
Impact of Keyword (not provided) for Paid Search

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Overview

Google began serving all search data via encrypted search using HTTPS in September 2013. At that time, Google stopped providing keyword referral data for organic search. That change meant that webmasters no longer had visibility into which search queries had resulted in a visit to their site from organic search. Paid search advertisers were still provided full keyword visibility until April 9, 2014, when Google announced that it would cease passing referral data in the URL for paid search. The company cited privacy concerns for both changes.

The Impact to Paid Search Advertisers

The loss of keyword referral data for paid search is much less impactful than it was for organic search due to much of the data still being accessible in the advertisers' AdWords accounts. Strategic planning, campaign build processes and query optimization are minimally impacted because advertisers will still be able to access search query data via the AdWords API and Search Terms report, which is already a best practice. This includes full visibility of keyword data on the terms that are purchased across all match types. For example, terms bought on exact match will not be affected by this issue, though matched queries from terms on broad match will only be available in AdWords, not in third-party referral data.

For Google, this elevates the potential need to utilize its owned product/feature suite while making it harder to rely on third-party analytics or management tools for these same functions, which have leapt ahead in functionality and features in many ways.

This impact will be felt most in three areas:

Performance Measurement

Many analytics tools obtain search query data via the referring URL and will begin reflecting Google's change with an increasing percentage of keyword (not provided) referrals for paid search. This affects marketers' ability to perform detailed analysis on how individual search queries perform against specific conversions, goals or other KPIs within their selected analytics product.

Bid Management Tools

Third-party management tools like Marin and Kenshoo have the ability to use referral data for bid rules and attribution analysis. They can now rely only on the query reports from the AdWords API as opposed to data they can capture themselves through a pixel or cookie.

Landing Page Customization

Some marketers dynamically customize landing pages based on the search query that drove a user to their site. An example of this would be dynamically changing a car rental ad's landing page to show only mini-vans, full-size cars and SUVs for the search query "family car rental."

With the loss of referral data in the URL, advertisers can now also utilize other URL-tagging elements, such as AdWords' ValueTrack, if they are not already implemented. These elements provide detailed information about the clicks an ad receives, including which keyword the advertiser was bidding on to trigger the ad.

The Impact to Search Retargeting

The loss of keyword referral data additionally impacts any network or search retargeting platform that uses search reference data for search retargeting purposes (e.g. Simpli.fi, Magnetic, Chango).

Typically these companies collect search retargeting data in the following ways:

- 1) Working directly with Tier 2 and 3 search engines, retargeting users based on keyword search.
- 2) Working directly with Publishers, leveraging their on-site search queries for retargeting.
- 3) Working with high volume publishers (e.g. About.com) that drive a significant volume of traffic from search engines. They use the referring keywords as an identifier for targeting.

The loss of search referral data from a source as large as Google will significantly limit sources for search retargeting. When working with such networks, it is important to understand the volume, quality and source of the data that is used for search retargeting.

This change does not impact publishers like Google and Yahoo that own the search data and could leverage for retargeting purposes.

Moving Forward

Neo@Ogilvy will work with individual advertisers and our third-party partners to address opportunities including the addition of AdWords' ValueTrack and other elements. We will also continue to utilize the AdWords Search Terms report to help inform campaign planning, optimization and overall performance reporting.

For search retargeting tactics, Neo@Ogilvy will continue to work with longtime publisher partners (such as Yahoo and Google) that are able to leverage search retargeting from the search data that they own and operate.

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