

The Scenic Route To ROI: Mastering Non-Linear Targeting In Google Ads



Do you remember the good ol' days of Google Ads when all you needed to get good results were a list of keywords and bids? People type into that little white search box *exactly what they're looking for*, so to win their business, you just need to ... show up?

While buying high-intent queries is still part of the PPC game, the rules have changed – or rather, expanded. Thanks to challenges like increased competition, rising cost-per-click, privacy regulations, and AI Overviews/AI Mode, this direct, “straight-line” approach to Google Ads has become increasingly difficult and expensive. If you operate in certain sensitive and/or B2B niches, you know this to be especially true.

To overcome this challenge, I developed a new advertising strategy that I call “non-linear targeting.” Think of it like taking an alternate route to reach your final destination when the main road is under construction. Instead of targeting

exactly who you're looking for with the "perfect fit," "linear" keywords or audiences, you target *adjacent* behaviors and interests to reach those perfect customers. Another analogy: Rather than picking through every piece of hay in a haystack looking for your needle, buy *the whole haystack* knowing that your needle is in there.

Who Should Use Non-Linear Targeting?

Now why on earth would you want to spend your money (and time) buying a bunch of useless hay when all you need are a few needles? There are a few scenarios where non-linear targeting is not only advisable, but *essential* to get new customers from Google Ads today.

First is advertisers in so-called "sensitive interest categories" like healthcare, legal, finance, or real estate. These services can net you thousands if not millions of dollars when you get a new client, and so search CPCs can easily run above \$100 per click. Plus, the usual audience targeting tactics like remarketing/retargeting, custom segments, or even basic demographics are not always available due to Google Ads policy. By using a non-linear targeting strategy, you can reach the exact people you need to, without paying \$100 per click or running afoul of Google policies.

Similarly, advertisers in non-restricted but similarly expensive niches like B2B manufacturing or SaaS services may not be able to afford \$40-\$300 search CPCs, especially when they're just starting out. Non-linear targeting allows new advertisers in hyper-competitive niches to get a foothold with your ideal audience, even if you're not showing an ad at the exact moment of searching.

Finally, non-linear targeting is an effective strategy when you're trying to reach a customer segment that simply does not

have a predefined Google audience and/or may not yet be solution-aware. If “by the book” Search, Shopping and/or Demand Gen targeting has failed to produce results, it may be time to go non-linear.

How To Develop A Non-Linear Targeting Strategy

Step 1: Define Your Scope

As with all campaign strategies, non-linear targeting starts by answering the two core marketing questions:

- Who is looking for *what you offer*?
- Who is in your *ideal audience*?

The distinction here is key, and often overlooked. For example, let’s say you sell nail polish. Nail polish can cost 99 cents, or \$25, or anything in between depending on the brand, durability, features, where you buy it, etc. Yes, you want people looking for nail polish to be aware of your offerings, but *not every single person* looking for nail polish; that’s where No. 2 comes in: ideal audience.

If you sell a 99-cent nail polish, your ideal audience might be teenagers. Alternatively, your ideal audience might be professionals looking to experiment with fun colors on the weekend. Notice that these are two *completely different* ideal audiences, which means we would need different targeting strategies to reach them.

And just as importantly, we are not trying to reach beauty sophisticates looking for the latest nail polish innovations, or salon owners looking for long-lasting gel polish – two different customer segments that are looking for nail polish (No. 1), but are not in our ideal audience (failure at No. 2).

By defining both who is looking for you, and who you are

looking for, you can narrow your targeting scope, and start building out your non-linear targeting strategy.

In this example, we'll give ourselves a nice challenge and build a non-linear targeting strategy around the campaign statement "I want to sell a 99-cent nail polish to professionals looking to experiment with fun colors on the weekend." Try summing that up in a keyword!

Step 2: Throw Spaghetti Against The Wall

Not literally, but this is the ideation phase, and all ideas are welcome! Run through every possible Google audience type to see which might contain *people looking for your offer* and/or *people in your ideal audience*. Here are some examples for our experimental professionals:

- **Detailed demographics: Employment > Financial Industry.** Colorful nails are generally not culturally acceptable in finance, but on the weekends? Folks may want to have a little fun!
- **Affinity: Beauty & Wellness > Makeup & Cosmetics.** This is a little more linear than non-linear, but someone who's really into makeup may be more amenable to experimenting with fun colors
- **Affinity: Fashion > Fashion Consumer Behavior > Budget Fashion Shoppers.** This is more non-linear; reach budget-conscious fashionistas with an offer of cheap and cheerful nail polish.
- **In-market: Business & Industrial Products > Work Safety Protective Gear.** Someone who wears protective gear at their job probably can't wear nail polish at their job. But on the weekend? Some cheap, colorful nail polish may be just what they're looking for.

