

How To Plan PPC Campaigns For SaaS Marketing & Think Strategically via @sejournal, @timothyjjensen



Planning a SaaS PPC strategy can be daunting. It often involves lengthy buying cycles, complex products to explain, and high competition.

According to Gartner, B2B SaaS buyers spend 27% of their time in the buying process doing independent research online.

Being visible across channels is crucial to keep your brand top-of-mind during this process.

In this article, we'll dive into thinking through PPC for SaaS marketing, from audience planning to measurement.

Your Target Audience Is Wider Than

You May Think

Who's your target for a software product that will be used in an enterprise-level company?

While a director or C-level individual may sign off on a purchase, the people using the product on the ground are more likely to influence the decision-making process.

For instance, if you're selling marketing automation software, a marketing operations manager may be fed up with their current solution and ask senior management to consider a new tool. However, a CMO may still need to approve the contract.

Particularly when using platforms such as LinkedIn, which allow incredible granularity with job title targeting, you're likely shooting yourself in the foot if you only target select executive suite titles.

Job functions and groups can be a better route to reach a broader pool of individuals with a say in the purchase process.

Use data from your organization wherever possible to inform targeting. For instance, look at existing titles for individuals engaging with lead forms and sales processes.

Additionally, you can use LinkedIn Audience Insights on the website audience segments you've created to view demographic criteria that can help identify what job roles and types of companies are actually most engaging with your content.

Identify Your "Hook"

How are you getting the attention of prospects for their initial touchpoint with your brand?

Keeping in mind the breadth of the potential target audience, you'll likely want to consider testing multiple "hooks" that

may appeal to those in different roles.

For instance, a call to action (CTA) emphasizing bulk seat discounts may appeal to a chief financial officer (CFO) or someone primarily accountable for cost savings. A CTA emphasizing efficiency may resonate with an operations manager.

Testing multiple hooks against different audience segments can also be a helpful way to determine what will drive the most prospective interest at the most efficient cost.

This can be done using testing capabilities within ad platforms, such as Google's Ad Variations or Campaign Experiments, or Meta Experiments, to ensure that separate individuals are exposed to the appropriate variant.

Next, while planning what messaging to use to entice new prospects, take into account what competitors are running and how your offer compares.

Analyze Your Competition

SaaS can be a highly competitive niche in paid search and other channels, with other players bidding aggressively and attempting to outdo each other's offers.

Take some time to document the advertising efforts of competitors in your space, including ad messaging, creative, and landing pages.

Realize that those who actually compete with you most often in search auctions may not necessarily be the same as those who top the list of competitors for company leadership.

Use Auction Insights in Google and Microsoft to note which advertisers most often overlap for particular campaigns.

You can then use ad libraries such as Google's Ad Transparency

Center, Meta's Ad Library, and LinkedIn's Ad Library to view ads that these competitors have run.

Your analysis should help to answer questions such as:

- What audience do they appear to be speaking to?
- How attractive are competitor offers compared to yours?
- What CTAs are they using?
- Are there ad formats they are running that you're not currently using (for instance, LinkedIn Lead Gen Forms)?
- How many creative variants do they appear to be testing?
Are there types of images that you're not incorporating (for instance, vector graphics vs. stock photos)?

Additionally, go to competitor sites and initiate their lead processes by filling out forms or starting to sign up for an account. See what follow-up measures they implement.

Are you seeing retargeting ads encouraging you to complete account signup or offering additional resources? Are you receiving email follow-ups?

Share your findings with your team, not only to inform paid media tactics but also in thinking about landing pages and marketing automation flows.

Additionally, bidding on competitor names can be an effective paid search tactic to target people who are in the market for your product, especially when first entering the foray of search.

You can latch onto familiarity with a larger competitor that may have more search volume than your own brand.

While you shouldn't directly mention your competitor by name in an ad (for trademark and ethical reasons), feel free to highlight your brand's differentiators.

Research your competitors to keep tabs on areas where they may be weak and you are strong.

For instance, if a competitor has recently increased their pricing, current users and those in research mode may be more open to other options.

You can capitalize on mentioning your more efficient pricing, if that is your brand's selling point.

You may also discover that a competitor receives frequent complaints about their customer service. If your brand is known for positive customer service, highlight that aspect of your business in ads to stand in contrast against your competitor.

Set Measurement Goals

SaaS marketing often involves long sales cycles with multiple steps of interaction before a user or business becomes a paying customer.

Establishing realistic expectations for cost per acquisition (CPA) and conversion rate goals at each stage is crucial.

Additionally, only measuring at the beginning or the end of the cycle is not beneficial in the long run.

If you're purely focused on tracking and bidding toward CPA and conversion rate for a final paying customer, you're likely not getting enough data back to the ad platforms to inform campaigns focused on those earlier in the awareness stages.

Conversely, if you're strictly optimizing to an initial touchpoint such as a whitepaper download, you're likely not providing the platforms enough information about lead quality to drive conversions from those most likely to become paying customers.

Consider your lead cycle and how your sales team nurtures prospects when establishing these goals.

For instance, you may categorize individuals as marketing qualified leads (MQLs) after they've downloaded a resource and attended a demo and mark them as sales qualified leads (SQLs) if they've completed those actions and started a free trial.

Each stage further down the "funnel" is likely worth a higher value, which should inform one's willingness to pay a higher CPA to obtain it.

Connect Ad Platforms To Your CRM

Connecting your ad platforms to CRMs and/or marketing automation platforms, such as HubSpot or Salesforce, can help with complete conversion tracking and audience creation.

First, you can pass back conversions when users complete specific actions, such as completing a demo or signing up for a trial, and associate them with the same user.

Enhanced Conversions for Leads can ensure you track these actions more accurately based on individual contact information.

You can also use your CRM or marketing automation platform to sync audiences to ad platforms.

For instance, you may have a list of people that have opted in from an initial touchpoint with a webinar or whitepaper download.

Use the lists that you build for audiences to target ads based on the buying stage where they are.

Additionally, you can use lists of high-value prospects or customers to seed lookalike audiences for targeting and reaching people with similar demographic characteristics and interests.

Meta allows for lookalike targeting across campaign types

(with the exception of some sensitive industries), while Google lets you build lookalike audiences for Demand Gen campaigns.

LinkedIn offers Predictive Audiences built from first-party data as a method to reach similar individuals.

You can also use customer lists to exclude existing customers from campaigns or to exclude those who already have a particular product from upsell campaigns.

Use Account List Targeting

In addition to targeting specific individuals, you can also use account-based marketing (ABM) to reach select companies you'd like to target.

The advantage here is that you don't need explicit opt-ins to upload a list. A sales team may have a list compiled of "dream" target accounts, or you may have access to a list of major companies within a particular industry.

Out of the major self-service ad platforms, LinkedIn is the primary route for uploading account lists.

In addition, you can also work with reps to sync account lists in native advertising platforms such as Taboola or Outbrain, and for larger buys, you can look into dedicated ABM platforms.

You can also overlay additional targeting onto the account lists to ensure you're reaching the right decision-makers in the organization.

For example, you can overlay an IT job function with job seniority of director and upwards to put your ads in front of people likely to make IT buying decisions.

Making PPC Work For Your SaaS Marketing

Planning and executing a PPC strategy for a SaaS product can be a complex but rewarding process when you start to see qualified leads come through and turn into paying customers.

Start with understanding your audience and competition, and work through setting clear measurement goals and targeting strategies.

As you move forward with your campaigns, you can continue to test and refine based on the data you can gather, especially as you have time to analyze lifetime value associated with customers obtained via various channels.

More Resources:

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