid adjustments and bidding strategies.

With Google's recent announcement of withholding

search terms that are not deemed “statistically significant”, this is a telltale sign of what is to come.

PPC marketers will be working with less data to make informed decisions on keywords.

The loss of control over keywords also hints at the strategic shifts towards the importance of proper audience targeting.

Spend Shifts to Additional Search Platforms

An unintended consequence of the loss of control in Google will likely lead to more companies shifting PPC dollars to other search engines such as Bing/Microsoft Ads.

This platform still gives marketers the robust data it needs to make sound strategic decisions.

There has also been speculation regarding a new search engine from Apple.

While there is nothing definitive, I’m certain that there is bound to be a shakeup in Google Ads.

LISA RAEHSLER

Founder & SEM Strategy Consultant, Big Click Co.

One of the most important trends will be PPC Managers using marketing skill sets that are flexible and agile.

PPC marketers will have to roll with the punches and adapt to an ever-changing turbulent economic and social environment.

Messaging will be critical to roll with positive search, display, landing pages, and offers positioning their products and service benefits of convenience, safety, but also brand messages of hope.



FREDERICK VALLAEYS

Co-Founder, Optmyzr



Who would even dare predict trends after 2020 showed us that nothing is certain anymore.

But luckily, I'm a digital marketer so I'm used to operating in uncertain environments.

Like all of us in the industry, I expect Google to change an algorithm or two, and when I least expect it, throw me for a loop with a big change in Google Ads.

What we did learn from 2020 is that automation,

when used wisely, can actually save the day when all else falls apart around us.

So I believe a big trend for 2021 will be advertisers using automation to save time while finding ways to use human intelligence to manipulate these systems to gain an edge over competitors.

For example, advertisers will spend more time building checks-and-balances for the machines rather than doing account maintenance with automations like Smart Bidding and Responsive Search Ads handling tasks previously done by hand.

Advertisers will look for ways to get notified when these systems deviate from expectations, either due to shortcomings of the tools themselves, or because unplanned events in the world are messing up the best-laid plans.

It's natural for humans to only trust the machines when we can set our own rules for how to monitor them.

And without that trust and control, we'll be hesitant to rely on them to gain the potential time savings.

Advertisers will also continue to seek the benefits of business data to improve PPC results.

As we saw in the pandemic, when the world around us changes, the accounts that adapted most quickly were the ones driven at least in part by structured business data.

Not only can these accounts more rapidly adapt to changes in supply chains, local response, and shifting consumer patterns, they can also help deliver financial results by translating Google's levers like CPA and ROAS into business outcomes like profits and revenue growth.

PURNA VIRJI

Senior Manager, Global Engagement, Microsoft Advertising

My predictions for 2021 is that PPCs will need to go back to the basics, to rethinking and re-optimizing the core fundamentals of campaign management.

Here's why.

A shock of the scale that COVID-19 brought has created major shifts in the preferences and expectations of us all – shifts that could last even post-recovery.

From the start of quarantine, search was key to



helping fill the gap around what we once took for granted, such as popping out to buy some laundry detergent.

Consumers – even those that wouldn't have done so normally – looked online to fulfill their needs, from discovery to indulgence to entertainment.

As Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella has said, “We saw an increase in digitalization within the first two months of lockdown that normally would have happened in two years.”

Many consumers used online services for the first time, and many experienced the convenience and delight of shopping from home for products they never ordered before.

Analysts at Jefferies shared that between **40% to 60%** of U.S. online shoppers purchased more groceries and essentials on Amazon during the pandemic.

Significantly above its 2019 category share of just ~1% to 3%.

They believe many consumers will continue buying these on Amazon even after the pandemic ends, and

that overall online shopping will continue to accelerate post-pandemic.

Digital advertising has never had an audience like this, and that means competition is ever-increasing online.

As a result, PPCs will need to focus on getting the basics just right.

