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Click Fraud and Search Engine Marketing

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Whether it be an overanxious affiliate of a pay per click search engine, or the search engine itself, if you have participated in search engine marketing you have most likely found yourself to be the victim of click fraud, whether you know it or not. Click fraud is tainting the image of many pay per click search engines and costing advertisers far too much money. Although the negative effects of click fraud are obvious to both advertisers and pay per click search engines, many engines do not take the necessary steps to curb click fraud. The result is that you are losing money

Types of Click Fraud

Forced Traffic and Robot Traffic

The most egregious form of click fraud comes from forced traffic. Utilizing pop-ups, start page exchanges, and other mass traffic generation tools, the person committing the fraud forces traffic through paid listings. For example, if the person committing click fraud were to use pop-ups, rather than have a pop-up display the content of an ad, the pop-up is used deliver a visitor to the click URL that the engine uses to track traffic. The search engine does not know that the click was not user generated, but rather generated by a pop-up. As a result the search engine deducts money from the advertiser's account and considers the pop-up to actually be a click. The affiliate then gets paid for delivering nothing more than a pop-up.

Many PPC's have attempted to reduce the ability of affiliates to force traffic to their listings. Using unique session logging and requiring a valid HTTP referrer are a couple of ways click fraud is being reduced by some pay per click search engines. Even with these methods in place, some people have still discovered ways to force traffic to paid listings. The best defense a PPC has against forced traffic is to perform routine audits on their network and their affiliates.

Click Fraud and Search Engine Marketing

Robot traffic is a form of forced traffic, however, instead of having the click URL load fully in a user's browser the click URL is merely called by an automated program. Search engines that do not guard against this type of traffic will once again consider this to be a legitimate click. The danger with robot traffic is that it can be generated innocently by search engines crawling the web. Fortunately most search engines distinguish between spidered traffic and real traffic.

Excessive International Traffic

Although the Internet transcends most international borders, excessive traffic from Asia often signal generally poor quality traffic from your search engine. This traffic is particularly dangerous to your advertising campaigns as most advertisers do not know how to distinguish traffic origins by country. More dangerous yet is the fact that many search engines do nothing to filter out excessive international

traffic. International traffic is considered valid traffic by these engines as it is user originated traffic.

International traffic is not what most advertisers are hoping to spend their money on when starting a pay per click search engine campaign. The target market of most advertisers includes the U.S., Canada, Great Britain, other European countries, and possibly Australia. In addition to the traffic not being truly focused, this excessive international traffic also has a greater chance of being generated through incentivized or fraudulent means.

Sport and Competitor Clicking

In highly competitive pay per click scenarios advertisers may turn to dishonest means to hurt their competition. Such is the case with competitor clicking. Competitor clicking is the act of clicking on listings for the sake of costing another advertiser money. In an extreme case of competitor clicking, one company may click a listing several times in a row with the hope of depleting their competition's funds.

Sport clicking works in a similar fashion, however, instead of a competitor clicking on a listing a non-interested party clicks on expensive keywords. When a person comes across an expensive pay per click listing, many times they become interested in who would pay for such a listing. Other people just simply click on listings because they know it costs the advertiser money. Regardless of their motivation, advertisers have unfortunately become familiar with visitors from pay per click search engines that do not have any real interest in their service.

Although it is not possible for a search engine to completely eliminate competitor and sport clicking as it is impossible to know initially the difference between an interested visitor and a visitor with ill-intent, it is possible for search engines to guard against excessive clicking. Frequency caps are the most effective means to guard against this form of click fraud. A frequency cap will limit the number of times an advertiser is charged for a visitor within a set amount of time. For example, if a listing is clicked by an individual, the advertiser will be charged. If that same individual clicks on the same listing again within a short amount of time, the advertiser will not be charged for the second click.

Avoid Companies Who Don't Avoid Click Fraud

Click Fraud and Search Engine Marketing

It is a simple rule, but a rule that is not followed very closely by most marketers. If the search engines you are advertising with are not careful to avoid those who are prone to committing click fraud, chances are good that advertising with them will result in losing money to click fraud. Search engines that are actively pursuing click fraud tend to have stringent requirements to become a distribution partner. Other search engines that actively pursue click fraud set themselves up to not encourage click fraud, possibly by not using partner networks or possibly by not paying their partners on a per click basis.

Look for Publicly Held Companies

Search engines that have stringent guidelines on who can distribute their results tend to have more success in reducing click fraud. Publicly held companies, because of their accountability to long-term profitability and their shareholders are masters at performing due diligence on a website before accepting it as a distribution partner.

The two largest publicly held pay per click search engines are

Overture

and

FindWhat

. Both

companies examine sites wishing to distribute their search results with great detail. Every partner site is required to perform a minimum amount of traffic. Sites that achieve their minimum traffic requirements are signals that the site has a loyal and committed customer base. In addition, every site goes through a rigorous audit which is intended to reveal sources of traffic and fully understand how their feed will be used on that site.

