SoudCoh

White paper · Paid search

Launch, discover, control: the first 90 days on Google Ads

What happens from launch day to month three for trade and home-service advertisers, and how to shape structure, discovery and control around the way customers really search

White paper · September 2026

For owner-operators, growing trade companies, multi-site service brands

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Executive summary

The short version

A new Google Ads campaign for a trade business is not a switch that is flipped once. It is a 90-day process: launch with control, discover how customers really search, then fence that demand so every dollar can be traced to an enquiry and, eventually, a job. SoudCoh's research sample of Australian trade and home-service advertisers shows that 84% of new advertisers record an enquiry in their first three days, the second month usually costs more per enquiry than the first, and 59% of enquiries arrive from searches that were never on the keyword list. This paper sets out what happens at each stage, and the routine that keeps the numbers meaningful.

Key findings

59%

of enquiries came from searches that were not on the keyword list

52%

of Search spend is named in Google's search-terms report

47%

of exact-match enquiries came from searches worded differently from the keyword

69%

of keyword spend runs through phrase match

84%

of new advertisers record an enquiry in their first three days

+31%

change in cost per enquiry from month one to month two

What it means for your business

01 Judge a new account on its second and third months; the first month flatters it.

02 Treat a silent first week as a tracking or phone-answering problem before touching keywords or bids.

03 Treat the keyword list as a hypothesis and leave deliberate room, through phrase match, for the searches customers actually type.

04 Do not rely on exact match for control; every account, however tight, needs a search-term review and a negative list.

05 Promote searches that keep producing enquiries to their own exact keywords, because only a keyword can be bid on, written for and protected.

06 Simulate every negative keyword against searches that have converted before it goes live.

07 Before adding budget, check whether impressions are being lost to ad rank, which money alone does not fix.

08 Trace each keyword to enquiries and won jobs, so budget moves on revenue rather than on the cheapest lead.

01

Why the first 90 days decide how an account is run

Launch, discovery and control are three different jobs, and most accounts that disappoint skipped one of them.

Most trade businesses judge Google Ads the way they would judge a new apprentice: by how the first few weeks go. That is understandable, and it is usually the wrong test. In SoudCoh's research sample of Australian **plumbers**, **electricians**, **cleaners**, **HVAC businesses**, **pest controllers**, **roofers**, **removalists** and other home-service businesses, the first month is the least representative. It is usually cheaper than the month that follows, and it runs on a keyword list written before anyone knew how customers search.

The owner's question is simple: is this working, and what should we do next? The answer depends on which of three jobs the account is doing. In the first weeks it is **launching**: getting the structure, settings, tracking and phone answering right, so that real enquiries arrive and are counted. From about the second month it is **discovering**: learning from the search-terms report which words customers actually use. From then on it is **controlling**: promoting the searches that pay, removing the ones that never will, and putting budget where enquiries and jobs come from. Running through all three is a fourth job most accounts never finish — **tracking each keyword back to revenue**, so decisions are made on jobs won rather than on clicks or cheap leads.

This paper follows those jobs in order: what the reported data shows, what it means, and what to do about it — whether you run your own account, employ someone to run it, or want to check an agency's work. The method is the same for an owner-operator with one van and a multi-site brand with a call centre; what changes is how many ad groups there are to review.

84%

of new advertisers record an enquiry in their first three days of ads

68%

of new advertisers pay more per enquiry in month two than in month one

59%

of enquiries come from searches that were never keywords

Definition

Keywords, search terms and enquiries

A **keyword** is the phrase you bid on. A **search term** is what the customer actually typed; Google matches it to one of your keywords. An **enquiry**, in this paper, is a phone call that was recorded as a call or a form that was submitted — never a tap on a phone number, a click or a page view. **Cost per enquiry** is ad spend divided by those enquiries.

02

Before launch: build for control, not for size

The settings chosen on launch day decide who can see the ads, and several of Google's defaults are wrong for a business that serves a fixed area.

A trade business has three facts that every campaign should be built around: it does a defined set of jobs, it serves a defined area, and it earns its money when the phone is answered. The build should mirror them. In practice that means a services campaign with one ad group per job — blocked drains, hot water, switchboard upgrades, end-of-lease cleans, termite inspections — each with its own keywords, ads and landing page, so the search, the ad and the page say the same thing. Someone searching for a hot water replacement should see an ad about hot water replacement and land on a page about it, not on a home page that lists eleven services.

SoudCoh builds launch with a median of 18 keywords per ad group and three responsive search ads in every ad group, each written for that one service. Every keyword is staged as an exact-and-phrase pair, so there is effectively no broad match at launch. Campaigns are created paused — 97% of the campaigns SoudCoh's campaign builder creates — and switched on only after a person has read the ad groups, keywords, copy and landing pages against what the business actually does. None of this needs special software: a list of services, a spreadsheet and an afternoon of careful reading will do.

The settings matter as much as the keywords. When a Search campaign is created in the Google Ads interface, the defaults include search partner sites, the Display Network, and location targeting that reaches people interested in your area as well as people in it. For a plumber who works a set of suburbs, each default spends money on people who cannot become customers: someone reading a news site, someone on a partner site that rarely produces enquiries, someone interstate looking up a holiday rental near your suburb. SoudCoh's campaign builder switches search partners and Display expansion off on every Search campaign, and targets people physically in the service area. The companion paper, **From keyword to revenue**, shows what the Display setting costs when it is left on.

Table 1

Launch settings: interface defaults against a trade build

Setting	Default when created in the interface	Trade build	Why it matters
Networks	Google Search, search partners and the Display Network	Google Search only	Display clicks inside Search campaigns converted at 4% of the Search rate, partner clicks at 16%
Location	People in, regularly in, or interested in the area	People in or regularly in the area	Someone merely interested in a suburb cannot book a local tradie
Match types	Broad match is recommended	Exact and phrase pairs; broad later, if at all	Broad needs deep conversion data and a mature negative list to stay on target
Status at creation	Live when saved	Paused until reviewed	A person checks every ad group, keyword, ad and page before the first dollar is spent
Ad schedule	All hours, every day	The hours the phone is actually answered, or answering arranged for the hours ads run	An unanswered call is paid for but never becomes a job

Interface defaults change from time to time; check each setting on the campaign itself rather than assuming.

Structure first: a build that mirrors the jobs a business actually does is easier to read, review and control.

What the build should not be is big for the sake of it. A comprehensive build switches on hundreds or thousands of keywords, but for the median advertiser only 29% of switched-on keywords have triggered even one impression, and the top tenth of keywords by spend carries 53% of all keyword spend. Google matches each search to the closest keyword, so near-duplicates sit silent — harmless, but it makes keyword count a vanity metric. Typically, 17% of live ad groups received no impressions over a recent month: niche services and suburbs waiting for a rare search.

What makes an account work is whether searches, ads and pages line up, and whether someone reads the search-terms report every week. Be wary of any pitch that sells "more keywords" as the fix.

⚠ **Watch out**

Suburb campaigns: useful coverage, not a shortcut

A per-suburb location campaign can be worth running beside the service campaign, so the ad and the page can name the suburb back to the customer. But it is not a cheaper way to buy enquiries. Across the sample, clicks on per-suburb campaigns cost 49% more than service-campaign clicks for the same advertiser, and for 57% of advertisers running both, the suburb campaign produced fewer enquiries per dollar — close to a coin toss. Build the service campaign first, run suburbs as a satellite with a separate budget, and let cost per enquiry decide once both have two months of data.

03

Weeks one to eight: the honeymoon and the month-two rise

The phone should ring within days; the second month usually costs more per enquiry, and that is the moment to tighten rather than to stop.