This list is non-exhaustive, but hopefully you get the idea. You should end up with at least a dozen different audiences to pursue by thinking "outside the box," thinking "non-linearly,"

about how to reach your ideal audience through non-conventional means.

Note that for this campaign, I am not going to target the obvious choice, which would be In-Market: Beauty & Personal Care > Makeup & Cosmetics > Nail Care Products. Why not? Because that's where every single nail polish company is going to be advertising! By the time someone hits that segment, they've already started searching, scrolling, browsing and testing – they're too far down the funnel. We want a non-linear approach, so that we're reaching our ideal audience before they hit the “in-market for nail products” segment.

Step 3: Narrow Your Options With Creative

Ad targeting is important for non-linear targeting, but it's not effective unless it's paired with the right creative. For example, let's take our “Works in the Financial Industry” audience. If we target this audience in a Demand Gen campaign, and show standard ecommerce photos from our feed of bottles of nail polish ... that's probably not going to resonate.

Remember our full campaign statement: “I want to sell a 99-cent nail polish to professionals looking to experiment with fun colors on the weekend.” We've got the professionals via our audience targeting, so we have to nail (pun intended) the “looking to experiment with fun colors on the weekend” part with our creative.

An image or video that would complement this non-linear audience might portray a professional woman wearing a drab suit, holding a laptop in her hand, dashing out of her office building, with each nail painted a different color. Or perhaps a side-by-side that shows “Sunday” and “Monday”; on Sunday, she wears an eclectic outfit with bright makeup and purple nails, and on Monday, she wears a grey pantsuit with minimal makeup and bare nails.

Because non-linear targeting relies on broader, adjacent audiences, the ad creative must do more heavy lifting. Your ad text, images, and/or video must be highly specific to attract your ideal customer while, just as importantly, *repelling* your non-ideal customer (e.g., using industry jargon or explicit pricing).

And of course, for your creative to consistently land in front of your ideal audience, you need robust conversion tracking and a Smart Bidding strategy. For lead generation, that means tracking qualified leads only via offline conversion tracking. For ecommerce, that means tracking actual purchases. Remember, Google Ads does exactly what you tell it to do. If you tell it to bid for clicks, then it will bid for clicks ... not customers.

Examples Of Non-Linear Targeting Strategies For Retail, Healthcare, Financial Services, Real Estate & More

It's one thing to talk about a strategy, and another to actually use it. Here are half a dozen real examples of non-linear targeting strategies that I've developed with my Google Ads coaching clients, and helped them execute. Unless otherwise noted, all of these tactics can be deployed in a Demand Gen campaign.

1. Plastic Surgeon (Healthcare: Sensitive Interest Category)

Non-linear targeting: Affinity segment "Beauty Mavens," In-Market segment "Anti-aging skincare," Life Event segment "Getting Married Soon."

2. Mattress Retailer (Retail: High Competition, High CPCs)

Non-linear targeting: Life Event segment “Moving.”

Note: In-Market segment for “Mattresses” exists, but is highly competitive; focus on an adjacent segment instead, highlighting one of the main reasons to buy a new mattress: Moving.

3. Indian Food Delivery App (Ethnic Group: No Direct Targeting Capabilities)

Non-linear targeting: Affinity segments “South Asian Film Fans” & “Cricket Enthusiasts,” In-Market segment “Trips to India.”

4. Christian Jewelry Brand (Religion: No Direct Targeting Capabilities)

Non-linear targeting: Affinity segments “Homeschooling Parents” & “Charitable Donors & Volunteers.”

5. Auto Loan Provider (Financial Services: Sensitive Interest Category)

Non-linear targeting: In-Market segment “Credit & Lending.”

Note: In-Market segment for “Auto Loans” exists, but is very small and highly competitive; focus on the broader “Credit & Lending” segment instead.

6. Service For Real Estate Agents (Real Estate: Very Niche, No Search Demand)

Non-linear targeting: In-Market segment “Houses (For Sale).”

Note: Although this audience is designed for B2C (people

looking to buy houses), Google has trouble distinguishing between B2B and B2C intent. The users who look at home listings the most are realtors, so the ad creative will complete this non-linear approach.

How To Make Non-Linear Targeting Work For You

In Google Ads, learn to embrace the scenic route. With AI bidding and AI targeting and AI creative taking over, skilled practitioners must pivot from *forcing* direct control over the platform to *guiding* the AI with strategic, intentional inputs.

Non-linear targeting is a robust framework for navigating this new era of Google Ads. By combining adjacent audiences with highly specific creative and robust conversion tracking, you can bypass platform restrictions, lower acquisition costs, and gain new customers profitably beyond search.

More Resources:

Featured Image: bpawesome/Shutterstock

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