

How to Survive the Google AdWords Update of July 2006



An Affiliate Classroom
Best Practices Guide

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It's been a tough week for a lot of AdWords advertisers. With the recent update of Google's landing page algorithm, many marketers that had been paying five or ten cents a click (or less) are now required to bid at least 50 cents to a dollar or more. There are also reports of some advertisers who have kept their bid prices, but those bids are now buying only 3rd or 4th page ad positions, where they used to buy first page positions.

Before we get into the details of what's changed and how to deal with it, note that not all AdWords accounts have been affected – ads going to large sites with lots of content have seen no changes to their bid prices.

Four kinds of sites are hardest hit:

- One page sales letter websites
- Squeeze pages (landing pages whose sole purpose is to gather an email address in exchange for a free report)
- AdSense sites (particularly AdSense arbitrage sites)
- Affiliate sites

Google's New Landing Page Algorithm

Actually, the change we've seen in the last week has been coming for a long time. Google warned all of us about this back in December of last year (see <http://AdWords.blogspot.com/2005/12/new-addition-to-quality-score.html>) when they began implementing the new landing page quality score. The recent upheaval in the last few weeks is just an update of the algorithm that Google implemented late last year.

So what's changed? In addition to evaluating your keywords and your ads, Google now scrutinizes your landing pages, calculating a "quality score" for every landing page.

Some new advertisers are confused by the idea of the "quality" (or lack of quality) that an ad can have. Though it may sound elusive, Google defines a quality score as...

"the basis for measuring the quality of your keyword and determining your minimum bid. Quality Score is determined by your keyword's clickthrough rate (CTR) on Google, relevance of your ad text, historical keyword performance on Google, **the quality of your ad's landing page**, and other relevancy factors." (The emphasis is ours.)

This idea of a "quality score" is not new at Google. Just last year there were howls from many advertisers when Google first applied its "quality score" to keywords. Before then, the lowest possible bid was five cents; after the quality score was applied, some advertisers got burned when ads that previously cost 5 cents suddenly cost 50 cents to a dollar.

But smart advertisers appreciated the new possibility of 2 cent keywords, and so the problem (and the complaints) quieted down in a few weeks. As of this writing, we are definitely still in the "early complaint phase" of the latest AdWords update.

On every discussion board there is at least one advertiser whose online business has been effectively shut down. The major complaint from advertisers is that Google won't reveal exactly how the new landing page algorithm works – yet it can and will penalize advertisers for not meeting those standards.

This understandably leaves many marketers desperately trying to aim at a target they can't see. The forums are filled with posts about class action suits, and general resentment towards what is seen as the blatant unfairness of the new update.

But Google is not apologizing for any damage to its advertisers' businesses. A post on the AdWords blog earlier this month states:

"We realize that some minimum bids may be too high to be cost-effective — indeed, these high minimum bids are our way of motivating advertisers to either improve their landing pages or to simply stop using AdWords for those pages, while still giving some control over which keywords to advertise on. Although it is counter-intuitive to some who hear it, we'd rather show one less ad than to show an ad which leads to a poor user experience — since long-term user trust in AdWords is of

overarching importance.” (<http://adwords.blogspot.com/2006/07/landing-page-quality-update.html>)

Though Google won't spell out exactly what a landing page needs in order to earn a high quality score, they have laid out some guidelines for webmasters. A close read of these guidelines goes a long way in explaining why certain kinds of sites tend to be penalized more than others.

What Does Google Want?

According to Google, only some advertisers are delivering “a poor user experience.” Ads pointing to landing pages with a low quality score (and thus, by Google's calculations, a poor user experience) are the ones now required to pay much more for their clicks.

Squeeze pages, sales letter sites, and websites with duplicate content or too many ads are the prime offenders.

So what does Google want to see in a website? In Google's own words (<https://AdWords.google.com/select/siteguidelines.html>), sites should:

“Provide relevant and substantial content.

If users don't quickly see what they clicked on your ad to find, they'll leave your site frustrated and may never return to your site or click on ads in the future. Here are some pointers for making sure that doesn't happen:

Link to the page on your site that provides the most useful and accurate information about the product or service in your ad.

Ensure that your landing page is relevant to your keywords and your ad text.

Distinguish sponsored links from the rest of your site content.

Try to provide information without requiring users to register. Or, provide a preview of what users will get by registering.

In general, build pages that provide substantial and useful information to the end-user. If your ad does link to a page consisting of mostly ads or general search results (such as a directory or catalog page), provide

additional information beyond what the user may have seen in your ad or on the page prior to clicking on your ad.

You should have unique content (should not be similar or nearly identical in appearance to another site). For more information, see our affiliate guidelines."

Most advertisers will have no problem following the first two points above. Both tactics improve conversions, so anyone who wants sales is motivated to conform.

But the last four items are a different story. Let's look at each of them:

"Distinguish sponsored links from the rest of your site content."