Search advertising captures demand that already exists. Someone with a leaking hot water system is going to call somebody today, and a new account that appears for that search should hear about it quickly. In the reported data, it does.

> **84% of new advertisers in SoudCoh's research sample recorded an enquiry from their first three days of ads.**

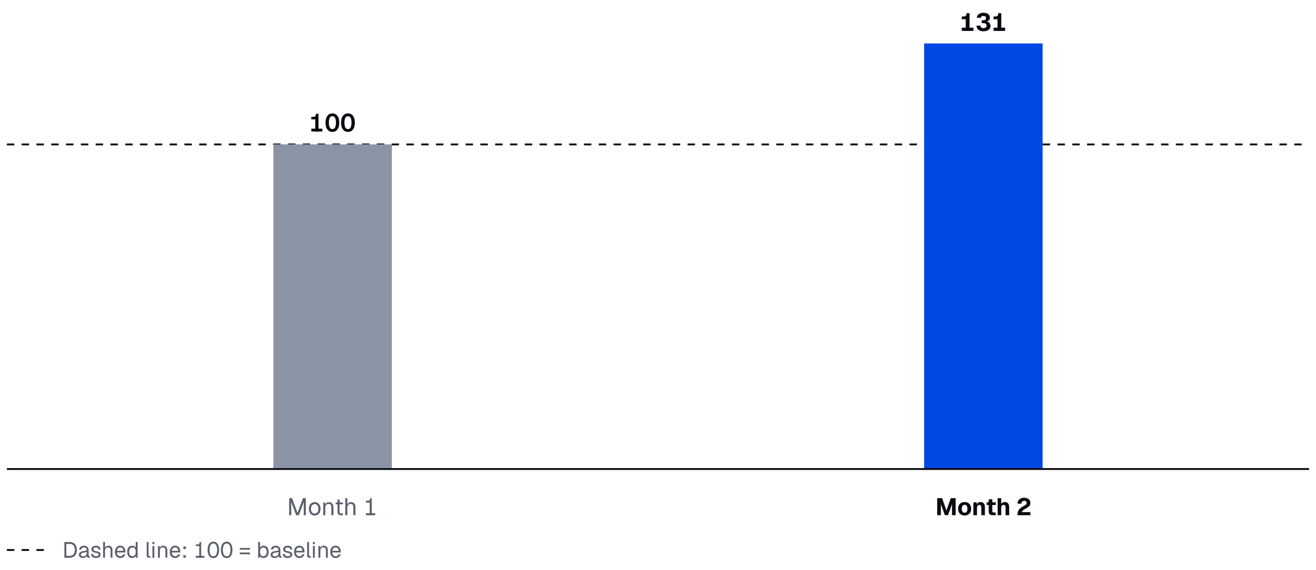
That makes the first week a useful diagnostic window. If a new account has spent money for several days and recorded no enquiry, the cause is far more often mechanical than strategic: a call-tracking number that does not ring through, a form whose confirmation never fires the conversion tag, a phone that goes to voicemail, or a conversion action that was never switched on. Check those before touching a single keyword or bid.

The second pattern surprises almost everyone: the first month of a new account is usually its cheapest. For the median new advertiser, cost per enquiry in days 31 to 60 was 31% higher than in days 1 to 30, and 68% of new advertisers paid more per enquiry in their second month than in their first. We explain the pattern in more detail in **why Google Ads month two costs more**.

Exhibit 1

The month-two rise

Cost per enquiry for the median new advertiser, indexed to month one = 100; months are 30-day blocks from launch day



How to read this: Month two is dearer than month one for most new advertisers, so cost-per-enquiry targets belong to months two and three, not month one.

Source: SoudCoh analysis of reported Google Ads data.

Our reading is that a fresh account serves the most urgent, ready-to-book searches first, before the bidding has widened its reach. After a few weeks it starts buying harder searches — more research, more comparison, more people not ready yet — and cost per enquiry rises towards its true level. The month-two rise is the end of a honeymoon, not a sign that something has broken.

Insight

Set targets from months two and three

The practical consequence is simple. Do not scale the budget on month-one results, and do not panic when month two costs more. Tell everyone involved before launch that the second month usually costs more per enquiry, use the first month to learn which services and areas ring, and set cost-per-enquiry targets from the second and third months. An account that is switched off in week six because "it has stopped working" has usually just stopped being new.

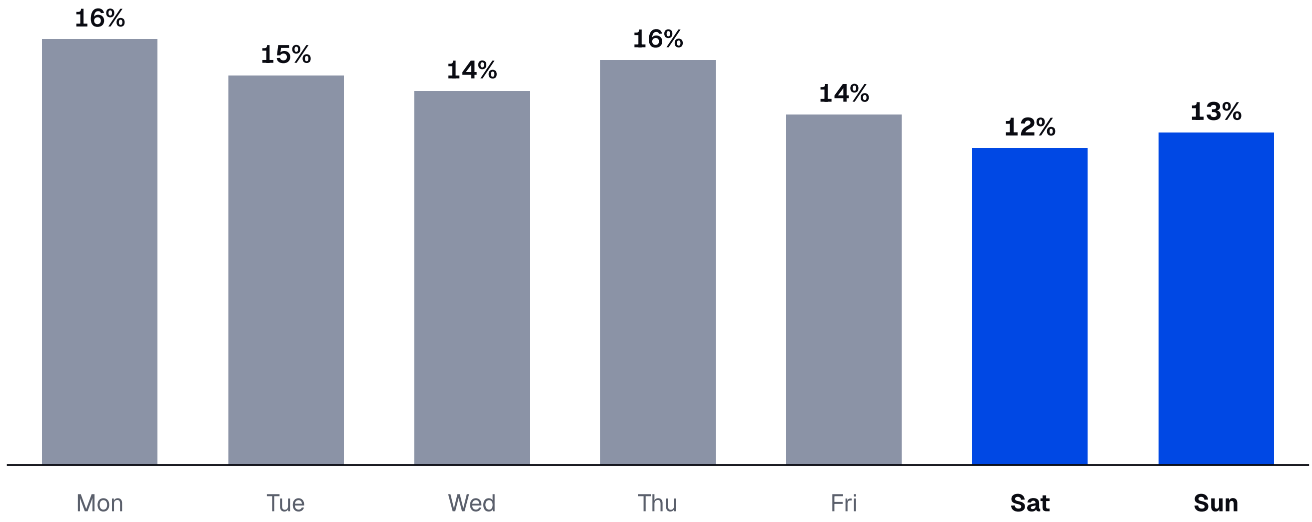
The launch is also when the business side has to be ready. Most trade enquiries come from phones: mobile clicks delivered 76% of enquiries across the sample, and 58% of mobile enquiries were phone calls. Demand does not keep office hours either: about 26% of calls from ads arrive before 7am, after 6pm or on a weekend. Weekends pay their way: for advertisers that run ads all week, a weekend enquiry costs only 4% more than a weekday one.

So the schedule, the call roster and the landing page need to fit that reality before the first dollar is spent: a tap-to-call button that works, a form that fits on one screen, someone answering in every hour the ads run, and copy that promises only response times the business can keep. If nobody can answer at night, schedule the ads to match — knowing that this misses real demand rather than saving waste.

Exhibit 2

Enquiries arrive every day of the week

Share of the week's enquiries by day, median advertiser running ads on all seven days



How to read this: No single day dominates: Saturday and Sunday still bring a steady share, so a budget or roster that stops on Friday afternoon misses real enquiries.

Source: SoudCoh analysis of reported Google Ads data.

Figure 1

The first 90 days at a glance

A new account moves from launch to discovery to control. The dates are a guide; what matters is the order.