In ecommerce, it starts with focusing on the feed, both to ensure that errors aren't limiting reach and volume, but also to focus on optimizing the feed to increase relevant impressions.

For those with physical locations, leveraging "buy online, pick-up in store" will continue to be a way to compete with the online-only giants.

Being able to shop online and pick up items within a couple of hours can be a huge advantage over even one-day shipping.

No matter what you advertise or which vertical you work in, what's never been more important is putting customers and communities first and marketing with purpose.

Inclusive marketing helps your brand connect authentically, drives trust, and drives purchase intent.

For PPCs looking at being more inclusive with their campaigns, it once again comes down to the basics: keywords and images.

Keywords

The goal here is to target potential customers based on their unique needs that map to the keywords they use to satisfy their unique dimension of diversity.

For example, the LGBTQI+ community, when looking to source a retailer for any given product or service, tends to use the phrase, “gay-friendly” as a modifier – “Gay-friendly wedding photographer” or “gay-friendly vacations”.

This unique phrase could be used as a proxy to help match your efforts in personalizing messaging or services specifically for this community.

As marketers, it’s our job to uncover these unique insights with diverse audiences and their unique consumer decision journeys.

The relevance of search across the consumer decision journey has never been more important in finding these insights.

Images

How can you signal inclusion within images?

Choosing imagery is an important part of the process of constructing a meaningful and inclusive customer experience.

Inclusive brands don't just want to reach people - they want to make all people feel seen to the extent they feel that your brand not just represents them but is for them.

Images that indicate that the brand is open-minded or brings a sense of balance and equity can indicate inclusion.

Consider portraying realistic diversity - including outlier dimensions of diversity like body size, and ensuring that when more than one person is in a photo

– that they are featured compositionally with the same prominence.

Brands who prioritize inclusive marketing to build trust, advocacy, and loyalty will future-proof their market leadership position.

It begins with small actions in the details of campaign design but gains fly-wheel-sized steam when an inclusive approach to business is at the heart of a brand's mission and values.

Inclusively marketing is [Marketing with Purpose](#), and that is a win, win, win for your brand, your customers, and your employees.

It all comes down to going back to the basics.

SUSAN WENOGRAD

Director of Paid Acquisition, Nextiva



Google Wants More of Your Budget

Marketers should watch how Google will continue to try and get a piece of the paid social spending pie.

Facebook has commanded large budgets often because of the diversity in how a product can be presented to customers is, combined with reaching prospects that are further up the funnel in buying.

Google was limited to text ads by people already searching, and then display ads, which had questionable targeting.

They've really started to make clear moves into this space with the addition of things like Discovery campaign types, lead capture ads for YouTube, and even their recent streamlining of custom audiences.

Facebook Will Continue to Grow Instagram's Features

As Facebook is a mature platform with an increasing age bracket into older demographics, Instagram is their fresh hope for new things.

Ad formats like Stories have done exceedingly well, and they've gone after TikTok formats by launching Reels.

They are going to continue to find ways to monetize the real estate on the platform. They also need to entice creators – something they haven't historically done a great job of.

IGTV bumbled along, with no monetization options.

That's now changing with their releasing monetization opportunities.

But longer-form content a la YouTube is a nut they're still trying very hard to crack.

We will likely see continued experimentation here.



AJ WILCOX

Founder, B2Linked

Smart digital marketers in 2021 should focus on data.

Never have we had such abundance of cheap data available to us through APIs, data partners, and the ad platforms themselves.

There isn't an excuse anymore – there are so many developers to collaborate with on marketing projects.

You have access to tons of data. You have free or cheap tools that are more powerful than you'll ever need.

Marketers need to familiarize themselves with the technical. Excel/Google Sheets are great, but they're the standard.

You can provide so much more value as a marketer when you leverage python, SQL, KNIME, and other data access/manipulation tools.

I got my degree in marketing back in '08, but I've regretted not getting a degree in Information Systems, and then used that knowledge to learn marketing.

