5 (less obvious) PPC trends to watch in 2018



In closing out our big recap of all the big 2017 trends and changes in PPC, I predict we'll see trends in artificial intelligence, audience targeting, attribution and local marketing continue to develop in 2018.

Those are all exciting areas, but that's not a particularly earth-shattering prediction. Here is a look at five trends that are related but slightly askew from the major themes that will play out in paid search over the coming year.

1. Structured data will matter even more

It's not just for SEO, and I suspect we'll be talking about structured data much more on the ads side in 2018. Cindy Krum makes the case in her (must-read) column on mobile SEO predictions for 2018 that structured data will become a bigger factor in the year ahead as the mobile-first index rolls out. Krum primarily discusses Schema markup, but advertisers also provide files of structured data via product feeds in Merchant Center and Business data feeds in AdWords.

On this front, Google Manufacturer Center has been a pretty sleepy product since it first came out two years ago, but I expect more brands and manufacturers will pay attention to it in the coming year. Manufacturer Center rolled out to more countries just last month, and the recently enhanced knowledge panels underscore ways in which Google will be using this data.

Original manufacturers and brands can upload data to Google

Manufacturer Center that includes:

> *detailed and rich product information such as product titles, descriptions, images, key features, YouTube videos, and others that are not captured in a Merchant Center feed. The data submitted into Manufacturer Center is used to enrich Google's overall product catalog. Manufacturer Center is only available to manufacturers, brand owners, and brand licensors, regardless of whether they sell directly to consumers.*

I also would not be surprised in 2018 to see Google pulling more information into ads dynamically from landing page copy, images and schema markup, as well as sources like Google Manufacturer Center. And of course, Google isn't the only platform relying on feeds and other structured data sources to power ad campaigns.

2. The Google-Amazon rivalry will spur search ad innovations

Amazon and Google are dueling on multiple fronts. The retail giant has long been a threat to Google's product search business and is poised to become a search and display advertising juggernaut in its own right in 2018. Three Google ad-driven programs – Google Express, Local Services by Google and Purchases on Google – each take aim at Amazon in their own ways.

Google Express is the initiative that takes a direct shot at Amazon. Google has partnered with some 30-plus retailers such as Walmart, Costco and Target to provide streamlined checkout and free next-day delivery for qualified orders. Expect to see Google experimenting with messaging for the service as we spotted in Google Assistant this week (first screen shot below).

Local Services by Google expanded into more cities at the end of this year and will likely continue to expand in the US and include more service sectors next year.

Purchases on Google is the dark horse here. The program has been very slow to develop and still faces challenges. The goal is to make buying from mobile Shopping ads as easy as Amazon's one-click checkout.

Amazon has been building out its own advertising portfolio for its sellers, including search ads, and will push further into programmatic to challenge Google and Facebook's display and video businesses in the coming year.

3. Voice & visual search will impact user behavior before ads

For the first time, voice search has brought full sentences to both the way we query and the responses we receive from the engines. With visual search (Pinterest Lens and Google Lens, for example), we query with our cameras. There has been a lot of talk and hype around voice search as millions of smart speakers have been sold, less around visual search.

Both visual and voice search are still emerging, and while we won't necessarily be building specific ad campaigns around these capabilities in 2018 (which is not to say they won't drive ad conversions when available), advertisers should be watching how search behaviors with these media change and the kinds of results the platforms deliver.

Visual search with Google Lens

How we think about voice search depends on whether the results are returned via screen (e.g., Siri, Cortana, Google Assistant) or via voice (e.g., Google Home, Amazon Echo). When

the search results are delivered on a screen, little changes on the ads side of things, other than the case for using broad match and broad match modified becomes stronger.

What shape advertising on smart speakers will take remains to be seen, but it seems ripe for a departure from the standard AdWords auction in favor of partnership arrangements. Programs like the ones discussed above – Google Express, Local Services and Purchases on Google – could be natural entry points for introducing ads (or sponsored messages) to Google Home, for example.

Voice and visual search are both still nascent, but these are two areas in which paid teams can benefit from working with SEOs to ensure their brands or clients are on the leading edge as they evolve.

4. How we work will change – mostly for the better

Paid search managers will hand over (or perhaps more accurately, surrender) more daily tactical chores to the engines in 2018. Artificial intelligence will have a dramatic impact on the work of paid search practitioners, teams and agencies in the coming year. The year 2017 ushered in this shift as ad rotation, ad creation, bid optimization, the display of ad extensions are now more automated than ever – and those automations function better than ever. As Frederick Vallaeys points out in a two-part column on PPC agencies and AI, this evolution will create opportunities for those that adapt.

Strategic, analytical, creative, inquisitive: Those will continue to be highly prized traits of PPC team members. As AI takes over more tasks, highly skilled practitioners are no longer relegated to hours of tedious keyword research or bid optimizations. Instead they can focus on tasks that truly

leverage the skill sets that got them hired in the first place. Those who are analytical and inquisitive will be even more valuable as checks against machine learning algorithms that inevitably won't always live up to their promise and in making machine learning and technology more powerful for their organizations.

5. Channel expansion & measuring for incrementality will become more popular

The duopoly power of Google and Facebook will continue in 2018. Yes, there has been advertiser pushback against measurement errors, objectionable ad placements and lack of transparency, but marketers will continue to put the bulk of their digital ad dollars in Google and Facebook properties. That said, nimble search marketers (with time freed up thanks to automation) will be looking for growth opportunities in more channels and platforms in 2018, and search and social will continue to see more interdisciplinary overlap.

The Bing-LinkedIn combo will likely yield more opportunities in the coming year. Pinterest, Snapchat, Quora and Twitter each have varying degrees of incremental potential.

And speaking of incrementality, 2018 could be a reset year for retargeting. Apple's Intelligent Tracking Prevention is forcing it on Safari, for one. Second, more audience targeting options – life events, demographics and so on – give search marketers more ways to segment and better personalize their retargeting messaging on the other browsers.

Customer-centric personalization – coupled with machine learning-enabled frequency capping and targeting – could finally help clean up the mess that sloppy retargeting strategies have had on eroding user experience and campaign

effectiveness. I’m still skeptical we’ll see massive change, but marketers that measure incremental lift from retargeting will be better positioned to turn the tide.

About The Author



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