

Google AdWords and the Case of the PPC Fraud Ad Lockout By Jim Hedger, StepForth News Editor, [StepForth Placement Inc.](#)

Fraud (frôd) *n.*

1. A deception deliberately practiced in order to secure unfair or unlawful gain.
2. A piece of trickery; a trick
3. a. One that defrauds; cheats
b. One who assumes a false pose; an imposter

[Middle English fraude, from Old French, from Latin fraus, fraud-.]

Fraud is an issue both in the real world and in the virtual world. Practically every day the media carries a story about fraud, be it accounting fraud, stock fraud, white collar crime, or in the recent case of Canada, governmental corruption and fraud. No commercial sector is immune and the perceived anonymity of the Internet seems to promote a greater degree of fraudulent activity. Regardless of the medium, fraud happens and when it does it affects more people than might immediately meet the eye of the fraudster. Fraud also affects search engines, advertisers and search marketers through criminal exploitation of the various pay per click advertising programs. Fraud targeting the paid-search sector is generally referred to as [click fraud](#) or ppc fraud.

Earlier today, the good folks over at [Spider-Food.Net](#) noticed all AdWords advertising for Pay-per-click detection and analytics firms had been pulled from Google search engine results pages. Keyword phrases such as "ppc fraud", "click fraud", or "pay per click fraud", bring up tens of thousands of organic listings and generally produce a full slate of ten paid AdWords advertisements. For an eight hour period today however, those phrases produced only organic listings leading many to assume Google had banned ads from click fraud detection services. A post to the Spider-Food blog spread the word across the search engine related blogosphere and lots of search marketers started questioning why Google would do this.

All paid-search tools are concerned about click-fraud but Google is especially sensitive to it. Over the past few years, thousands of articles have been written on the subject of click fraud, the most recent being [Web Start-Ups Vie to Detect 'Click Fraud'](#), featured in today's Wall St. Journal (subscription req). The WSJ article touts the growing sector of PPC analysts and auditors that has emerged to assist advertisers affected by click fraud, generally estimated to account for 5 – 10% of all PPC clicks.

While the phenomenon of click fraud is not solely Google's problem and certainly not their fault, Google is often singled out by the media as the representative of all things search. Google's webmaster partnership program AdSense gives Google the world's densest distribution network by allowing private webmasters to spilt revenues from AdWords displayed on their sites. This allowance has provided ample temptation to the inevitable fraud artists whose exploits range from the simple to the elaborate. Even before a [class-action lawsuit](#) was filed against it and eight other PPC search engines, Google had recognized the problem. Back in December, Google CFO George Reyes told a room full of investors, "I think something has to be done about this really, really quickly, because I think, potentially, it threatens our business model."

When search marketers, including those involved in click fraud detection awoke to find that paid advertising related to click fraud was not appearing at Google many assumed Google pulled the ads because they simply didn't want to publicize an issue that could severely damage the credibility of their bottom line.

Danielle Leitch from Florida based SEM firm MoreVisibility.com noticed that the word FRAUD was the actual stop word after searches using phrases such as "insurance fraud" and "bank fraud". The single word "fraud" also produced pages showing no paid advertising. This discovery set some to thinking that perhaps Google was quietly trying to eliminate ads from PPC analysis firms whose services demonstrate potential gaps in the PPC business model. Others felt that, being intensely brand protective, Google was simply exercising editorial rights over what appears on their search engine.

As it turns out, there was a technical problem over at Google that had nothing to do with a wish to avoid the topic of click fraud. Around 1:30 PM (Pacific Time) the missing ads started showing up again. Over at the [SEW forums](#), a post from AdWordsRep, the topical cousin of GoogleGuy, read:

"Heheh. I'm sorry to disappoint those who were dusting off their tinfoil hats, but here's the official word: A glitch briefly prevented ads from being shown for a small set of keywords, including words such as **funeral, fraud and others**. The glitch was technical and was not related to a specific issue or policy. To that I'd add that I hope you'll accept my apology for any inconvenience - or suddenly high heart rates - this may have caused."

Skip Pratt from PPCTrax, a maker of PPC campaign tracking software, noted that he was shocked to see web traffic drop sharply this morning. Pratt was interviewed by the WSJ for the story that ran today. He likens his industry to certified general accounting firms or financial auditors in that their role is to provide a neutral third party analysis service that provides advertisers with the information and statistics needed to manage campaigns with multi-thousand dollar monthly budgets. Pratt has been an AdWords advertiser since late February and credits AdWords with a substantial increase in web traffic.

It is fairly safe to assume Google has no problem with providers of funeral services. It should also be safe to assume that Google has an interest in working with and accepting data from credible third party PPC analytic firms if cooperation can help stem the specter of click fraud. Google was not targeting click fraud detection services today.