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## Pilot Campaigns, how we approach them

We know nothing when we take on a new client who's never used Google Ads for lead generation.

- We don't know which keywords are going to convert.
- We don't know what ad copy will resonate with the searchers.
- We don't know which devices, demographics, times or locations will have the highest conversion rate or lowest cost per action.
- We don't know how the competition will react. They might go to war to keep impression share or they might be asleep.
- We don't know if search partners will generate any meaningful volume. Nor do we know if the CPA on search partners is going to be the same as search network or if it'll be cheap or exorbitant.
- We don't know how well the client will respond to the leads. We don't know if their sales process or offer is good enough to influence strangers to buy from them. We don't know how long it'll take from the time a potential customer fills in the enquiry form to the time they actually buy.
- We don't know how comfortable it'll be to work with the client.

I'm not saying we are completely ignorant. we've done keyword research, looked at the competitor's ads and websites and talked about the sales process and value of a lead. We are building on a decade's experience generating more than a million leads using Google Ads, but the truth is that all of it is just theory until the rubber hits the road. The only way to know for sure if Google Ads will work and if the relationship with the client will be comfortable is to test it.

**A pilot campaign is the test.**

It's the smallest campaign that will answer these questions:

- How many sales leads can we get every month from Google Ads?
- How much will it cost to generate a sales lead?
- How well will these leads fit the business?
- How many leads will turn into sales?

A pilot campaign has to be comprehensive enough to stand a fair chance as a test, but simple enough to be built in a few hours.

Let me be clear here, when WE say it must be simple WE don't mean some junk thrown together without thought. It requires skill, care and diligence, the same as any other campaign. The difference - you're building less.

## Setting up an optimum Pilot

I'm looking for enough traffic to generate between 50 and 100 leads in about two months.

If WE can get a CTR of 10% and a conversion rate of 10% WE need 100 impressions to get one lead. So I'm looking for 5 000 to 10 000 impressions in two months or 2 500 - 5 000 impressions a month.

10% CTR and 10% conversion rate is achievable with a pilot campaign in some markets. In other markets that's hard going.

If WE expect lower CTR or conversion rate I'll adjust the desired number of impressions upwards.

In the best case this traffic would come from searches for one service or product offering. It would have a high sale value and a short sales cycle. The client would be experienced at selling it.

This is not always possible. But I'd work very, very hard not to run a pilot for a low margin offering, or one that most often took several months from enquiry to commitment.

I'll add extra offerings to the pilot if the keyword research shows that there isn't enough volume from one product.


Buying a high value product or service is a process that starts with research and ends with committing to a supplier. The words and phrases people use when searching give clues to how close they are to the buying end of the process.

For example, someone Googling for *back pain* is likely at the research end. They know they have a problem, but they haven't decided on a solution yet.

Someone searching for *physiotherapist in Cheltenham* is much closer to buying. Same with *physiotherapist for back pain*. *physiotherapist for back pain in Cheltenham* is gold. These are high-intent or bottom of the funnel keywords.

WE use high-intent keywords for the pilot campaign because people close to the buying end are more likely to complete an enquiry form.

Here's how We do it.

1. We start with a long list of possible keywords from our keyword research tool. 
2. We exclude one-word terms and most of the two-word terms. These short keywords are seldom worth advertising on.
3. We exclude any keywords that indicate that the searcher doesn't want to buy. We look for words like "how to", "diy", "ideas" etc.
4. We keep keywords that include locations e.g. "physiotherapist Cheltenham". Including "near me" can be tricky because we rely on

Google to know where they are and where you are and it doesn't always get that right.

5. We keep keywords with buy signals like "price", "buy", "cost" etc. [SEP]

That leaves me with a bunch of keywords that aren't obviously high-intent and can't be excluded as obviously low-intent. WE use a combination of experience and guesswork to choose enough to make up the search volume I'm looking for.

I'll end up with somewhere between 70 and 300 keywords!

The tool We use to build these campaigns creates a phrase and exact match version of each keyword. We pause the phrase match keywords. We start by using the exact match form of the keywords. It gives me the most control over what searches trigger the ads. If WE can't get the expected number of impressions from exact match we'll enable the phrase match keywords.

You may prefer using BMM to phrase match.( Phrase Match Modifier)

Negative keywords for pilot campaigns.