Besides filtering out click fraud through initial partnership requests, publicly held companies routinely perform audits on their distribution networks and employ the latest technology to find instances of click fraud.

Use PPC Spin-offs

Frustrated by the vast amounts of click fraud and the rising costs of keywords at most PPC's, many advertiser's have left the world of pay per click search engine marketing in search for other advertising venues. To meet the needs of this ever growing demographic, a few search engines have developed programs similar that resemble pay per click search engines in the results that advertiser's see without the negative effects such as click fraud.

The most successful model of these spin-offs is

TowerSearch

. Rather than using a pay per click model

requiring that advertisers deposit funds, bid on keywords, then subsequently deduct the bidded amount from their deposited funds for every click recorded, TowerSearch opens up their traffic to advertisers without charging them on a per click basis. Their program is an ideal alternative to per click marketing and paid inclusion programs. Where paid inclusion programs do not guarantee a top position for any of the keywords you target, and where pay per click marketing does not offer the flat fee for inclusion in their database, TowerSearch steps up. TowerSearch guarantees both a top position as well as a flat monthly fee for that guaranteed top position.

Highly reputed

ExactSeek

also offers a program that guarantees placement for a flat fee. Advertisers

can buy a guaranteed placement of a featured listing box for any keyword they choose for a flat fee. With the draw that ExactSeek has in addition to the cost benefits, ExactSeek is the perfect alternative to the relatively highly priced Google AdWords.

By offering flat-fee guaranteed placement, both TowerSearch and ExactSeek have taken click fraud out of the equation of search engine marketing. Neither company currently offers an affiliate program to distribute listings on a per click revenue sharing basis; rather, they both rely on traffic they can generate without tempting other webmasters simply drive clicks to their listings. In addition, neither company's model lends itself to click fraud as clicking on a listing will not cost the advertiser any money. By adjusting their model's slightly TowerSearch and ExactSeek are safe bets for advertiser's looking to spend their money wisely.

Do Not Rely On Pay Per Click Marketing

Pay per click marketing is a valuable resource, however, with the vast amounts of resources available to find quality top placements in free search engines, no marketer should be relying solely on pay per click marketing. For most webmasters, the prize search engine to obtain a top ranking in is Google. With all the free information available from sites such as JimWorld's Forums, FreeWebSiteSubmission, and SearchGuild, it is possible for every webmaster to learn how they can capitalize on the extreme success of Google.

In addition to offering a great pay per click alternative, Exactseek's free listings are a great resource for webmasters looking for free traffic. Exactseek's offers several different programs to help every webmaster achieve a higher ranking in their listings. Recently they announced a change in their ranking algorithm. Rather than focusing solely on keyword relevance which has so often been abused by dishonest webmasters, Exactseek's now takes into account a website's popularity as judged by Alexa. Two websites that are equal in relevancy will achieve their position by how popular Alexa judges

them to be. Not only does this provide better results for end users, but it opens up new possibilities for webmasters to capitalize off of Exactseek's popularity.

Conclusion

Search engine marketing is still the best marketing available to bring high quality visitors and convert visitors into paying customers. Whether it is through pay per click programs, pay per click spin-offs, or through free listings, every marketing plan needs to include search engine marketing. Unfortunately the reality of search engine marketing is that click fraud exists. By focusing your search engine marketing on companies that are less susceptible to click fraud, your marketing campaigns will see a solid ROI.

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Tips For Combating Click Fraud

By Gabriel Adams

Click fraud is one of the biggest issues in the pay per click industry right now. It's easy to understand why, too - click fraud costs advertisers money, but gives no return. It cuts deep into profit margins, and in some cases, may be the difference between making money and losing money.

Click fraud is, at its simplest, clicks on ads that are not generated by a real person interested in making a purchase. Click fraud can come from many different sources:

Click bots, which are robots designed to click on ads, are one source. Click bots are often run by an affiliate of the PPC search engine.

Competitors may click on your ads to try to drive your cost up.

Click schemes are programs people join to click on ads for each other. Usually these people are affiliates of the PPC search engines.

Combating click fraud can be tough. One of the easiest ways to combat click fraud is to not advertise on search engines who deliver lower quality traffic. This factor is easily determined with conversion rates. If one search engine's traffic converts at 2 percent, and traffic from the second search engine converts at 1 percent, you know the traffic from the second search engine is half the quality. Click fraud is likely one of the factors involved.

In addition to such basic tracking mechanisms, you can use more advanced tracking mechanisms to try to catch click fraud. For example, you could use a script that you would gather data on visitors from PPC search engines (data might include IP address, number of times they clicked on the ad, and time they spent on the site) and use that data to pick out suspicious visitors. You can then submit the data

to the search engine and request a refund on the traffic.

Click fraud is probably the biggest problem in the PPC industry, and you can work to save yourself some money by combating click fraud.

Bespoke click fraud detection and protection software from Evolution Internet Ltd:

<http://www.evolution-internet.com/147/prevent-click-fraud.aspx>



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