



# EXACT MATCH IS DEAD POV

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A CLOSER LOOK AT GOOGLE'S  
EXACT MATCH  
CLOSE VARIANT CHANGE

## WHAT CHANGED?

On Friday, March 17th, Google announced that Exact Match close variant keyword targeting will be broadened to ignore certain function words & potentially change query word order. Function words include words like to, from, the, that, and, but, all, some, could, would, be, might and will. This change is expected to roll out to a limited percentage of traffic in the coming months and eventually, scale to most traffic. Outlined below are several implications that advertisers should consider when navigating Google's latest 'enhancement.'

## TRAFFIC CONTROL

With this change, advertisers' ability to finely control query traffic has been eliminated. Until now, the power of Exact Match keywords was not in their ability to expand traffic, but in their ability to optimize that traffic based on discernibly knowing the query's intent. The wider the net casted, the less control advertisers have over which queries trigger their ads and where those ads show in the search engine results pages (SERPs).

## INCREASED COSTS

As any smart advertiser knows, quality score is made up of three parts: one of those parts, ad relevance, measures how closely related your keyword is to your ads. One way to improve your ad relevance is to match the language of your ad text directly to user search queries. Before this recent change, matching ad language and search queries was a relatively straightforward endeavor for Exact Match keywords. With this change, however, Exact Match keywords stand to serve on low affinity queries, which will negatively impact quality score due to lower ad relevance.

## 'SAME MEANING' DOES NOT EQUAL 'SAME INTENT'

Google specifically states that function words won't be removed when they affect the meaning of the search. For instance, they clarified that the "to" in "flights to New York" would not be ignored because a "flight from New York" is not the same as a "flight to New York". It is still unclear, however, whether Google will similarly prevent function words from being added. Will the keyword [Flights Miami] map to the query "flights to Miami" or "flights from Miami"? This is a grey area that leaves many questions unanswered.

## TRADEMARKS UNDER ATTACK

While Google vows not to remove the function word when such action would affect the keyword meaning, advertisers are understandably reluctant to gamble on their trademarked gold mines. Consider the Rachel Ray-branded pet food, Switch to Nutrish. With the policy's latest take on function words and word order combined with the existing adoption of close variants, Switch to Nutrish queries could be deemed interchangeable with queries like "switch nutrition." Word order changes may pose the greatest risks to trademarks. The intent behind a "Mattress Firm" query is dramatically different than users' intent who search "firm mattress." In short, these changes position some advertisers to be at risk of brand equity depreciation with little recourse.



## THE DEATH OF EXACT MATCH

When Google's change is fully dissected, the fact is that Exact Match keywords will become a less controllable version of Modified Broad Match keywords. The disregard for word order completely abolishes the former utility and differentiation of Exact Match keywords. While both Exact Match and Modified Broad Match keywords are susceptible to close variant matching, and word order is treated identically, Modified Broad Match terms have an inherent advantage of the incumbent keyword ruler in that function words are not removed. In the case of Mattress Firm, performance and therefor bid would be drastically different on "Mattress Firm" vs. "firm mattress." However, lowering the bid on one without negative matching the other may cause traffic to migrate from one to the other with bid changes.

## NEXT STEPS

In preparation for this change, advertisers should exercise several measures to safeguard programs. First, advertisers should take stock of the keywords that contain function words and develop a new refinement strategy that is conducive for negative mapping at the ad group level. In other words, if it is determined that intent is different for the terms "water bottle" and "bottle water," advertisers will need to separate the keywords into two different ad groups so that corresponding traffic can be funneled appropriately. Only by separating the new variants into their own ad groups will advertisers be able to control the flow of traffic and keep ad text and keywords aligned for quality score purposes. Next, advertisers should go through the exercise of normalizing keywords alphabetically, so that duplicates can be removed and self-competition mitigated. Special attention should be paid to trademarked terms that are at high risk of brand equity depreciation. Meticulous categorization should be executed to protect trademarks and their associated value.

Finally, we have seen advertisers and agencies move away from leveraging phrase match keywords altogether, as Modified Broad Match keywords have proven to more efficiently capture that traffic. With Google's latest shift, the unfathomable has become fathomable in that the healthiest programs may deliberately funnel most of traffic through Modified Broad Match keywords for the first time.

While Google's intention in broadening close variants for Exact Match keywords is to alleviate advertisers' burden of building expansive keyword lists, it is, in fact, abolishing control of one of the most effective paid search optimization levers at advertisers' disposal. Steps can, and must, be taken to combat the change and the impact it has on ad serving and keyword quality. Depending on the sophistication of the paid search program, these steps can mean hours and hours of formerly unnecessary refinement.

## ABOUT US

Chacka is a leading digital marketing agency, specializing in paid search engine marketing, paid social advertising, programmatic display and direct response consulting services. Breaking through the clutter of the digital landscape, Chacka brings a collaborative approach by acting as an extension of our advertisers' marketing team. Highly recognized with industry accreditations, Chacka takes pride in innovation, integrity and driving net results for our partners.

## CONTACT

PH: 813.281.1217  
EMAIL: [info@chackamarketing.com](mailto:info@chackamarketing.com)  
OFFICE: 550 N Reo St, Suite 200 | Tampa FL 33609

FACEBOOK: [facebook.com/chackamarketing.com](https://facebook.com/chackamarketing.com)  
TWITTER: [@chackamarketing](https://twitter.com/chackamarketing)  
LINKEDIN: [linkedin.com/company/chacka-marketing](https://linkedin.com/company/chacka-marketing)  
INSTAGRAM: [@chackamarketing](https://instagram.com/chackamarketing)