

Improving PPC Search Engine Campaign Results Using Generic Domain Names

Executive Summary

A challenge for online marketers is getting more clicks out of their pay-per-click search engine campaigns.

One approach is to use a generic domain name in PPC ads, since product- or service-related keywords in the displayed domain name and landing page should attract more clicks from people searching for that product or service.

We tested this theory using an AdWords PPC campaign for electric bicycles.

Ads featuring a generic domain name with an exact match to the product (ElectricBicycles.co.uk) performed significantly better than identical ads featuring an alternative generic (YourBikes.co.uk) or non-generic (InAHurry.co.uk) domain.

The CTR of ads using the ElectricBicycles.co.uk domain name was 15% and 42% higher than the two alternatives.

The ElectricBicycles.co.uk ads produced **45% more clicks than the YourBikes.co.uk ads** and **105% more clicks than the InAHurry.co.uk ads.**

We conclude that the strong performance of a generic domain name is driven by factors such as:

- the close match between the domain name and the product searched for (irrespective of the search keywords used)
- automatic bolding of search terms in the domain
- the potential positive impact of the domain name on ad quality score

Marketers should consider using generic domain names for dedicated PPC search engine campaigns for specific products, services or advertising initiatives.



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Introduction

A generic domain name describes a product or service using the words people automatically associate with the topic. Examples would be:

- TaxPreparation.co.uk
- CarNavigation.co.uk
- MerchantAccounts.co.uk

One of the benefits claimed for such generic domain names is that they attract more search engine clicks (both organic and paid) for product and service searches. Reasons given are:

- The close association between search terms and domain name encourages searchers to click
- The presence of search terms in the domain name leads to higher organic rankings or a better ad quality score in pay-per-click ad ranking algorithms
- Search engines commonly automatically bold any word in the domain name that matches the search term, drawing attention to the listing¹

This claim makes clear intuitive sense, but do the numbers support the theory?

We ran some tests in AdWords designed to gauge the true impact of a generic domain name on PPC search engine results, including impressions, clicks, CTR and CPC.

The Scenario

First, we developed and published an 11-page, content-rich, informational minisite as our landing page. The site was dedicated to electric bicycles, a popular product group among environmentally-aware travellers:



We then chose three domain names to compare:

- **ElectricBicycles.co.uk** (an "ideal" matching generic domain)
- **YourBikes.co.uk** (an alternative generic name with some keyword benefits)
- **InAHurry.co.uk** (a "traditional" coined, keyword-poor domain)

All three domains resolved to the same minisite landing page, customised only by the automated inclusion of the domain name in 2 locations on the page.

Then we used keyword research tools to identify the most important keywords and key phrases relating to this topic, and split them into two groups.

¹ See, for example, <http://adwords.google.com/support/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=13851>

Keyword Group A included relevant search terms featuring the words "bicycle" or "bicycles".
Keyword Group B included relevant search terms featuring the alternative words "bike" or "bikes".

Campaign Tests

We set up an AdWords campaign with two Ad Groups, one for each keyword group.

We split the campaign into these two groups so we could test three things:

1. The overall AdWords performance of each of the three domain names
2. The comparative AdWords performance of an "ideal" generic name when it closely matches a set of relevant search terms (the "electric bicycles" group)
3. The comparative AdWords performance of an "ideal" generic domain name for a set of search terms where other generic domains might be equally appropriate (the "electric bikes" group)

Ads were run on Google Search and search partners only, with the device platform limited to desktop and laptop computers. The targeted language was English and location restricted to the United Kingdom.

Ad serving was set to rotate ads more evenly, with no ad scheduling.

The following three ad variations were rotated for the Ad Group featuring "electric bicycle" keywords:

[Want an Electric Bicycle?](#)

Learn the pros and cons before
you buy an electric bicycle...
www.ElectricBicycles.co.uk/

[Want an Electric Bicycle?](#)

Learn the pros and cons before
you buy an electric bicycle...
www.YourBikes.co.uk/

[Want an Electric Bicycle?](#)

Learn the pros and cons before
you buy an electric bicycle...
www.InAHurry.co.uk/

Each ad featured the same copy and headline, but a different display URL. The destination link for the ad headline matched the display URL.

A similar approach was applied to the second Ad Group, featuring "electric bikes" keywords:

[Want an Electric Bike?](#)

Learn the pros and cons before
you buy an electric bike...
www.ElectricBicycles.co.uk/

[Want an Electric Bike?](#)

Learn the pros and cons before
you buy an electric bike...
www.YourBikes.co.uk/

[Want an Electric Bike?](#)

Learn the pros and cons before
you buy an electric bike...
www.InAHurry.co.uk/

Note that the ad headline for each Ad Group reflected the targeted keywords, as would be usual in an optimized PPCSE campaign.

Important: the only difference between the ads within each Ad Group was the domain name used. Headlines, copy and landing page content were identical.

The campaign ran from February 10 to February 22, 2009.

Interestingly, this type of test is now no longer possible. Google recently modified its AdWords policy to state that all ads in any one Ad Group must point to the same domain².