Experienced marketers know that making outgoing links blend in with the rest of a page's content is a sure way to get more clicks. If the links look like navigation or interior links, a user is more likely to click on them. So you, the site owner, make more money if the AdSense links and merchant links blend in. But **Google wants those ads to be clearly marked as sponsored links.**

"Try to provide information without requiring users to register. Or, provide a preview of what users will get by registering."

It is not much of a leap to see that the act of registering on a site and a user submitting their email address could be viewed as similar actions. **So asking for someone's email address – or not giving information unless someone gives over their email address – may be seen by Google as reducing the quality of the user's experience.** If you've got a squeeze page, that means that you're going against Google's guideline.

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We already knew that Google's bot doesn't like pages that are mostly made of ads or pages that have duplicate content. Now, not only will your position in the SERPs (search engine results pages) suffer if you

have little or no original content – your CPCs (Cost Per Click) will go up, too. **This rule is clearly a problem for AdSense Arbitrage sites or pure data feed affiliate sites.**

"You should have unique content (should not be similar or nearly identical in appearance to another site). For more information, see our affiliate guidelines."

Using free articles from article directories has been very popular – it's a great way to build content fast, but from now on you may pay a penalty in your AdWords costs. And as mentioned above, affiliates using copy from merchants may also get dinged.

Of course, you also need to be 100% compliant with Google's Affiliate Guidelines, found here:

<https://adwords.google.com/support/bin/answer.py?answer=14844&hl=en>

So What Do You Do Now?

If you have a site that's been affected, there are a number of ways you can soften the blow - and possibly get your minimum bids back to a reasonable level.

Update your site/landing page per Google's guidelines, then ask them to re-evaluate your site.

Call Google (866-246-6453) and ask for "a manual review" of your site. (NOTE: Google's bot does re-crawl pages without your prompting, but no one is sure how much time there is between crawls.

Here are some tips for improving the quality score of your landing pages:

- Consider removing all AdSense ads from your landing pages.
- Create or find more original content for your sites.

- If you have squeeze pages, add more content to them (historically, short squeeze pages do convert better, but you now have to balance that with increased click costs). Every landing page should have a minimum of 500 words.
- The old keyword density score seems to apply here: aim for 2-5% keyword density on your landing pages and Google will nudge your quality score up a little.
- Use your keywords in your landing page's filename. Ie, if you are bidding on "dog collars", naming your landing page "dogcollars.html" seems to boost the quality score.
- Be sure your landing page's title tag matches the keywords you're targeting.
- Make use of header tags (<h1>, <h2>, <h3>, etc) and add the keywords you're bidding on to those headers.
- Several squeeze page advertisers have had success with moving their page to another site they own – a site with good page rank and lots of content. There's no need to change the html of your squeeze page for this technique – the squeeze page simply inherits some of the main domain's quality score.
- Try adding a few text links on your landing page that use your targeted keywords as anchor text.

If you'd like perspective on Google's feedback from the manual review, there is an interesting post about the feedback one advertiser received at <http://forums.digitalpoint.com/showthread.php?t=110213>.

Keep your landing page as it is and try to find workarounds by tweaking your AdWords account.

Here are a few simple changes that will help:

- When you are writing your ads, don't use any words that aren't on your landing page.
- Test using different display URLs in your ads. Some advertisers have been able to restore their old bid prices simply by trying different display URLs. Simply adding a dummy directory with the targeted keyword may make all the difference. For example, instead of using the display URL "DoggieDeals.com" for the keyword "dog collars", try "DoggieDeals.com/Dog_Collars/"
- Target your keywords. If you haven't been using phrase and exact matching, learn how.
- Try creating an entirely new campaign in your AdWords account and set it up with your old ads and landing pages. Some advertisers have gotten this to work, though we suspect that this is just because Google hasn't had time to review the landing pages. As soon as they do, the landing pages may get penalized again. Take note: creating a new adgroup won't work – you'll need to create a new campaign.
- "Borrow" another site's URL. You can learn a lot (and lower your minimum bid) by searching Google for the term you're bidding on while you're writing your ad copy. Here's how:

Do a search for the exact keyword or phrase your ad is targeting.

Copy the exact url of the first or second site that appears in Google's SERPS.

Paste this URL into your ad, then see what kind of minimum bid Google wants.

If the bid is very low, you've written a well-targeted, relevant ad (according to Google). If the minimum bid isn't low, keep reworking your ad copy.

Of course, before you finalize the new ad, replace your real URL with the one you "borrowed" for ad copy testing.

Test other PPC engines to find replacement traffic that fits your budget.

Google's latest move may drive thousands of advertisers to Yahoo, MSN and other pay per click engines. If you've been putting off looking into other PPC traffic streams, Google's latest update is a great motivation tool.

See the April issue of Affiliate Classroom's magazine (http://affiliateclassroom.com/magazine/magazine_apr2006.php) and our list of the top PPC engines (available to AC students only) for an exhaustive look at what's available to you. Google is NOT the only game in town.

Additional Resources

Inside AdWords. The official Google AdWords blog.
<http://AdWords.blogspot.com/>

Google Groups: AdWords Help. Read posts from other advertisers.
<http://groups.google.com/group/AdWords-help/>