

Know Your Customer's Path to Purchase to Win at the Pay-Per-Click Game

By Heather Lutze

When it comes to pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, most companies make the same mistake: Every keyword they use drives prospects to their homepage, as they believe that their homepage is the best and broadest place to drop prospects. This single mistake costs companies thousands of dollars each year in lost sales and increased PPC fees.

In order to choose and use the right keywords at the right time in your pay-per-click (PPC) campaigns, you must be clear about your customers' intent at each stage of the buying cycle and their search. Consider, for a moment, how people search. Typically they'll start with a very basic search term and view the results in a search engine. Unsatisfied with the results, they add another term onto their search string. Still unsatisfied, they add another search term...and then another...and then another...until they get the results they want.

This process of adding keywords to a generic initial search term until "valuable" or "relevant" search results appear is called a "keyword tail." For example, let's say that John Smith of Dayton, Ohio has a broken television on the Friday before the big game. His TV is too big to fit in his car, and he is freaking out! John turns to the internet to find a possible solution to this problem. He starts by performing a search using the keyword "television." However, this does not give him results that address his pain. So he incrementally adds keywords that get him closer to easing his pain and solving his problem. Here's what his keyword tail might ultimately look like: Television + Repair + Sony + Dayton OH + On Site Repair. If the ad that John Smith clicks on immediately takes him to a relevant page that provides the information he is seeking, then that's the repair shop that's likely to get John's business.

Unfortunately, the path to purchase doesn't usually take place quite so quickly. The various buying stages typically occur over time, instead of in one sitting. John Smith's situation simply illustrates how searchers add terms in an iterative process until they get what they're looking for.

On the path to purchase, there are times when broad, informational terms are appropriate. Someone might type in the generic term "mountain bikes" because they want general information about mountain bikes—brands, features, prices, and comparisons. And if they're using that term and staying on that page, then you want to deliver what they're asking for. But people don't type in "mountain bikes" when they're ready to buy one. Rather, they type in a much longer keyword with lots of specifics added.

The Three Buying Cycles

The various stages in the buying cycle prompt different kinds of consumer searches. During the **information** phase, the search query usually involves one- or two-word generic information terms. The **shopping** cycle usually involves two- to three-word generic terms. And during the **buying** phase, consumers are likely to use four-word or longer keywords with less generic terms that include brand names and detailed specifications.

The key to PPC success is knowing how your prospects shop during each phase. Therefore, you need to think like your prospects and customize the results you give them based on their search terms. Simply having every searcher land on your homepage is a formula for disaster. Here are some details to consider for each phase.

- **The Information Phase**

During this stage, customers don't know what they want yet. They are only aware of a pain, a problem, a need, or a desire that they're trying to solve or meet. It is akin to customers driving around the outside of a mall, not sure what stores they might visit.

Your broadest terms—the most “generic” keywords—are your informational keywords. These are the shortest search terms, usually only one or two words. What you provide the searcher at a one-word keyword search should be different than when they type in a longer keyword string. Always keep in mind the searcher's pain, desire, and intent, which are revealed by their search terms. When the customer types “television” into the search box, he or she is in the information and research gathering stage. That customer is not ready to buy. Therefore, having your prospect go to your homepage for general information would be appropriate at this phase.

As a general rule, the higher the price-point of an item, the longer the information stage. A customer looking for a \$2 widget will usually move through information-gathering rather quickly, whereas someone researching \$2,000 televisions will have a much longer information-gathering stage.

- **The Shopping Phase**

Once customers have moved past the research stage, they begin shopping—looking at and comparing features, sizes, colors, brand names, price-points, and retailers. In the world of online purchasing, this is akin to someone walking around the mall and visiting the various stores. This phase is when customers put more words onto their search terms, such as “Sony Silver Flat Panel” and “Sony Plasma 37 Inch.” They add more modifiers onto their root search term and more specific keywords in order to get more detailed results. Longer and more specific search strings indicate that the customer is in hardcore shopping mode.

At this point, rather than drop someone off at your homepage for general information, you want to deliver prospects directly to the specific information they're looking for. So if you sell televisions, and the prospect types in “Sony Plasma 37 Inch Television,” you want them to land on the page that features that specific product. Only you know how long this phase generally lasts in your own business and what the most important information to deliver at this point is.

- **The Purchasing Phase**

Purchasing keywords are the longest and most specific searches of all, indicating that the prospect is ready to make a buying decision. Your customer is at the cash register and opening his or her wallet. While there is no single term that will absolutely tell you they are ready to buy, there are certain assumptions you can make based on the length and specificity of the keyword phrase. Therefore, at this point make sure you bring people directly to your shopping cart page.

Note that your longer, more specific, highly-targeted keyword phrases will have a lower search volume than more general terms. That should not cause you undue concern, however, because their conversion rate will be higher. In other words, the targeted purchasing keywords will put you in front of customers who know exactly what they want and who are ready to buy. When customers type in keywords like “Television 32 Inch Sony Flat Screen Plasma Denver Colorado,” they are done shopping. They have decided on what they’re going to buy and in what geographical area. If you go to the extra effort of running a long-string, highly-specific keyword in your campaign such as what the prospect would typically type during this phase, you’re going to be right there when the person’s credit card is coming out.

Your Path to Profits

You may be wondering why you can’t simply run PPC campaigns with purchasing terms only in order to get in front of customers when they’re ready to buy. The answer is that sometimes you have to start building trust, authority, and name recognition with prospects before they’ll buy from you. Even if you offer something totally unique or phenomenal, prospects won’t consider you a real contender unless you build the relationship with them.

Remember, the ultimate goal is for your company to be found easily under *every* keyword or keyword phrase that is relevant to your business—and at every stage in your customers’ path to purchase. That’s how you get business from the Internet. So pay attention to your customer’s path to purchase, give them a great user experience by keyword, and you will win in PPC advertising.