² See <http://adwords.blogspot.com/2009/02/change-to-our-display-url-policy.html>

Results

Comparative results for the three different domain names across both Ad Groups were:

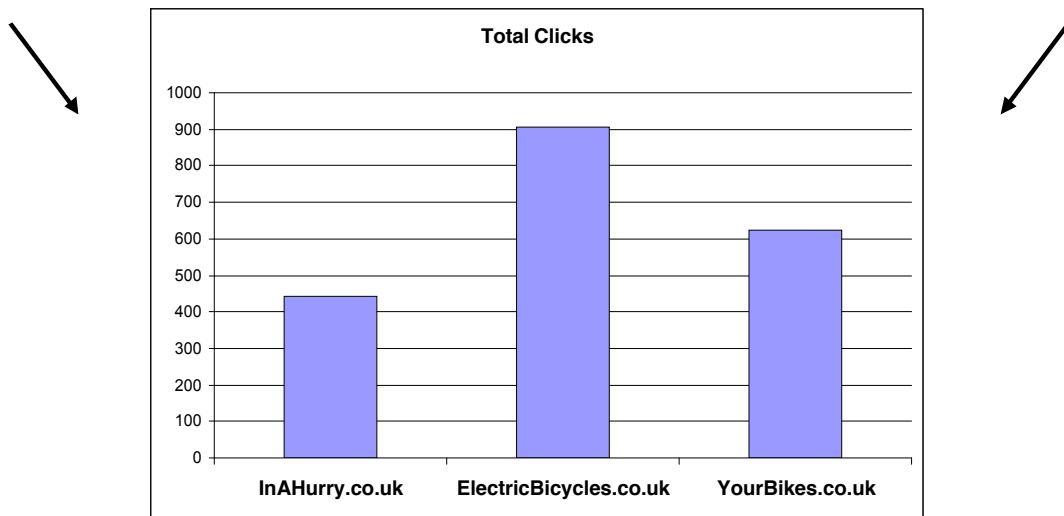
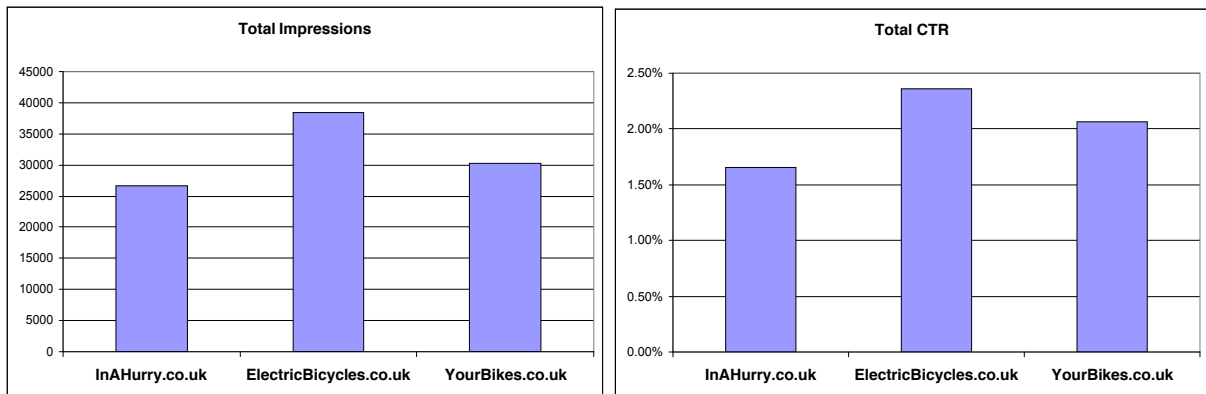
Featured domain	Impressions	Clicks	CTR	CPC (\$)
ElectricBicycles.co.uk	38,404	907	2.36%	0.2504
YourBikes.co.uk	30,222	624	2.06%	0.2531
InAHurry.co.uk	26,718	443	1.66%	0.2589

Even without optimized ad rotation selected in campaign setup, Google clearly favoured the ElectricBicycles.co.uk domain, whose ads received **27% and 44% more impressions** than the same ads featuring the two domain alternatives.

The CTR of ads with the ElectricBicycles.co.uk domain was **15% and 42% higher** than these alternatives.

Together, these impression and CTR benefits meant that **the ElectricBicycles.co.uk ads produced 45% more clicks than the YourBikes.co.uk ads and 105% more clicks than the InAHurry.co.uk ads.**

Although CPC was also lowest for the ElectricBicycles.co.uk domain, the difference was not statistically meaningful.



Group A: "Electric bicycles" Keywords³

Featured domain	Impressions	Clicks	CTR	CPC (\$)
ElectricBicycles.co.uk	13,111	393	3.00%	0.2513
YourBikes.co.uk	11,528	252	2.19%	0.2510
InAHurry.co.uk	7,333	141	1.92%	0.2560

The performance advantages of the ElectricBicycles.co.uk domain were particularly strong in the keyword group most closely related to the domain's keywords.

CTR for the ad featuring the ElectricBicycles.co.uk domain was **37% and 56% higher** than the alternatives. The net result was **56% and 178% more clicks** than for ElectricBikes.co.uk and InAHurry.co.uk.