Learning digital marketing is extremely inexpensive (due to the multitude of excellent publishing sources - like this one - out there).

If you're like me, you may have found that it's much more difficult to learn data science and programming on your own.

Marketers who can write ad copy and create campaigns in an ad interface are a dime-a-dozen.

Marketers should also understand how important it is to stand out.

Want to stand out in your own career? Become a technical marketer.

KIRK WILLIAMS

Owner, ZATO

While the role of automation continues to grow in Google and Microsoft, PPC marketers continue to question where the future lies for them in this regard – and if it includes them in it.

I think the companies that focus specifically on the following will have the greatest success in 2021.

Automation or not, it is a move away from making strategic channel decisions by solely incorporating directly tracked channel results.



“Hold on a second, Kirk,” you protest, “you’re not suggesting a new fancy trend or fad to hop on here, you’re getting to the basics of brand marketing and how the role of PPC fits into that broader narrative.”

Shhh, quiet!

If we call it a new trend, more people will jump on the bandwagon!

Teasing aside, we have been emerging from a period of time in PPC that involved obsessing over directly tracked Profit and Leads, and making specific Channel decisions based solely on that data (whatever the attribution model).

This came out of:

- The assumption that attribution was more clear than it is.
- An ignorance in the complexity of the user journey and its incorporation into multiple/all channels.
- A purposeful desire to demonstrate tracked results to shift more of the budgetary pie each year into the coffers of PPC.

In this way, I would argue that what I am suggesting really could be considered a new trend to hop onto in PPC.

It is a realization that:

- PPC is simply a part of the bigger puzzle and that no attribution model (not even data-driven attribution) can paint the full picture of it.
- We need to rely more on implementing a well-thought-out strategy at the macro-adjustment level, and then make our micro-adjustments based on the tracked profitability of our channel.

That's a lot of corporate mumble-jumble.

What I mean is that the business that invests well into learning:

- Who their audience is.
- What they care about.
- Where they spend their time.
- What they want to hear.

...can then build a PPC campaign strategy targeting those audiences (social) and how they are searching (search).

This will inform:

- Landing page creation and content.
- Ad creative.
- Various Google Ads targeting metrics such as audiences, keywords, location, devices, and more.

Then, utilizing broader metrics such as Gross Revenue, divided by Media Spend for the bigger picture profitability target (rather than channel ROAS), the micro-adjustments can be made as needed using soft channel ROAS targets.

This removes the need to obsess over why this poor-performing, middle funnel keyword that is “exactly” what we want to target and is sending really solid traffic isn’t sending directly tracked conversions.

When:

- The prime objective is aimed correctly.
- The overall marketing strategy is performing.
- We PPCers can make micro-adjustments, shifting bids and budgets around with the data we have.
- Our realistic, softer target CPAs/ROAS to help guide our hands.

Then, we watch the brand actually grow.

We are not hamstringing it by strangling the funnel because the attribution model we put our trust into hasn't yet given us the go-ahead.

Throw off the constraints of that tyrannical attribution model and get back to working within a larger system.

Do that in 2021, and no matter what Google decides to give or take away (well, we hope), we'll still be able to figure it out.



BEN WOOD

Strategy Director, Hallam

There's a lot more I could mention here but I've broken down my predictions into three categories.

There will clearly always be new networks and targeting options emerging and we will certainly see even less manual control on platforms such as Google Ads.

This is due to rising automation technology and privacy that will continue to be a more important issue for consumers.

Outside of those obvious points, I have listed out some of the more interesting advances I think we'll see in 2021 below.

Accelerated Digital Transformation and Knock on Impact on Competition

The recent pandemic has massively accelerated digital transformation.

Many organizations are now being forced to massively upskill their digital capabilities at a rapid pace, including targeted media buying.

Many marketing teams are now 100% reliant on digital marketing due to the overnight loss of many traditional marketing channels.

And this often means doubling down on what's delivering the best returns.