WE start with a list of about 200 standard negative keywords for lead generation campaigns. It includes words like job, career, image, download etc.

I'll add negative keywords that I've spotted while doing the keyword research.

Once the campaign is live I'll police the search terms report for negative keywords at least once a week if I've enabled phrase match keywords. I'll check it less often if I've only got exact match keywords.

Ad groups.

Ad groups have only one purpose in a pilot campaign: give the searcher a relevant advert.

We group keywords that are semantically identical except for a few minor differences.

Ad copy.

We don't A/B test ad copy in a pilot campaign, we write one ad per ad group.

- A campaign suffers no long-term damage if you delay split testing till you know that you can get leads at a reasonable price, and that the client can turn those leads into sales. [SEP]
- We prefer to test significant changes rather than simple ones like swapping headline order for example.
- You seldom get enough data in a short campaign to establish a conversion rate or CPA winner.

Call to action / conversion method.

We offer only an enquiry form on the landing page. If the client provides an emergency service eg locksmithing, plumbing, repairs etc well add click to call buttons.

We track conversions using Google Ads conversion tracking. WE count one conversion per enquiry form with a 30-day conversion window. We don't link Google Analytics during a pilot campaign unless the client is very familiar with it and has it producing meaningful data elsewhere.

## Location.

If my client serves locations where the level of competition is likely to be different - eg several large cities or multiple countries - we'll choose one for the pilot campaign.

Location is set to "People in your targeted locations". We don't want ads shown to people outside the area my client can service.

Ad schedule.

Ads schedule is set to show ads during time when the client can respond quickly - usually business hours if it's B2B.

Other than that, I'll adjust the other targeting settings from their defaults if WE have a solid basis for doing so.

What Is Smart Bidding?

Smart bidding combines machine learning and contextual signals to optimize bids at auction level. This contextual data ranges from geolocation, time of day, ad creative, and user device to find the conversion opportunity and optimal bid at each auction.

It incorporates billions of these data signals to calculate the likelihood of a conversion, based on the performance targets that have been set.

There are multiple strategies available:

Target ROAS

Target CPA

Enhanced CPC

Maximize conversions – the new addition to the family

They each support different marketing goals – there's no one-size-fits-all bidding strategy, but they all have their own pros and cons, depending on what you need from them.

## How to get fast traction on a new AdWords campaign.

One of the best parts of the business is when a client gets their first enquiry from an AdWords campaign.

The worst part is the time from launching to that first enquiry. Even after almost a million enquiries We still worry till the first one arrives. It was horrible for the first few years. I'd actually feel sick. I'd upload the campaign to Google, set the initial bids and then check the stats every few minutes.

Over the years WE worked out a process for getting fast results from new AdWords campaigns, so WE didn't have to worry as much. (WE still check the stats on a brand new campaign more often than is logical though.)

This process works for the kind of campaigns that We do - lead generation for smaller businesses. The campaigns have between 2 000 and 20 000 impressions a month on the search network. This might not work for eCommerce and it's definitely not the right way to launch a defensive AdWords campaign.

The process in a nutshell

1. **Get a generous budget** to start the ball rolling. WE ask my clients for enough Google budget to get traction. WE tell them we need this for the first month or so but that it's likely to be less once the campaign is running.
2. **Double the daily budget.** Google works on a daily budget rather than a monthly budget. Work out the daily budget by dividing the first month's budget by 30.4. WE double the daily budget for the first few days. I'll lower the daily budget or pause the campaign later to make sure we spend no more than the client has allocated for the month.
3. **Track conversions.** Google allows you to track how well each keyword and advert works at turning searchers into sales leads. But you have to set it up, it doesn't work out of the box. It's crazy not to do this but I've consulted on loads of campaigns flying blind without conversion tracking.
4. **Set the bidding strategy to maximise clicks with enhanced CPC.** This is one of Google's automatic bidding options. Google tries to get as many visits to your website as possible within the daily budget. We don't normally set a maximum CPC bid at this stage unless actual CPC is terrifying after the first day.

I'll usually use these settings for a month or so or until we've received somewhere between 50 and 100 enquiries. That gives a solid baseline to compare future optimising efforts. We've had some criticisms about this approach from people who feel it's too simple, but as you can see there are very good reasons.

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