

Google's Right-Hand Search Engine Results Page (SERP) Change - Early Results



BACKGROUND

Between February 19 and February 24, 2016, Google phased out traditional PPC ads on the right-hand side of the search engine results page (SERP). In doing so, Google reduced the overall number of ads displayed; no more than seven ads populate for any given search, with the threshold on “highly commercial” searches raised from three ads to four. These changes directly affect all desktop searches, with the exception of two areas:

- Shopping ads are still capable of displaying on the right-hand side
- Ads in the Knowledge Panel

CHALLENGE

With the recent remodeling in Google's search real estate, advertisers must anticipate how these changes will impact their ads and be proactive in ensuring continuity of performance. Advertisers should ask themselves several questions in response to these changes: What's the impact on traditional PPC ads? What's the impact on Shopping ads? What measures can be taken to avoid overall traffic loss, and what benefits, if any, can be found in this revision of Google's SERP?

INITIAL EXPECTATIONS

Since Google only sanctions a maximum of seven traditional ads per search result, it would be logical to expect a more competitive (and expensive) atmosphere for advertising. For desktop ads, lesser ads overall would be expected to translate into higher cost per clicks (CPCs) and, for ads in the top position, a stronger click-through rate (CTR). Similarly, desktop shopping ads should expect to receive more impressions and a stronger CTR. CPCs for desktop Shopping ads, however, should be relatively unaffected. Because mobile never supported right-hand side ads, no direct affects should be observed.

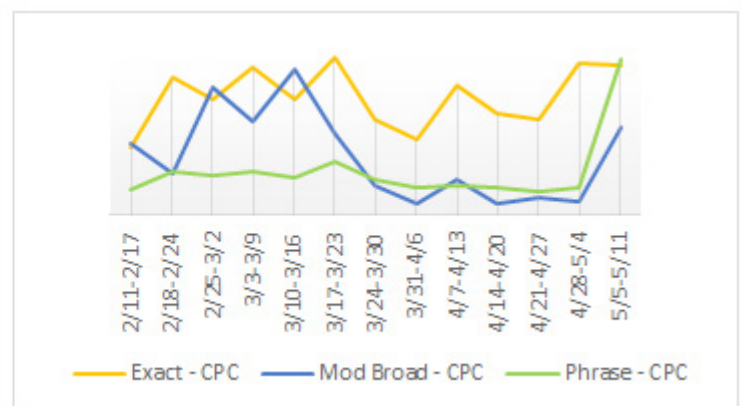
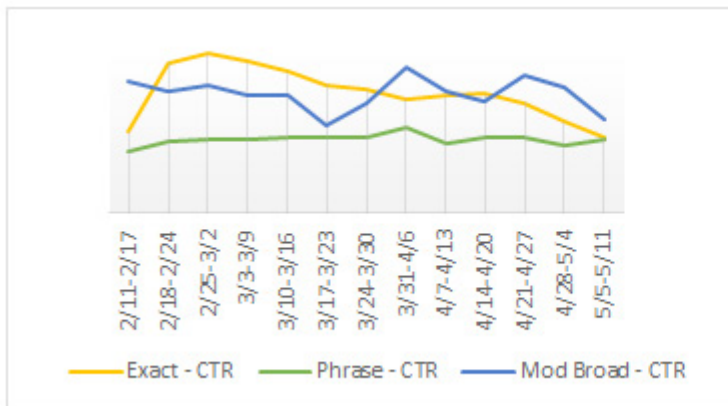
SOLUTION

To test our initial expectations, Chacka Marketing pulled Google AdWords data for Bibles by The Case – an online retailer of religious books in bulk at wholesale prices – a stabilized account that doesn't typically receive too many significant changes. This allowed confident analyses without substantial distortion from outside factors that could interfere and discredit the findings. Separate data was pulled for traditional PPC ads and Shopping ads for side-by-side comparisons. To perform our analyses on this data, the date range spanned from February 11 to May 11, 2016, a time period long enough to capture data before, during and after the transition in Google's SERP.

RESULTS

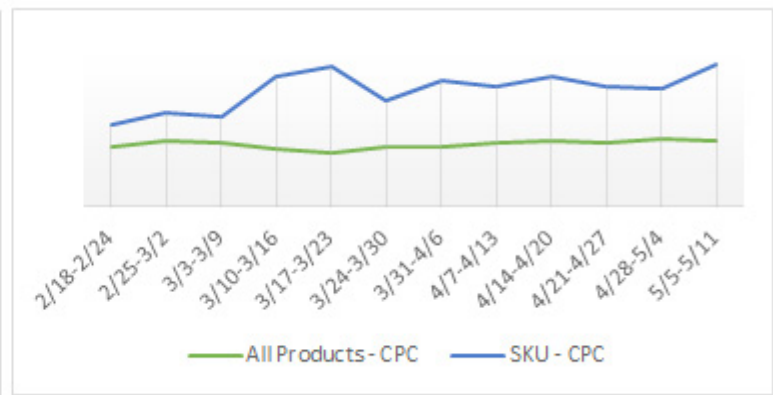
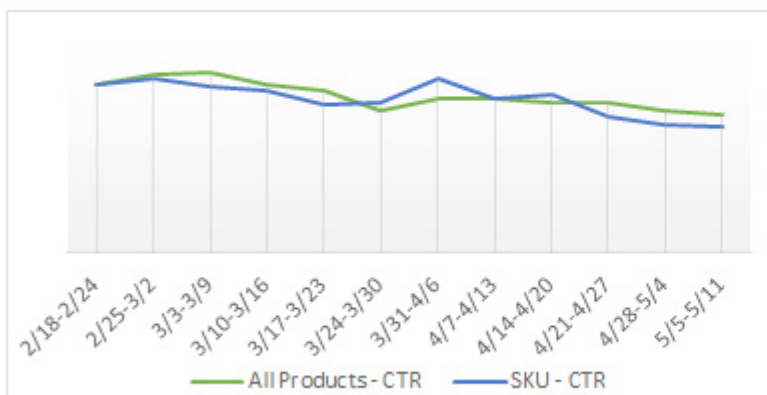
Traditional Pay Per Click (PPC) ads:

Bibles by The Case achieved consistency once the transition began and right-hand side traditional PPC were removed from Google's search landscape change. Exact, phrase, and modified broad performance metrics remained fairly stable as the weeks continued, disproving many of the initial expectations. CPCs (right graph) did not increase, average position appeared relatively untouched, and CTR (left graph) remained steady overall. Even the exact match impression share experienced minimal changes.



Shopping:

As found with traditional PPC ads, Shopping ads (both All products and SKU ads) experienced little change, and any variations found in the data were minimal. CTR fell slightly, impression share saw a downward slope, and CPC (at least for SKU) increased; all contradicting original expectations of performance.



CONCLUSION

One explanation for the results may suggest that right-hand traditional PPC ads played a very minimal role, initially. Since this transition did not create significant changes in the performance of Bibles by The Case's CPCs, CTRs, average position, and impression share, right-hand PPC ads had a low impact overall. Therefore, the change in Google's results page and the elimination of these right-hand PPC ads had a miniscule impact on this specific account.