

Beyond the bid

Search marketing puts a new spin on the art of copywriting

By Mary Wagner

Frye boots were a hot item among fans of footwear fashion last fall and winter—one good reason for savvy Internet shoe retailers to bid on that brand name during the season in paid search keyword campaigns. In fact, so many bid on Frye boots that competition was stiff to get shoppers' attention and stand out from a crowd of search listings.

Yet for SimplySoles.com, a small online retailer of designer women's shoes, a paid search campaign for "Frye boots" was a winner, generating a 50% increase in conversions after the company made a critical change to its campaign.



That change? It wasn't more money for a higher keyword position on search engines. In fact, the campaign, newly managed for the season by search marketing firm MoreVisibility.com Inc., actually cost SimplySoles less per click than when it had managed its own search campaigns, while producing better results.

Instead, SimplySoles and MoreVisibility looked to a side of search that some online

marketers underestimate: the ad copy. Between what can become a bidding frenzy to secure top position under coveted keywords on Google or Yahoo and complaints over the rising cost of keywords, search marketing companies say it bears remembering that success is not all about the bid. The language in a paid ad listing also critically affects click-through and ROI.

Simple and bold

MoreVisibility altered the copy in SimplySoles' paid listing to something shorter, punchier and more directly relevant to the targeted audience. "Rather than include a lot of details, they made a simple and bold statement that caught customers' attention," says Rebeccah Sensenbrenner, SimplySoles general manager.

Under that rationale, the earlier ad copy became "Boots Shoe of the Season—The 'Must Have' Boots of the Season From Pucci, Frye, Miss Sixty & More."

Another product from SimplySoles, the CozyChic robe, experienced similar improvements in search results when MoreVisibility pumped up its ad copy to "CozyChic Robe—Pamper Yourself With the Luxurious CozyChic Robe By Barefoot Dreams."

MoreVisibility further optimized the campaigns by rotating different versions of the new ad listings on the engines for several weeks, and then building information on their comparative performance into the campaigns going forward.

"MoreVisibility has educated me to the fact that fewer words often have more impact and that I should not be afraid to use bold adjectives in our campaigns," Sensenbrenner says.

While many search marketing companies and their clients have focused on automated bidding

technology to reduce the labor in managing pay-per-click spending, those automated agents tackle only part of what makes an effective search campaign, says Danielle Leitch, executive vice president of client strategy at MoreVisibility. "It's a small piece of the pie," she says. "In reality, the creativity behind the campaign can be much more influential."

Paid listings operate in a constrained format: Yahoo in January trimmed the 190 characters it formerly allowed for paid search listings to 70 characters, or two lines of 35 characters each including spaces and punctuation (though that doesn't apply to ads it distributes to partner sites). Google's paid listings, AdWords, allow 25 characters in the headline and 35 in the second line.

"When you are limited to a very short amount of space, you have to be very concise in describing what you are providing, then also offer them something compelling to make them want to go to your site and learn more about it," says Charles Chin, senior associate of Google's vertical operations for retail. For a retailer, for example, that could take the form of an ad that says, "Limited-time 15% off offer." Says Chin, "That's a promotional offer that conveys time sensitivity and therefore the idea that you want to act now."

But getting a call to action into the listing is only half the battle; it had better be specific, too. A listing for a flower retailer that says "Worldwide delivery service guaranteed to get there in time for your event," simply describes some features of the service. "A more specific message would be, 'New York flowers, delivered to you within 24 hours.' It's a specific geography and a specific time frame," says John McAteer, head of Google Retail.

Other basic best practices include loading into the listing as early as possible a brand name and information on pricing, promotions or anything that underscores a competitive position, says Diane Rinaldo, director of the retail category for Yahoo Search Marketing.

Finding a copywriter

With the ever-increasing popularity and competitiveness of search marketing, writing for search has evolved into a specialty among copywriters—although there aren't many practitioners yet. "Do a search for copywriters on the Internet, and you'll probably find people who have a lot of experience in doing ad copy for print," says Cliff Koraska, COO of online exercise equipment retailer Smoothfitness.com. "You probably



won't find 50 that do ad copywriting specifically for the Internet."

Karon Thackston, whose company, Marketing Words, has a sub-specialty in copywriting for search engines, uses best practices from the search engines and has developed insights of her own as well. She starts creating pay-per-click listings by trying out the searched term in the headline of the listing, a proven technique for pulling the searcher's eye into the ad, though sometimes, she says, "forcing that in will take up more space than you have."

Thackston says she's also learned to look at what a client's competitors are doing in paid

search. If there's a trend, she weighs going in the other direction. "If the entire column of Google AdWords advertisers is using the search phrase in their headline, then you want to do the opposite because you want to stand out," she says.

A frequent error she sees in writing for paid search is ads that are too broadly written in an effort to snare more clicks. They can end up backfiring because they attract too many clicks that won't convert, unnecessarily burning through the marketing budget. A better strategy, says Thackston, is to qualify clicks with "deal breaker" copy in the listing. "If you say, 'Luxury Mexico Cruise, 2/6,' people not available to leave on that date won't click your ad. You're giving detailed information

that would entice the right visitors and helps prevent people who were just looking from clicking your ad and running up your tab," she says.

A balancing act

Beyond basic best practices to shorten and clarify search ad copy, the choice of language used in the creative should depend on what the objective is, according to search marketing experts. "Creative can impact click-through and conversion rate, and many times, the two act in opposition to each other," says Harrison Magun, vice president and managing director of Avenue A/Razorfish AR Search.