Launch checklist: week by week

- [ ] Before launch: write down every service you want work for, every service you do not do, and every suburb you will travel to.
- [ ] Before launch: build one ad group per service, each with its own keywords in exact and phrase match, three ads and a landing page that names the job.
- [ ] Before launch: set networks to Google Search only, location to people in or regularly in your area, and the ad schedule to the hours the phone is answered.
- [ ] Before launch: submit a test form and tap your phone number with Google Tag Assistant open, and confirm the form fires its enquiry conversion tag once and the tap fires only a secondary action; ring the tracked number and confirm the call reaches your call-tracking log.
- [ ] Week 1: check every day that calls ring through and forms arrive; if nothing has arrived after a few days, check tracking and call handling before keywords.
- [ ] Week 1: add a starter negative list for obvious non-customers (jobs, courses, DIY tutorials, free downloads; never the word free on its own, which would block free-quote searches), and nothing more aggressive yet.
- [ ] Weeks 2–4: read the search-terms report twice a week, note which services and suburbs produce calls, and resist raising the budget.
- [ ] Weeks 5–8: expect cost per enquiry to rise; tighten ads and landing pages for the busiest ad groups and review search terms several times a week.
- [ ] Month 3: promote searches that have produced repeat enquiries to exact keywords, set cost-per-enquiry targets from months two and three, and check impression share lost to rank against budget.
- [ ] Day 90: move to the monthly review routine below, and start recording which enquiries became jobs.

04

How customers really search: the case for deliberate room

More than half of the enquiries a trade campaign captures arrive in words the business never wrote down.

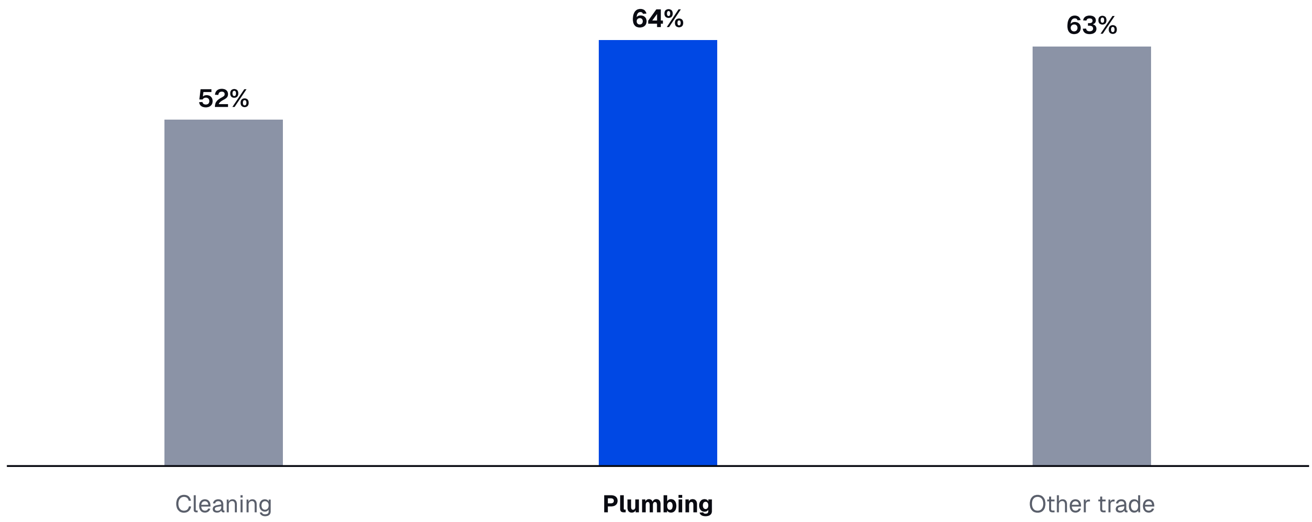
Every keyword list is a guess, written before launch in the way the trade talks about its work: "hot water system replacement", "switchboard upgrade", "end of lease cleaning". Customers do not talk like that. They describe symptoms ("no hot water", "power keeps tripping", "water under the sink"), they add a place or an urgency, they misspell, and they phrase things once and never again. SoudCoh's research sample shows how large that gap is.

For the median trade advertiser, 59% of enquiries came from searches that were not on the keyword list — even allowing for plurals and word order. Those discovered searches took 64% of search-term spend. Discovery is not a side budget; it is the larger part of the account, and a launch keyword list is a hypothesis, not a map of demand. Trade enquiries come from searches you never chose looks at the pattern in more detail.

Exhibit 3

Most enquiries come from searches nobody chose

Share of enquiries from searches that were not on the keyword list, median advertiser by trade



How to read this: The pattern holds in every trade: discovery is a structural feature of trade search, not a quirk of one category.

Source: SoudCoh analysis of reported Google Ads data.

The share holds across trades — from 52% of enquiries for the median cleaning business to 64% in plumbing and 63% across other trades and home services. Plumbing searches are especially varied because customers describe what they see — a leak, a smell, a noise — rather than the job that will fix it.

Discovered demand costs a little more. An enquiry from a search that was not on the list cost 1.19× as much as one from a search worded like an existing keyword. That premium is the price of learning, and it is modest. The mistake is to see it and switch discovery off; the better response is to harvest it — promote the repeat winners to keywords of their own and keep the net open for the next ones.

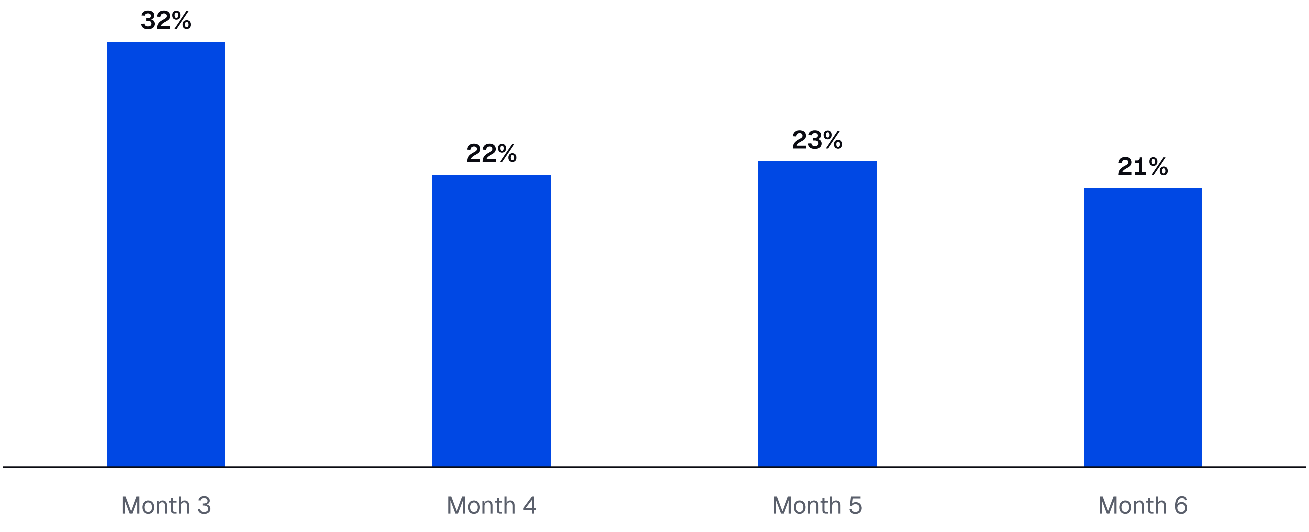
Much of that demand is rare. For the median advertiser, 54% of enquiries came from searches that received two clicks or fewer in total, and 33% came from searches that appeared in only one calendar month. Trade demand is episodic: a burst pipe, a failed inspection, a lease ending, a storm. No keyword tool would suggest most of those phrases. They can only be reached by keywords with room to match, which is why an exact-only build leaves customers on the table.

