The PPC changes that bugged and elated marketers most in 2019: An unscientific poll

Of the dozens of changes that rolled out across the paid search landscape this year, what had the biggest impact? This was the question I put to the dedicated marketers still monitoring the Twittersphere this holiday week. Two negatives quickly rose to the top.

> *OK, 3 other people working this week….What change had the biggest impact on your paid search/ #PPC/ #SEM campaigns this year? #ppcchat*
>
> *— Ginny Marvin (@GinnyMarvin) December 26, 2019*

Biggest negatives: A tie between close variants expansion, Google Ads support

You could almost hear the "hearts" being clicked after Julie Bacchini of Neptune Moon named Google's expansion of same-meaning close variants to phrase match and broad match modifier and the decline in Google Ads support as the changes that had the biggest impact this year.

> *The expansion of "close variant" tomfoolery. Also, G Ads support taking a nosedive in quality has been, as they say, really not good. #ppcchat*
>
> *— Julie F Bacchini (@NeptuneMoon) December 26, 2019*

The expansion of close variants was named by several others —

“and not in a good way,” as Jeffrey Baum, director of services at Hanapin Marketing, put it. “Very much agree with close variants. Terrible results and they continue to get worse,” added Sam Kessenich, chief digital officer at RyTech, LLC.

Mark Skinner, managing director at Rare Digital Marketing Ltd. in England, said the “close variant changes have been one big negative.” He also cited poor Google support as a problem, adding that it seems to take longer to get display ads approved.

Frequent complaints about Google Ads support were heard throughout the year, with stories of support reps not having up-to-date and accurate information about recent changes to giving just plain bad advice.

Cypress North partner and digital marketer Greg Finn said “Google Support somehow getting worse” topped his list of problems. “Issues do happen, and it is now a minimum of 2 hours to get any simple issue resolved. Productivity killer,” he wrote.

With security and expediency as motivators, Google Ads said it will stop fielding customer support questions via its social accounts as of January 1, steering users to an online form that can then be directed to the appropriate team. It’s not clear that this will have any broader effect on response times, however.

With productivity on the mind, Steve Plimmer, director of client services at BlackbirdPPC, noted reporting challenges caused by the close variants changes and the removal of average position: “The death of average position has meant a big overhaul of reporting templates & client education. That and the Exact Match dilution is making YoY comparisons murky to say the least!”

Honorable mentions: ITP headaches, Facebook ad policies and more. Apple continues to make changes to Intelligent Tracking

Prevention in Safari, making retargeting to and measurement of typically high-value iOS audiences a challenge. “ITP on iOS had huge remarketing impact for us,” said Andrew McGarry, founder of The McGarry Agency in Scotland, which focuses on fashion and lifestyle e-commerce.

Two marketers noted challenges posed by changes to Facebook ad policies. “We work in marketing for the staffing industry, so the Facebook changes for Employment Ads had a HUGE impact,” wrote Matt Lozar, director of recruitment Marketing at Haley Marketing Group. Matt McGee, former Search Engine Land editor in chief and current real estate marketer, said Facebook’s changes, which affect real estate ads as well, have been disruptive. As of March, advertisers could no longer use age, gender or zip codes in targeting housing, employment or credit ads in the U.S. Starting in late August, Facebook began requiring those advertisers to use a special ad category and limited lookalike audience targeting.

On the positive: Smart bidding, Audiences, Bing and low social CPCs

Finn cited Google’s Maximize Conversion Value bidding as a big positive change this year. “Huge for those with wide variety of products/prices!” He added that the newest audiences update, combined audiences for Search, has also been a good addition: “Great for bidding up on B2B clients!”

McGarry called paid search campaigns on Bing “one of the few happy stories in 2019.” This year, Microsoft Advertising added many new ad features and took over serving all Yahoo and AOL search ad inventory in a new deal with Verizon Media.

On the paid social front, Skinner said, “The low CPCs on Facebook has resulted in our clients investing more in Paid Social.”

Embracing automation. The forward march of automation continued this year, and more marketers seemed to transition from pessimism about things like smart bidding to what might be described as optimistic skepticism.

This mind shift was best captured by Matt Umbro. “Automation and machine learning. I finally allowed myself to embrace these features and my accounts are the better for it,” Umbro wrote.

About The Author

Ginny Marvin is Third Door Media’s Editor-in-Chief, running the day to day editorial operations across all publications and overseeing paid media coverage. Ginny Marvin writes about paid digital advertising and analytics news and trends for Search Engine Land, Marketing Land and MarTech Today. With more than 15 years of marketing experience, Ginny has held both in-house and agency management positions. She can be found on Twitter as @ginnymarvin.
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