Due to the difficulties that come with correctly attributing sales to upper funnel advertising networks like display and video, as well as the relative digital immaturity of some of the brands investing in digital for the first time because of the pandemic, I think this

will exponentially increase the competition seen on Google search, shopping and many traditionally bottom funnel networks.

Brands will jump to invest their marketing budgets on those networks that will be able to show quick returns.

The truth is that long term brand growth comes from a combination of sales activation and brand awareness activity.

And although it may prove more of an attribution challenge, it may now be more important than ever for us to identify relevant, cost-effective networks for our brands in 2021.

This is to ensure we're able to maximize exposure outside of search alone.

I also expect that for much of 2021 we'll be operating in the midst of a recession.

And we know from previous experience that brands who use brand awareness throughout recessions have grown their share of voice and in turn remained top

of mind with consumers – recessions can be long and consumers have short memories.

The Importance of Offline Conversion Tracking

While not necessarily a brand new concept, I think offline conversion tracking will become a priority in B2B markets.

More traditional marketing investments are moving toward PPC and marketing leaders look to understand the true value of their investments.

This means looking to import offline sales values back into analytics to ‘close the loop’ between advertising spend and offline conversion data.

Traditionally, many B2B organizations would invest in PPC as an ancillary network to drive sales.

They would be comfortable with reporting on “conversions” without any offline data to report on the actual conversion value.

Now that PPC is set to become a primary sales driver, I have a feeling this will become a huge focus in the months ahead.

A Shift Back Toward Contextual Targeting & an Integrated Approach to Advertising Driven by Increasing Privacy Regulations

Both Apple and Mozilla have already introduced enhanced privacy controls (ETP and ITP) in their browsers. And Google Chrome is now following suit.

Essentially this will hugely restrict third-party cookie tracking and reduce the data available to advertisers and advertising networks on a user level.

I think that the hyper-specific user-level targeting we're used to will continue to erode massively over the next year as privacy becomes an even bigger issue for consumers.

I expect this to push more advertisers back to contextual targeting methods and raise the importance of compelling creative.

The importance of effective persuasion techniques to sit alongside the precision targeting most of us PPC marketers have become more familiar with will be emphasized.



CHRISTINE ZIRNHELD

Digital Marketer, Cypress North

One of the biggest trends we've seen in recent years that we can count on continuing through 2021, from Google Ads specifically, is a push towards automation – even if it's not in the advertiser's best interest.

Optimization scores are pushed on advertisers who want to remain Google Partners.

Close variant matching gets more and more egregious as time passes.

And now, Google is removing much of our visibility into search query data and the ability to negate those bad matches as they occur.

Looking ahead to 2021, one of the most important things PPC marketers can do to set themselves up for success is diversifying their skillset beyond Google Ads.

As Google continues to move away from actionable data and more toward machine learning, it will be vital for advertisers to be well-versed in other advertising platforms that allow them more control over their spending, reach, and messaging.

If Google's Smart Shopping campaigns are any indication of where things are headed, advertisers will continue to lose both control and tangible data in 2021.

In order to do the best work we can for our clients, we simply can't rely on Google Ads as heavily as we once did.

That being said, there are a lot of exciting things happening on other platforms that advertisers can be excited about, especially for B2B advertisers.

LinkedIn social targeting on Microsoft Advertising opens up a world of targeting possibilities for B2B marketers who want to avoid paying for pesky B2C clicks.

The ability to target users based on employer, industry, or job function at the exact moment they perform a search is unmatched on any other platform.

Advertisers will also be able to expand their reach with ads across the new Microsoft Audience Network, pulling top-of-funnel traffic to their site with new placements.

B2B marketers should also keep an eye on LinkedIn Ads.

The platform's expanded targeting options, such as company growth rate and company category in 2020, don't always make headlines.

Advertisers should be on the lookout for improvements to retargeting on LinkedIn as well.

Engagement-based retargeting allows advertisers to move prospects further down the funnel based on how they interact with lead generation forms or videos on the platform.