Nor does discovery finish. From the third month of running onwards, 25% of each month's enquiries still came from searches that had not appeared in any earlier month. Search-term review is a standing job, not a launch task, and the keyword list should keep growing from evidence.

Exhibit 4

New searches keep arriving

Share of each month's enquiries from searches not seen in any earlier month, from the third month of data onward (median advertiser)



How to read this: Even after months of running, around a quarter of each month's enquiries come from phrasings the account has never met before.

Source: SoudCoh analysis of reported Google Ads data.

Customers search for what they see — a drip, a leak, a noise — not for the job that will fix it.

Some kinds of search deserve a closer look because they behave differently from the rest. "Near me" is how many customers ask for a tradie without naming a suburb. Those searches produced 17% of enquiries for the median trade advertiser and converted clicks to enquiries at 1.3× the rate of other searches — the customer has usually decided to hire and is choosing who. The search says nothing about where the customer is, so it only works when location targeting reaches people physically in the service area and the page shows the area and a phone number in the first screen (**why near-me searches convert better**). Searches naming a suburb or local town are a smaller slice — 7% of enquiries — that converts slightly better but costs more per click, so the case for splitting them out is relevance and control, not cheaper leads.

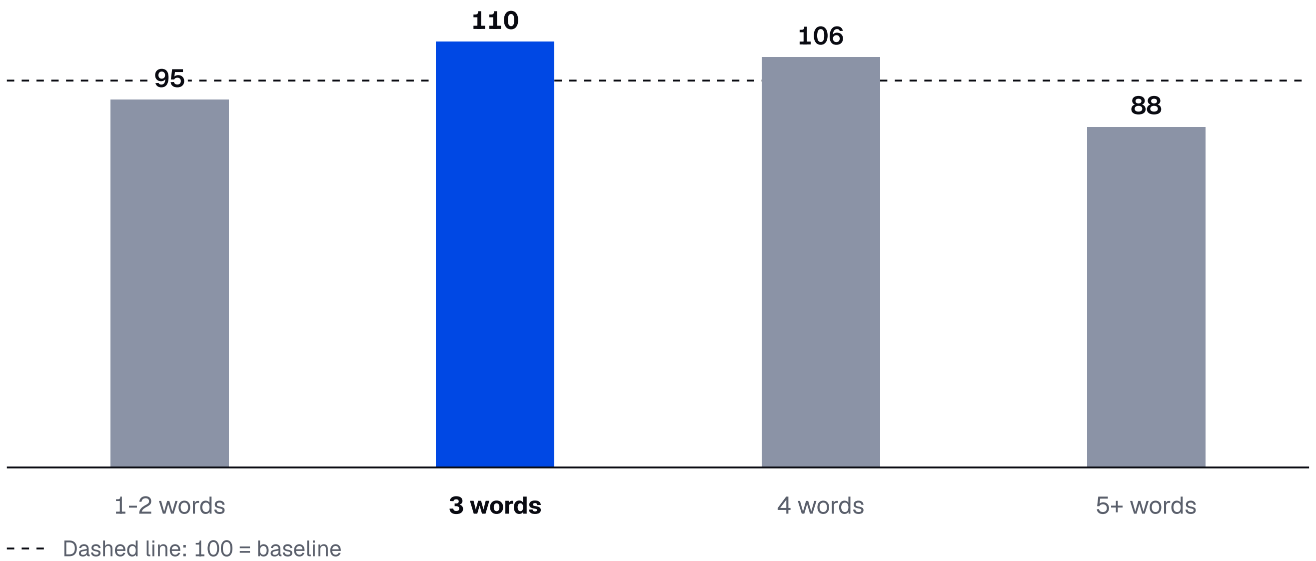
Emergency searches are the story trades tell about paid search, and they are a thin slice in the data. Even for plumbers and electricians, emergency-worded searches ("emergency", "24/7", "urgent", "after hours") took 1.9% of search-term spend for the median advertiser, and produced 1.9% of paid-search enquiries. They convert well but cost more per click. Run a separate emergency ad group only if someone genuinely answers the phone at night, and bid it on its own numbers so it cannot quietly take the budget (**emergency searches are a small share of trade demand**).

Price researchers are not waste either. Searches containing "cost", "price", "how much" or "quote" converted less often but cost less per click, so an enquiry from them cost 0.95× what other enquiries cost. A blanket negative on "price" throws away enquiries at a normal cost; answer the price question in the ad and on the page instead. Length matters too: three-word searches — typically a service plus a place or a problem — converted at 1.24× the rate of searches of five or more words, which tend to carry questions and research. Long-tail room adds volume, but long searches need the tightest cleaning.

Exhibit 5

Short and specific converts better

Enquiries per click by search length, indexed to each advertiser's average = 100 (median across the sample)



How to read this: A service plus a place or problem converts above average; very long searches carry more research and need the tightest cleaning.

Source: SoudCoh analysis of reported Google Ads data.

Table 2

What customers type, and what it is worth

Kind of search	What the data shows	What to do
Not on the keyword list	59% of enquiries, at 1.19× the cost per enquiry of keyword-worded searches	Leave room to discover; promote repeat winners
"Near me"	17% of enquiries; converts at 1.3× the rate of other searches	Target people in the area; show the service area and phone number up front
Names a suburb or town	7% of enquiries; converts at 1.07× the rate of other searches	Split out for relevance and control, not for cheaper leads
Emergency wording	1.9% of search-term spend for plumbing and electrical advertisers	Separate ad group only if nights are genuinely answered
Price research	Enquiries cost 0.95× what other enquiries cost	Answer the price question; do not negate "price" wholesale
A competitor's name	0.6% of search-term spend; produced enquiries for 72% of advertisers that paid for them	Segment and bid low; negate only after a long, zero-enquiry window

Figures are medians across SoudCoh's research sample of trade advertisers unless stated.

05

Match types: exact is not exact, and phrase does the work

Match types set how much room each keyword has to discover; in trade campaigns, phrase match carries most of the load.

Match types set how much room each keyword has: exact is meant to catch the keyword and little else, phrase lets the customer add words around it, and broad lets Google decide what is related. In trade campaigns they behave differently from the way they are often described.

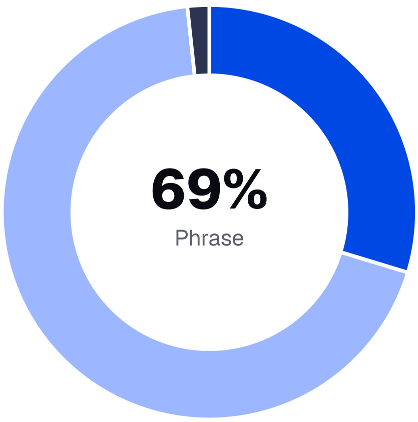
Exact is not exact. Google now treats exact match as "same meaning", so it also matches plurals, misspellings, reordering and rewrites it judges equivalent. Across the sample, 47% of the enquiries that exact-match keywords produced came from searches worded differently from the keyword. That is mostly helpful — customers rarely type the textbook phrase — but it means an exact-only account still needs a search-term review and a negative list. Exact match alone is not control (exact match is not exact).

Phrase does the work. Phrase match carries 69% of keyword spend across the sample, with exact at 30% and broad at 2%. Phrase keeps the service words fixed and lets the customer add the rest — the suburb, the urgency, the symptom. It is the balance most trade campaigns need. For the median advertiser, phrase match and its close variants produced 34% of enquiries.