Group B: "Electric bikes" Keywords⁴

Featured domain	Impressions	Clicks	CTR	CPC (\$)
ElectricBicycles.co.uk	25293	514	2.03%	0.2497
YourBikes.co.uk	18694	372	1.99%	0.2546
InAHurry.co.uk	19385	302	1.56%	0.2603

The keywords in this group favoured both the ElectricBicycles.co.uk and YourBikes.co.uk generic domain names. This was reflected in similar CTRs for the ads featuring those two names.

However, Google displayed the ElectricBicycles.co.uk ad more often, resulting in **38% and 70% more clicks** than the two domain alternatives.

Conclusions and Discussion

These results lead us to draw several conclusions about the value of a generic domain name for PPCSE campaigns.

A generic domain name outperforms a non-generic name by delivering a higher CTR and an even higher number of total clicks.

The exception is likely to be where the non-generic name is an established brand or website with a strong awareness and trust factor for the product or service search terms in question.

Even in such cases, a generic domain name has potential value in targeting very specific product or service search terms with an appropriate keyword-rich domain. Established brands should consider a generic name for minisites associated with a particular product, service or ad campaign.

The choice of generic domain name itself is also important. An "ideal" generic name was able to produce 45% more clicks across all keywords than a "reasonable" generic alternative.

Generic domain names perform particularly strongly where search and domain keywords match closely. This suggests businesses might do well to isolate keyword groups within their PPCSE

³ electric bicycle, electric bicycles, folding electric bicycle, electric bicycle reviews, best electric bicycle + 11 other key phrases. Top 5 key phrases accounted for 31,692 out of 31,972 impressions (99.1%), and 768 out of 786 clicks (97.7%).

⁴ electric bike, electric bikes, electrical bike, electric bikes bikes, folding electric bike + 14 other key phrases. Top 5 key phrases accounted for 60,524 out of 63,372 impressions (95.5%), and 1,096 out of 1,188 clicks (92.3%).

campaigns, **and use an appropriate generic name for each group** (thus maximising the total benefits).

AdWords does not provide the kind of data that would allow us to draw clear conclusions on exactly why an "ideal" generic domain name performed so well relative to the alternatives. We believe it is due to a combination of factors, notably:

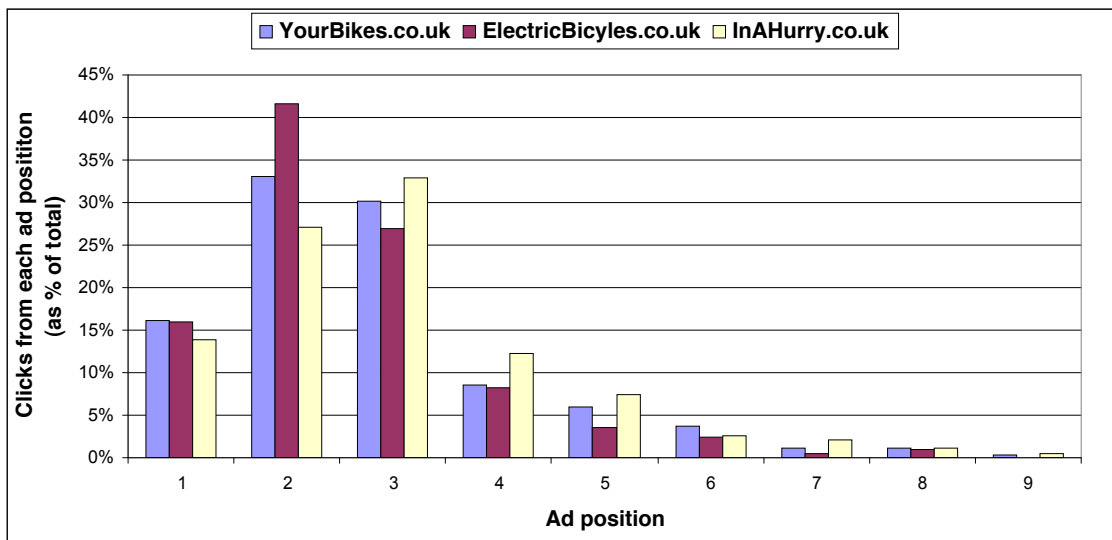
1. Domain name closely matching the product or service being searched for (irrespective of the actual keywords used in the search).
2. Bolding of search terms in the domain occurring more often.
3. Impact of domain name on ad quality score.

As such, the benefits are likely a mix of an inherent "greater clickability" (factors 1 and 2) and higher ad positions (through factor 3, and through factors 1 and 2 driving better CTRs).

Whatever the explanation, we would expect to see the ads featuring the winning generic domain name appear higher up the PPC ad listings on search result pages.

Landing page analytics data reveals the ad position for each incoming click from an AdWords ad. While not the same as data on ad position for each ad impression, it likely reflects the same pattern.

The graph below reveals that the ads featuring the winning ElectricBicycles.co.uk generic domain name did indeed seem to get higher average positions than the other ads:



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