

Use Negative Keywords to Make a Positive Impact on Your Pay-Per-Click Campaign

By Heather Lutze

When running any type of online pay-per-click (PPC) ad campaign, most business professionals spend a lot of time planning their keywords. They know what phrases customers use to find them, and they make sure their site is findable with those specific search terms. Unfortunately, these same keyword-savvy businesspeople often miss one important element of pay-per-click keywords: Defining negative keywords. In other words, they fail to spell out how they *do not* want customers to find them.

“Wait a minute,” you may be thinking. *“Why would I want someone not to find me? I want all the web traffic I can get.”* While you certainly do want lots of web traffic, even more important is getting the *right* web traffic. Negative keywords help you accomplish that.

Negative or “Excluded” keywords are the list of search terms under which you do *not* want to show up in search results. Google AdWords, Yahoo! Paid Search, and MSN AdCenter all offer you the option of selecting “Negative” or “Excluded” keywords to add to your account.

This option is important because search engines make matching decisions on your behalf, and if you don’t have a list of negative keywords in your PPC accounts, you could end up paying for wasted clicks. By missing the chance to determine how you do NOT want to be found, you are letting Google, Yahoo!, or MSN match your ad to what they think is relevant, rather than to what you know is relevant. This can hurt your branding, identity, and market position—not to mention the money you are wasting by paying for a click for something you don’t sell or offer.

To put the value of negative keywords in perspective, consider the following example. Let’s say that you’re in the business of selling fine timepieces, such as Rolex, Breitling, and Concorde, and that each of those brand names is in your keyword campaign. If you only offer authentic, certified watches, you will want to exclude certain words from your account so you do not show up in any searches that include the words “knock-off,” “discount,” “imitation,” or “fake.” Otherwise if someone types “fake Rolex” into the search bar, and if “fake” is not one of your negative keywords, then you will show up in that search, which is a bad result for you and for the searcher.

If, however, you create a list of negative keywords and you include them in your ad campaign, then you will not show up on any search results page when someone types in “fake,” “knock-off,” or “imitation.” By using negative keywords you exclude yourself from “Rolex” searches that aren’t looking for the real thing.

To make identifying your negative keywords easier, follow these guidelines.

1) Use the negative keyword tool in Google AdWords.

To aid in building your negative keyword list, Google AdWords provides a “negative” keyword suggestion tool inside their “Keyword Tool.” The negative keyword tool is buried, so you have to look for it. Obviously the PPC providers don’t want to encourage negative keywords because they make money every time someone clicks on your ad, whether it’s relevant to the search or not.

The negative keyword tool will tell you all the “intelligent” associations being made on your campaign keywords. These keywords will change seasonally, so keep a close eye on them and keep adding new negatives each month (see tip #2). Make sure to set your calendar or Outlook settings to remind you to check your “negatives” suggestions in Google’s Keyword Tool.

2) Check for new negatives by month and season for trending.

Your negative keywords could change every month or season. Thinking in terms of “seasons” will help you expand both your keyword and negative keyword lists in many ways, since people cook different things, wear different clothes, buy different products, seek different services, and consider major purchases in different seasonal patterns. Even if you do B2B sales you have seasons, such as when you’re ramping up for a big conference, when budgets get renewed, or when quarterly earnings reports are due.

To get a better idea of how seasons change what people buy and do, consider the search term “cooking.” As you approach the holiday season, people will search for holiday recipes, including turkeys and roasts, rich decadent desserts, and comfort foods. But once January rolls around, cooking searches focus on non-fat cooking, healthy cooking, and diet specific cooking foods and techniques. In the summer months you’ll see outdoor cooking and barbeque cooking dominate.

So no matter what you sell or offer, you can’t just sit on the fact that you have a certain list of negative keywords. You have to know the seasonality of your own business and change your negative keywords accordingly.

3) Apply global negatives and ad group negatives differently.

A global negative keyword tells your PPC provider that you are NOT that word under any circumstance—no matter what the searcher types into the search bar. For example, if you sell high-end designer purses, you are never “cheap,” never “counterfeit,” and never “knock-off.” These would be some of your global negatives.

But let’s suppose you also have some color and style keyword ad groups, because you know that people who search for designer purses frequently type in the color and style they want. If it’s winter and you don’t sell light color purses, such as white and cream, in the colder months, then you’d want “white,” “cream,” “beige,” and any other light colors to be some of your negative keywords for the specific ad group. Then when spring rolls around, you can delete those negatives and replace them with other colors you don’t sell for that season. When you’re applying negatives to a certain ad group, you can be more specific than with your global negatives.

4) Pick your negative keywords carefully.

Don’t add negative keywords to your account without carefully considering each one. After all, if your negative keywords are too general, you might miss out on some valid web traffic. For example, just because someone types in “cheap” doesn’t mean that person wouldn’t buy something expensive. Therefore, add negative keywords carefully so you don’t negate the buying cycle or shut down traffic.

Also, don’t confuse mistakes, errors, or misspellings with negative keywords. They are not the same thing. You DO want to be found under common mistakes and misspellings, whereas you do NOT want to be found under your negative keywords. For

example, you do NOT want to add North Carolina to your list of negative keywords if you're a hotel in Hilton Head, South Carolina. You want to include this common error in your keywords, as this is truly knowing your customers inside and out and catering to them even if they make a mistake. So pick the obvious negative keywords, but don't go overboard.

Negative Keywords = Positive Results

By utilizing the negative keyword function to the fullest, you will separate yourself from your competitors and make the most of every click you pay for. Advertisers who take advantage of this tactic get better, more qualified visibility for their ads, and ultimately get better conversions for their investment dollar.