Exhibit 6

Where keyword spend goes by match type

Share of keyword spend across SoudCoh's research sample of trade advertisers



Exact	30%
Phrase	**69%**
Broad	1.7%

How to read this: Phrase match is the workhorse: it catches the natural variations people type while still requiring the service words.

Source: SoudCoh analysis of reported Google Ads data.

Exact is not cheaper per enquiry. Phrase-match clicks cost 17% less than exact-match clicks in the same account — and are 18% less likely to convert, so the two cancel out. Within the same account, a phrase-match conversion cost 5% less than an exact-match one. The price of a click and the value of a click move together, so match types should be judged on cost per enquiry, never on cost per click.

Broad has to earn its place. Where broad match was used, its enquiries cost 1.09× as much as exact-match enquiries for the same advertiser — not materially more. Broad match learns from conversion data which searches are worth buying; if the Conversions column is full of phone-number taps, it learns to buy taps. It is a tool for well-tracked, well-cleaned campaigns, not a default for an account nobody reviews.

Table 3

Match types in trade campaigns

Match type	What it matches	Share of keyword spend	Use it for
Exact	The keyword's meaning, including plurals, misspellings and rewrites	30%	The proven core: searches that have already produced enquiries
Phrase	The phrase's meaning, with other words around it	69%	Service plus modifier: the suburb, the urgency, the symptom
Broad	Anything Google judges related	2%	Campaigns with deep conversion data, clean tracking and a daily review

Pair every exact keyword with its phrase twin at launch, and let search-term data decide where the budget goes.

> Do this
>
> ### Launch with control, then earn discovery
>
> Start each service ad group with the same keywords in exact and phrase match. Exact holds the core; phrase supplies the discovery. Read the search terms that phrase brings in, promote the winners to exact, and negate what is clearly not your work. Consider broad match only once the account has months of clean conversion history — connected calls and submitted forms, nothing softer — and a negative list that has been tested against converting searches.

06

The discovery loop: review, promote or negate

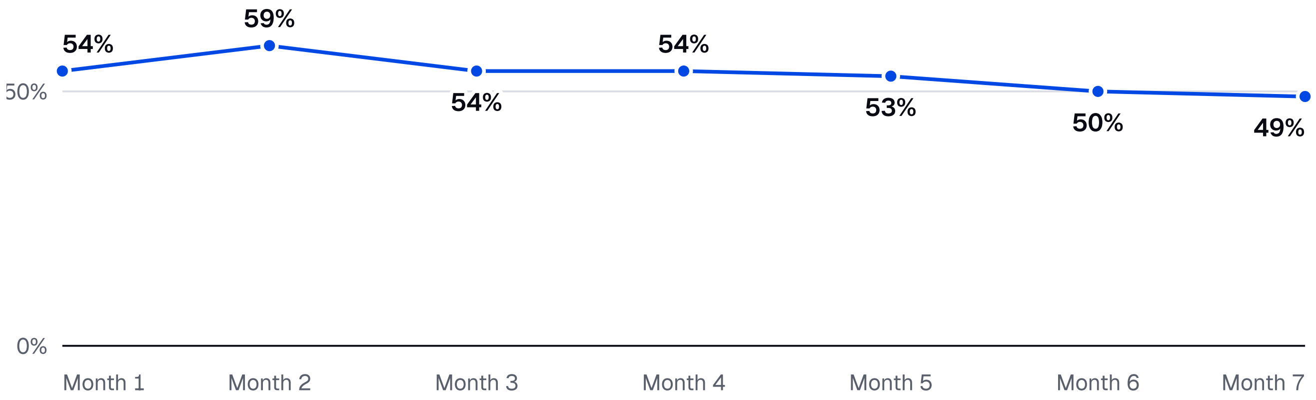
Control comes from a routine that turns the search-terms report into decisions — and from knowing what the report does not show.

The search-terms report is where an account learns. It is also incomplete. Google withholds low-volume searches from the report for privacy, and in the typical trade Search campaign the report accounts for only 52% of the money spent. The same is true of results: the report names the search behind roughly 51% of a typical advertiser's enquiries. The rest is spent on, and won from, searches that are never named (the search-terms report hides half your spend).

Exhibit 7

Google names only about half of what a campaign spends

Share of Search spend visible in the search-terms report, median trade advertiser, month by month



How to read this: Visibility sits around half, month after month: a negative list can only police the visible part, so structure has to do the rest.

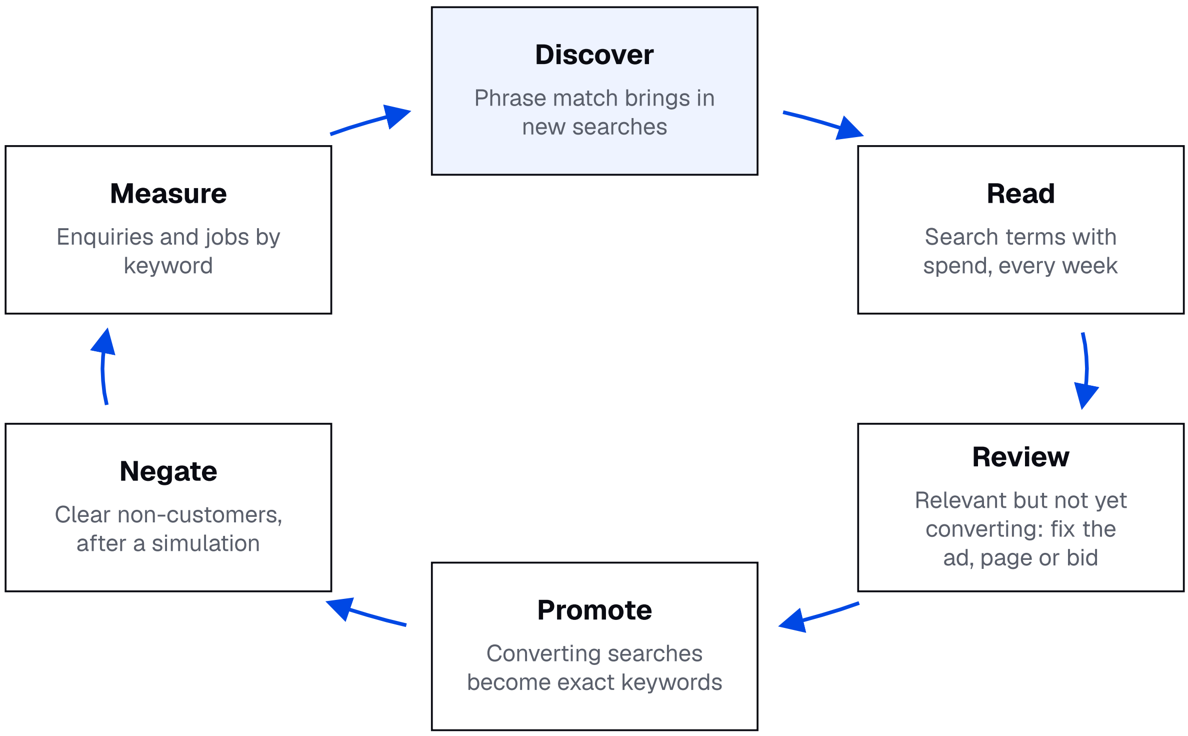
Source: SoudCoh analysis of reported Google Ads data.

That has two consequences. A negative list can only police the visible half, so control has to come from structure too: tight themes, the right match types and the right location settings. And the visible half is a sample — assume the hidden half behaves like the long tail you can see. Review the report every week, but judge a campaign on enquiries and cost per enquiry, not on how tidy the visible terms look.

