

Much of the thrust of The Science of PPC – like much of the published literature in our industry – is to provide advice. Tips and tricks, even. “What to do” is generally the stock in trade of marketing-related content.

I guess you could consider this week the “What Not to Wear” of digital marketing. To all of you slovenly, shabby, outmoded, career-limiting accounts: your friends and family have contacted me, Stacey, and Clinton to help you turn things around. Let the intervention begin!

Based on hundreds of account audits (including those for prospective clients, as well as live help at clinics and workshops at industry events, the most prominent of those being the PPC Mechanics sessions at SMX), I and my industry peers have, by now, familiarized ourselves with recurring patterns in accounts that have failed spectacularly. This week, I thought I’d share a partial list of these. It might help us to deepen our insight as to what PPC success might look like (do the opposite, perhaps?).

Here are ten typical characteristics of PPC accounts that really suck.

1. Not really built out.

Seems like a bit of a subtle one, but it’s actually quite a mind trick to play on a client or executive team: narrow the discourse down to this tiny thing that isn’t performing particularly well, and solve only problems related to that. Presto! You’ll never be in danger of working particularly hard on this channel. Accounts that succeed, by contrast, have been launched from a blueprint of sorts that takes 7-10 days or longer to research and put together. Fully built out accounts may include, for example:

- A full and robust keyword effort to organize and capture different levels of buying intent. This doesn’t have to be exhaustive or final, but there’s no sense just trotting out little stubs of a full account. Build something that you can go to war with.
- Most or all of the relevant campaign types, or at least a plan to add them. No attempt to incorporate Shopping? No Remarketing? No idea about how or why to include Brand (and to ensure it’s not sneaking into the campaign as a whole)? These underbuilds are symptomatic of an account person who has very limited experience.
- Audiences and other advanced targeting features. Again, “bare” accounts might be fine in the first week or two as things ramp up, but if none of the available accoutrements have been added over many months or years, the account manager doesn’t know what they are or where to find them.
- A full effort to build out ad extensions. Not doing so indicates a lack of effort and/or knowledge. An understanding of how automated extensions like seller ratings work is another sign of PPC chops. Having to go and research it suggests a newbie’s in the chair.

2. Multiple instances of conversions being counted.

Wow, that’s a pretty good CPA — \$14.50! Oh, until you look things up under Conversions, and don’t you know, four different ways of counting a conversion are turned on in Google Ads. The real CPA is

\$58. Instead of “we knew it probably wasn’t accurate, so we generally ignore that number,” how about “let’s bring a toolset to the table free of gotchas and mistakes, so we actually believe we’re doing marketing instead of playing make-believe?”

3. Brand queries smuggled into non-brand campaigns.

Beginners don’t even know the difference between keywords and queries, and don’t know where to find the Search Terms reporting. Or worse, sly practitioners deliberately salt the non-brand campaigns with these purely navigational, high-converting queries, rather than adding them as negative keywords in places they don’t belong. The same principle applies: stop playing make-believe.

4. Settings level mistakes.

I recently audited an account that used a relatively random series of different automated bidding strategies, including, for no reason, Target Impression Share. People dabbling in random account methods may be more interested in learning on the client’s dime than growing the business. Various other mistakes happen at the Settings level, including fundamental errors around what geographies to target, what networks to target, etc. Even not having set the “goal” guideline to something like sales or leads may be indicative that the campaign manager doesn’t notice changing trends in PPC platform features.

5. Modifiers neglected.

Again, not setting modifiers for certain things like device can indicate that a manager doesn’t even know what a modifier is. Weaker forms of neglect include dabbling in setting up geo bid modifiers for big round figures like +65%, 0%, 15%, and so on, and then never touching them again. If geography is important to bid accuracy in an account, it should also eventually progress beyond large regions like states and provinces, at least some of the time. “California” is a big state. It’s unlikely conversion rates and customer intent are the same across the entire state.

6. Fake work or “flatlining.”

Fake work is a certain hustle routine applied to accounts operated by agencies with a lot of client churn, client accounts, etc. – it’s done to show something, but it doesn’t improve results. The sad part is the account managers know a thing or two, but they don’t have time to get to know the client. The agency’s business model requires near total abdication of account effort, since each client pays so little.

An example might be deep blitzes of effort in a single obscure geographic zone: look how deep and relentless the effort was! (Well, when a junior person is sitting at a desk all day at a large, carefree agency, they do have to be tapping away at something for part of some days, at least. Too bad the

person is so underpaid they don't care to prioritize what it is they do, when they do work on an account. It's fake work.)

A similar problem is the faker who works on the client side who has taken over an account after one or more agencies have been let go. This individual knows just about enough to log in, but not much more. The company owners are under the impression that "Marla is working hard on the account, and we couldn't afford to pay that agency." Marla's work (Change History doesn't lie) consists of changes to daily budgets every few days, and pausing and unpausing ads every few days. No actual optimization takes place. Marla's account effort has no pulse, but unfortunately, no paramedics are on the scene and it will be months before the rotting corpse begins to smell enough to draw attention to it.

7. "Single theme" obsessives.

Some account managers pride themselves on some narrow tactical implementation, like obsessive daily adding of negative keywords. Although everyone needn't be a strategic genius, a lack of balance in account management is suggestive of someone attempting forest management armed only with a putty knife.

8. Lack of continuity and communication.

Six different account teams in six years. Eighteen different names appearing in change history. Everyone working differently, on different things. No one taking their effort very far. Account structures scrapped and restarted, each one more inscrutable than the last. Sounds like a formula for growing a great business built on a platform of accumulated insights... right? And no one seems to know any of the logins for related tools and platforms. Or if they even have those set up.

9. Strategic misfires and misfits.

Some failed accounts stem from leaning on a series of excuses while staying overly confined in one's lane. Oh, the landing pages they want us to use don't work! They told us to stick to brand terms for now! Google Analytics isn't set up right so we're just flying blind! We think this small business needs awareness, so rather than advising them to fix their Google My Business presence or driving quantifiable leads, we've decided to show videos to God knows who!

At some point, anyone working at any level in the job of paying for targeted media needs to be a linchpin and to apply the right tools to the job. When the list of "we can't"'s is so long that success seems impossible, why would one spend any budget at all on efforts that can't possibly succeed? At any level in any organization, success requires what Jeffrey Hayzlett calls "clock changers and seam finders." If you or your group are hell bent on staying so extremely in your lane that little of substance can be accomplished, then... consider being more generally helpful. The scope of your work (and the need for you) sometimes depends on you paving the way for that scope... even if it's as little as providing a gentle suggestion or two.

10. Accepting high CPC's as a given.

The number of people on the planet who can afford to – or would, for whatever reason – wander into an auto dealership and peel off \$130,000 for a Subaru Outback is no doubt well below 1%. Knowing the value of things is just one of those instincts people need to have. The same applies to businesses – but arguably the percentage of businesses who can afford to glibly pay 3x the real value to them of all their inputs is even below that sub-1% level. Sure, the ads platform may make it tempting to leave all your bids at multiple dollars per click when a single dollar might get you about the same business results, but if you haven't cared enough to drive those CPC's lower, then you've forgotten that real people depend on your work – real people who don't sail into a Subaru dealership and pay \$130,000 for the Outback on a Friday afternoon. The auction is competitive, sure. But the whole point is to find bargains and to pay appropriate prices, not outlandish ones, for the interactions that might lead to business growth and profit.

This all adds up to a great theme for 2021: suck less.