Magun recommends clients balance click-throughs and conversions in their search ad copy against

the desired outcome and offered an example of how that works: A hypothetical online bookstore creates a paid search ad that says, "Free books, click here" to support a promotion in which consumers who buy 10 books receive one book free. While that copy will likely increase the overall click-through rate, once visitors discover they must buy 10 books to get the free one, the conversion rate is likely to go down.

On the other end of the spectrum, the online bookstore that wants to pre-qualify visitors who click through so as to minimize ineffective paid search spending, limiting them, say, to those who are willing to wait to get their books, could create an ad that says, "More than 1 million titles, 30% available to ship now."

'You say bamboo, I say woven wood, but let's not call the whole thing off'

Copywriting is one way that wordsmiths ply their craft online; writing keywords for search engine marketing is another. And while keywords are usually only one, two or three words, they are important to the success of a web site.

Take the term "bamboo shade." Pretty simple, huh? How else would you describe it? Well, to the shade-manufacturing industry, bamboo shades are "woven wood shades."

"It's a copywriting challenge," says Sarah Cook Perkinson, vice president of marketing at Blindsgalore.com, which uses both "bamboo shades" and "woven wood shades" as search engine keywords. "You try to improve your rankings and be relevant to consumers based on the search terms they use—you don't want to fall prey to the fact that those aren't the correct terms."

The search engines themselves offer a lot of specific guidance to paying search advertisers and those seeking to optimize natural search, including which keywords get the most searches. Marketers work with the engines on creating an ad strategy from data compiled by the engines, create campaigns on their own, or look to a third party such as an interactive agency. That's what Blindsgalore.com did in turning to Avenue A/Razorfish's AR Search unit for help with boosting natural search rankings.

As part of an initial benchmarking exercise, the agency looked at the number of searches on major engines over the previous 120 days for about 50 words relevant to Blindsgalore's business. It found that the industry and consumers

in some cases used different language—like "woven wood shades" and "bamboo shades"—to describe the same products, leading to missed connections that affected search rankings, click-through and sales. Other examples included "cordless" shades, which some shoppers called "cord-free," and "top down bottom up," which is the industry term for



Sarah Cook Perkinson, vice president of marketing, Blindsgalore.com

“That may improve the conversion rate, because people who don’t want to wait won’t click through, but the click-through rate is going to go way down,” says Magun. But that can also be an effective approach, as in the case of one AR Search client whose paid search ad creative—“Win an iPod. Free trial. Credit Card required”—was effective in discouraging click-through from unqualified prospects.

While marketers and search engine marketing companies are compiling a growing body of data on what works for search and what doesn’t, testing is a critical part of maximizing ROI for search campaigns, Magun says. “People are always looking for the silver bullet, but there is no silver bullet. It’s silver buckshot,” says Magun. “We never say we know how something is going to work. We say, here are the possibilities, here are the things we test for and here is how we focus on testing creative elements,

categorizing them and coming up with regimented tests.” Magun also believes ad testing should be of statistical significance. “You can’t just say after 300 or 400 clicks, ‘This works or this doesn’t,’” he says.

Rotating ads

To speed up the testing and optimize campaigns based on test results sooner, Google uses a creative optimizer that will automatically rotate multiple versions of an ad and automatically serve the one that initially received the highest click-through more often. The rationale is that’s the version more people will choose to click on in the future. Yahoo also allows advertisers to test multiple versions of an ad over time, but it is a more manual process.

Google advertisers can opt out of the optimizing feature, meaning that different versions of the ad will be served up equally, a strategy typically recommended by MoreVisibility, says Leitch, who

believes that automatically optimizing the ads as soon as a trend appears doesn’t produce test results as valid as an equal comparison. “If there are a lot of marketing points we can use, we may end up using all the ads,” she says.

Nevertheless, Chin says most advertisers choose to leave the creative optimizing feature in Google campaigns. “Most people tend to use the feature because it does the extra legwork for them,” he says.

Creating effective search copy is a challenge, as typing in a few keywords and looking at some of the ads that come up will show. “There are a couple of things that should be focused on,” says Leitch. “Make it short and sweet and compelling. Brand yourself, define yourself, qualify the click, explain who you are, what you do, and any special offers you might have—in 70 characters or less. Writing good copy is not easy.” ●

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Blindsgalore.com explains to shoppers that “natural shades,” “bamboo shades” and “matchstick shades” all refer to the same thing.

shades that can open from the top or the bottom, but which are described six different ways by the six major manufacturers that fabricate them.

AR Search and Blindsgalore addressed the issue by creating page content that delivers a natural search listing that shows

both “woven wood shades” and “bamboo shades” in the same headline. The listing clicks through to a category landing page identified as “woven wood shades” that shows a brief paragraph explaining that the product also goes by the other name.

With that and other changes to the product page content indexed by search engine spiders, revenue from organic search has doubled at Blindsgalore.com. “Interestingly, we haven’t seen a lot of additional traffic, but we are getting people who are more qualified coming in from organic search because of this effort,” says Perkinson. “Though the sheer volume isn’t higher, the average order is higher.”

Once the retailer has chosen the keyword, best practices in search marketing call for including the search keyword in the title or first line of the listing and if possible, in the description. “Eye-tracking studies show the title is the most-read part of the creative listing,” says Diane Rinaldo, director of the retail category for Yahoo Search Marketing.