A good review sorts every search term with meaningful spend into one of three outcomes. **Negate** it if the intent is clearly not a customer — a job seeker, a DIY tutorial, a free download, a retail purchase, a service the business genuinely does not offer — and it has never converted. **Review** it if it looks relevant but has not converted yet; these go to a person, because the fix is usually a bid, an ad or a landing page rather than a negative. **Promote** it if it has produced an enquiry and is not yet a keyword in its own right: add it as exact match in the right ad group when its cost per enquiry is at or below target, and as phrase match when it is above.

Figure 2

The discovery loop



Each pass through the loop widens what the account knows and narrows what it wastes.

Most of what a review surfaces is not junk. Across the sample, about 75% of the spend a daily search-term review flags is on searches that look relevant but have not converted yet. Negating them on a cost threshold would shrink the account. Some are simply early: 7% of relevant-but-not-converting searches held back from negation went on to produce an enquiry in a later month. Many others are one-offs: 53% never triggered an ad again. Adding those as negatives does nothing except lengthen the list. The review effort belongs on patterns that recur.

Promotion is the step most advertisers skip. Only 11% of the searches that produced an enquiry through phrase or broad match were ever added as keywords in their own right, and even among searches that produced three or more enquiries, only 33% had been promoted. Leaving a winner to be caught by a broader keyword works, but it gives up control: you cannot bid a search up, write an ad in its exact words or protect it from a stray negative unless it is a keyword. A monthly promotion pass is cheap, and it compounds. Where a cluster of converting searches fits no existing ad group, it becomes an ad group of its own — which is how structure grows from evidence.

How to sort a search term

1. **Filter to what matters**
   Open the search-terms report for the last month, filter to terms with spend and sort by cost.

2. **Ask whether it is a customer**
   Could this person book the job you sell, in the area you serve? If clearly not — a job seeker, a DIY question, a product purchase, a service you do not do — it is a negative candidate.

3. **Check its history before negating**
   Look at the term, and any search sharing the same word, over the longest window available. If it has ever produced an enquiry, narrow the negative to the exact phrase, or leave it.

4. **Hold the relevant ones for review**
   A relevant term with spend and no enquiries is a question, not a verdict. Check the ad, the landing page and the bid, then give it time.

5. **Promote the winners**
   A converting term that is not yet a keyword goes into the right ad group — exact match if its cost per enquiry is at or below target, phrase if above — with an ad that repeats its words.

6. **Record why**
   Note why each negative and each new keyword was added, so the next person can tell a policy from a mistake.

Monthly search-term review routine

- [ ] Pull the search-terms report for the month, filtered to terms with spend, and note what share of total spend it covers.
- [ ] Negate clear non-customer patterns, each checked first against a year of converting searches.
- [ ] List every search that produced an enquiry through phrase or broad match; promote any with repeat enquiries to exact match in the right ad group.
- [ ] Group related converting searches that do not fit an existing ad group; if a cluster keeps growing, give it its own ad group, ads and page.
- [ ] Review relevant searches with spend and no enquiries: check the ad, the landing page and the bid before considering a negative.
- [ ] Check the busiest tenth of keywords one by one — bids, search terms, ads and landing page — and manage the rest in bulk.
- [ ] Compare each service's cost per enquiry this month with the previous two months, not with month one.
- [ ] Once a quarter, pull every search that converted in the last year and check that none is now blocked by a negative.

07

Control without cutting off customers

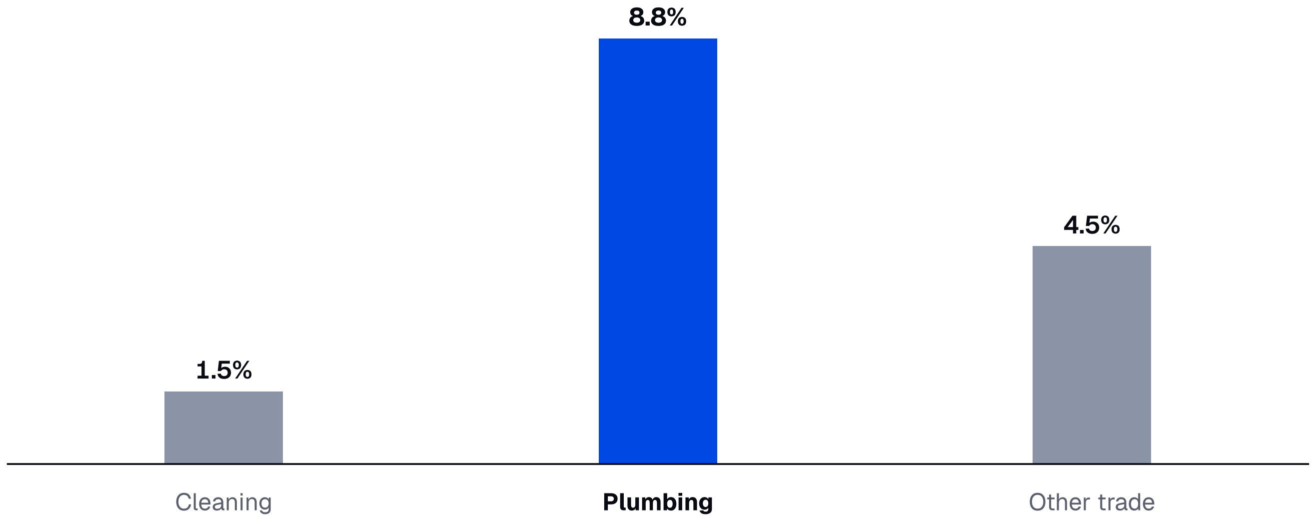
In a well-run account junk is a small leak; the bigger risk is a negative list that blocks the customers it was meant to protect.

Cleaning up search terms is the part of paid search that is easiest to sell, and the data suggests it is usually oversold. For the median trade advertiser, only about 4.4% of reviewed search-term spend was flagged as clear-cut waste to negate. The level differs by trade — lowest in cleaning, highest in plumbing, where the words overlap more with DIY and retail searches — but in a well-structured account junk is a small leak, not a flood. An agency that promises big savings from cutting wasted spend alone is describing an account nobody has looked after.

Exhibit 8

Clear-cut waste is a small leak

Share of reviewed search-term spend flagged to negate, median advertiser by trade



How to read this: Waste levels differ by trade because the words overlap differently with jobs, DIY and retail searches; the cleaning cadence should follow the leak.

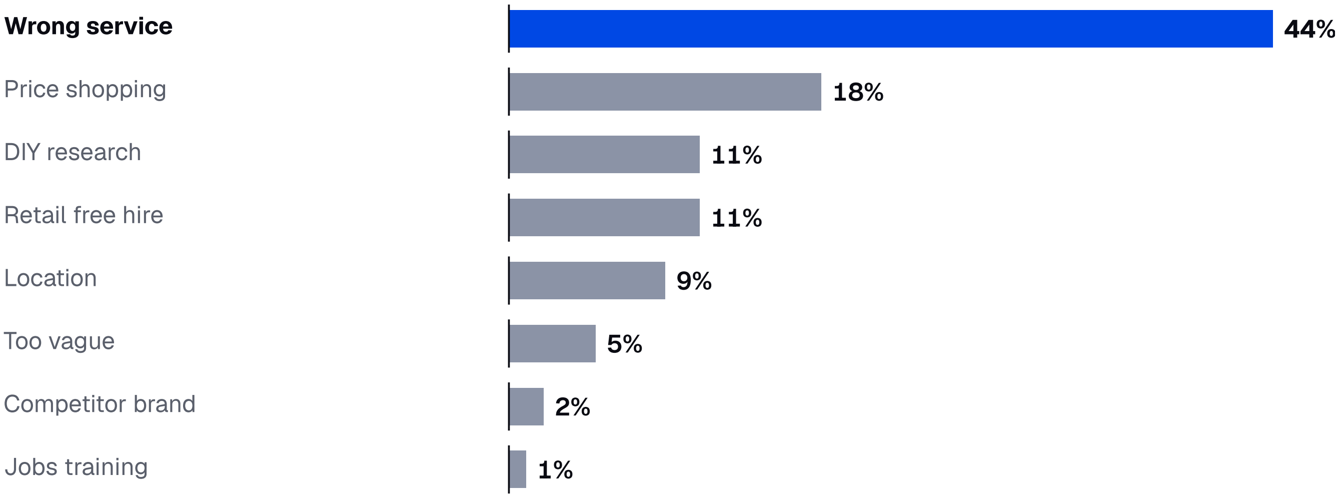
Source: SoudCoh analysis of reported Google Ads data.

Where the waste comes from matters more than how much there is. The usual targets of template negative lists — job seekers and DIY searches — were only 12% of the spend flagged as waste. The biggest single source, 44% of flagged spend, was searches for a different service, or for something unrelated that happens to share a word. Those look relevant enough to click and are specific to each business, so they need a list built from the owner's "we don't do that" list and checked against converting searches. Template lists are cheap insurance on day one; they do not solve the problem.

Exhibit 9

Where search waste comes from

Share of spend flagged for negation, by kind of search, pooled across the sample



How to read this: The expensive leak is the neighbouring service the business does not do, not the obvious jobs or DIY searches.

Source: SoudCoh analysis of reported Google Ads data.

Control is sorting: every search term with spend goes into one of three trays — negate, review or promote.

The good news is that control compounds. Each negative removes a pattern for good, so the junk that reaches the account shrinks as the list matures. Two months into daily cleaning, the share of reviewed spend that needed negating had fallen by 43% for the median advertiser. The first month is when cleaning matters most; after that it becomes maintenance. Once cleaning is regular, the negatives that can still be added safely cover just 0.6% of monthly spend for the median advertiser. By then the money is in cost per click, conversion rate and budget allocation. Cleaning is hygiene, not a growth strategy.

The bigger risk runs the other way. Negative lists accumulate, are rarely audited, and block more than anyone intended. In 52% of the sample, the advertiser's own negative keywords block at least one search that produced an enquiry during the year. For the median advertiser the cost is small — searches now blocked had produced 0.4% of the year's search-term enquiries — but it is concentrated: in the worst case in the sample, searches blocked by the advertiser's own list had produced 6% of its paid-search enquiries. It is the cheapest fix in paid search, because those enquiries were already proven (**negative keywords that block customers**).

Rules alone make it worse. Word-pattern rules ("price", "cheap", "buy", "review") catch a lot of junk and a small but real share of customers: 1.5% of the searches a keyword-rule cleaner flagged had converted in the very window it was judging, and 2% of searches flagged by simple waste rules had produced a genuine enquiry at some point in the year. A term can look like waste in a seven-day window and still be a customer over twelve months. That is why every automated negative in SoudCoh's process goes through a person and a simulation before it is added.

⚠ **Watch out**

Most negatives that look safe are not

When proposed negatives are put through a challenger review and a simulation against converting searches, 60% of them are thrown out. The most dangerous were the "we don't do that" kind: 92% of negatives proposed because the business does not offer a service were rejected, because they would have blocked work it does do or searches that convert. Words like "pool", "dishwasher" and "waterproofing" all looked like other people's work in a plumbing campaign, and all blocked converting searches. Almost half of proposed competitor-name negatives (47%) failed too, usually because the "brand" was also an everyday trade phrase or had brought in enquiries.

Propose, challenge, simulate, verify

1

Propose

List candidate negatives by kind: wrong service, retail, DIY, jobs, equipment hire, out of area, competitor. Hold the owner's list of services the business does not do against the website's list of services it does.

2

Challenge

Have a second person try to argue each one out, using the account's own ad groups, services and suburbs. A word that names a real service, a suburb inside the area or an everyday trade phrase fails here.

3

Simulate

Replay each surviving negative against the account's search terms over a long window — the last month and the last year — and count the enquiries it would have blocked. Anything that blocks a converting search is narrowed or dropped.

4

Verify

After adding the negatives, read the campaign's negative list back from the account and check a sample of the searches each one now blocks. Record why each was added.

Two details catch out careful people. Negative keywords do not match close variants, plurals or synonyms the way positive keywords do, so a negative written for one spelling can leave another open. And competitor names are rarely the saving they appear to be: for 72% of advertisers that paid for competitor-name clicks, those searches produced at least one real enquiry. People search a known name, find it busy or out of area, and call the next credible option. Negate a rival's name only after real spend with no enquiries over a long window, using the full business name, and give competitor traffic you keep its own low-bid campaign.

A useful health check is proportion. The typical trade advertiser carries about one negative keyword for every 5 keywords it bids on. Most control comes from structure — tight ad groups, sensible match types, correct location settings — and negatives are the finishing layer. A negative list growing much faster than the keyword list is a sign the structure is too loose, and every negative added is one more thing that can block a customer by accident.

Quarterly negative-list audit

- [ ] Export every negative keyword and shared negative list, with the campaigns each one applies to.
- [ ] Pull every search term that produced an enquiry in the last twelve months.
- [ ] Check which of those converting searches are now blocked, and by which negative.
- [ ] For each block, decide whether it is a deliberate policy (a job you no longer want) or an accident to undo.
- [ ] Check shared lists and any negatives used to route suburb searches between campaigns — a list applied to the wrong campaign can silently remove a whole service.
- [ ] Write down why each negative you keep exists.

08

Month three: fix rank before buying budget

Most trade campaigns are not short of searches; they are short of ad rank on the searches that already exist.

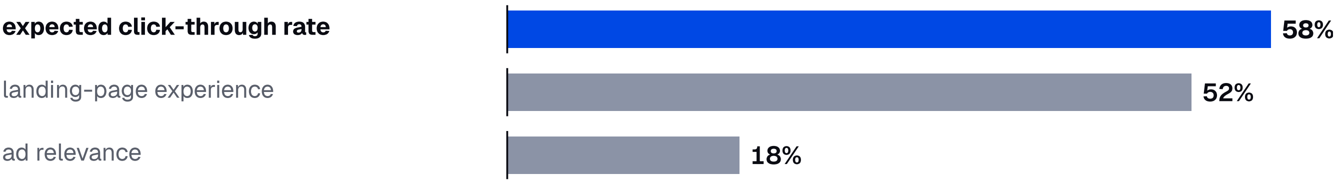
By the third month an account has enough history for the conversation to turn to growth, and the usual first request is more budget. The data suggests checking something else first. The typical trade Search campaign in the sample appears in only 21% of the searches it is eligible for, and for 92% of advertisers, more impressions are lost to ad rank than to budget.

Raising the budget does nothing for impressions lost to rank. Under automated bidding, "lost to rank" also includes auctions the algorithm chose not to chase because they looked too expensive for the conversion value, so the levers are relevance and a realistic cost-per-enquiry target, not a bigger daily budget. Relevance is made of three things Google scores on each keyword: expected click-through rate, ad relevance and landing-page experience.

Exhibit 10

What drags Quality Score down

Share of scored keyword spend rated below average on each Quality Score component, median trade advertiser



How to read this: Expected click-through rate is the most common drag: the ad has to beat directories and big brands on the first line.

Source: SoudCoh analysis of reported Google Ads data.

Expected click-through rate is judged against every other advertiser on the same search, so in trades the ad has to beat the directories and the large brands on the first line — price, speed and proof beat slogans. Landing-page experience comes next: a slow page, a page that does not mention the service searched, or no phone number in the first screen. Ad relevance is rarely the problem when each ad group has its own ads. For the median trade advertiser, 54% of scored keyword spend goes to keywords with a Quality Score of 4 or less. Some high-intent, high-competition searches never score well and are still worth buying, but each should be a deliberate choice, reviewed monthly.

Attention should follow the money: the few keywords that carry most of the spend deserve close attention, while the long tail is managed in bulk and pruned quarterly. Device and day adjustments come last and should be small. An enquiry from a mobile click costs 9% more than one from a desktop click in the same account, a small premium on three-quarters of the volume, so a blanket mobile bid-down saves a little per enquiry and gives away a lot of enquiries. Fix the mobile page first.

> **Insight**
>
> ### The budget question, answered in order
>
> Before adding budget, answer three questions in this order. Is tracking counting only real enquiries? Is impression share lost mainly to rank or to budget? And if it is budget, will the extra money go to the services and areas that produce jobs, not only to the cheapest leads? Only the last is solved by money; the first two are solved by work on tracking, ads and pages.

09

Tracking keywords back to revenue

An account is under control only when each keyword can be traced to enquiries and, eventually, to jobs won.

Everything in this paper so far — the launch, the discovery, the control — rests on one assumption: that the Conversions column counts real enquiries. Often it does not. In 32% of the sample, taps on a phone number, email or WhatsApp link were counted as conversions, and where they were, the Conversions column overstated real enquiries by close to double (+92%). A search-term review run on those numbers promotes the searches that produce taps, not the ones that produce jobs.

An enquiry is not yet revenue, either. 77% of trade advertisers leave Google's default value of one dollar on every enquiry, so the "conversion value" and return-on-ad-spend columns simply count enquiries in dollars; only 9% tell Google Ads what a job was actually worth. Until jobs are traced back to keywords, budget is steered by enquiry volume alone.

Figure 3

From keyword to revenue

Each step has to carry the one before it. When the click and search term travel with the lead, a won job can be traced back to the keyword that found it.

Connecting keywords to jobs, step by step

1

Count only real enquiries

Make connected calls and submitted forms the only primary conversions. Keep taps, directions and page views as secondary signals that do not steer bidding.

2

Capture the source when the lead arrives

Store the click id, landing page and campaign on every form and tracked call, so each lead carries the ad group — and, once matched, the search term — that produced it.

3

Record the outcome

Mark each lead as quoted, won or lost in whatever runs the business — a job-management tool, a CRM or a monthly spreadsheet — with the job value when it is won.

4

Send value back, secondary first

Upload won jobs to Google Ads as an offline conversion against the original click or call, as a secondary action at first, so reporting improves before bidding changes.

5

Move budget on revenue per dollar

Once several months of jobs are recorded, compare services and ad groups on revenue per ad dollar over rolling quarters, never on a single month.

That is the subject of the companion paper, From keyword to revenue: measuring what trade marketing is really worth, which sets out the measurement stack and a tracking audit any business can run itself. For the wider picture — demand, structure and revenue across home services — see Marketing for home services in Australia, and for published cost-per-enquiry figures by trade, the Google Ads benchmarks for Australian trades. How we build and run Search campaigns for trades is described on our Search campaigns page.

The first 90 days set the pattern for everything after. An account launched with control, given room to discover and reviewed on a fixed routine gets easier to run every month: the negative list matures, the winners become keywords, and the numbers start to mean what they say. If you would like a second opinion on a new or inherited account, talk to us.

Do this

Three things to do this week

Submit a test form and tap your number with Google Tag Assistant open, and confirm the form fires its enquiry tag once and the tap does not; then ring your tracked number and check it reaches the call log. The Conversions column only shows visits that came from an ad click. Check every Search campaign's network and location settings. Then open the search-terms report for the last month, find the searches that produced enquiries, and promote the repeat winners to exact keywords with an ad that uses their words.

Methodology

SoudCoh research sample: reported Google Ads campaign data from Australian trade and home-service businesses — search terms, keywords, match types, calls, forms and conversion settings. An enquiry is a phone call recorded as a call, or a submitted form; taps on a phone number or email link never count. Launch figures run in 30-day blocks from launch day, indexed to the first block. Figures are medians across the sample unless stated.

Questions readers ask

Why does a new Google Ads campaign cost more in its second month?

In SoudCoh's research sample, cost per enquiry in days 31 to 60 was 31% higher than in days 1 to 30 for the median new advertiser, and 68% of new advertisers paid more per enquiry in month two. A new account serves the most urgent, ready-to-book searches first, then starts buying harder searches. Set targets from months two and three, and tighten search terms, ads and landing pages rather than stopping.

How soon should a new trade campaign produce enquiries?

Within days. In SoudCoh's research sample, 84% of new advertisers recorded an enquiry from their first three days of ads. If a new account has spent for several days with nothing recorded, check the call-tracking number, the form's conversion tag and whether the phone is being answered before changing keywords or bids.

Should a trade business use exact match only?

No. Exact match now includes close variants — 47% of the enquiries exact-match keywords produced came from searches worded differently from the keyword — and 59% of enquiries for the median advertiser came from searches that were not on the keyword list at all. Launch with exact-and-phrase pairs, read the search terms, and promote the winners to exact.

How often should I review the search-terms report?

Twice a week in the first month, several times a week around weeks five to eight, and weekly after that, with a monthly promotion pass and a quarterly audit of the negative list against searches that have converted. The report names only about 52% of spend, so judge the campaign on enquiries and cost per enquiry as well.

Can negative keywords block real customers?

Yes. In 52% of SoudCoh's research sample, the advertiser's own negatives block at least one search that produced an enquiry during the year, and 60% of proposed negatives were rejected after a challenge and a simulation against converting searches. Check each proposed negative against a year of converting searches before adding it.

How much should a trade business spend on Google Ads in the first 90 days?

Enough to learn which services and areas produce enquiries, and not more on the strength of month one. Before adding budget, check whether impression share is lost to ad rank or to budget; for 92% of advertisers in the sample, rank loses more, and money does not fix rank. We recommend a minimum of A$5,000 a month in ad spend for most businesses; the largest companies we work with invest up to A$30,000 a day.

Do I need a separate campaign for every suburb?

Not necessarily. Per-suburb campaigns let the ad and page name the suburb, but their clicks cost 49% more than service-campaign clicks for the same advertiser, and they produced fewer enquiries per dollar than the service campaign for 57% of advertisers running both. Run them beside the service campaign on their own budget and compare cost per enquiry after two months.

Further reading

Article

Why Google Ads month two costs more than month one →

Article

Most trade enquiries come from searches you never chose →

Article

Exact match is not exact: what close variants mean for trades →

Article

Your search terms report hides about half your spend →

Article

Negative keywords that block your customers →

Article

Near me searches convert better for trades →

Article

Emergency searches are a small share of trade demand →

Article

How long does Google Ads take to get leads? →

Article

How Long Should I Give a Campaign Before Judging It? →

White paper

From keyword to revenue: measuring what trade marketing is really worth →

White paper

Marketing for home services in Australia →

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Marketing for plumbing businesses →

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Marketing for electricians →

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Marketing for cleaning businesses →

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Talk to SoudCoh →

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3. About negative keywords — Google Ads Help
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7. About Quality Score for Search campaigns — Google Ads Help
8. About impression share — Google Ads Help

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