

Paid search audits are one of those tasks that sound formal until you do one on a live account and realize how many small decisions are quietly shaping your results. A few keywords drift, a match type gets loosened, negatives lag behind search terms, and suddenly your account is spending like it's determined to teach you a lesson. The difference between a "quick look" and a real audit is judgment. You need to spot what is causing the spend, what is breaking the flow of intent to landing page, and what is mismeasuring performance.

I've run audits where the headline problem looked obvious, like a CPC spike, only to discover the real issue [social paid advertising](#) was conversion tracking that stopped reporting for a week. I've also seen accounts where the ads were fine, but attribution delayed long enough that the team started cutting campaigns that were actually helping downstream revenue. A pro audit doesn't just rank things from worst to best, it explains causality, then tests fixes in a controlled way.

Below is the approach I use when I want to audit like a paid media agency or a pay per click agency that has to prove value, not just look busy.

Start by defining what "good" means for this account

Before you touch the interface, you need a clear picture of the business goals and how paid search should support them. Paid search can drive different kinds of value, and the audit should reflect that.

If your account sells products with short purchase cycles, your primary metrics may be conversion rate, cost per acquisition, and revenue per click. If you're generating leads for a sales team, you often need a separate view of lead quality and speed-to-lead. If your business has a multi-step funnel, first click performance may not map cleanly to final conversion performance.

I usually start by pulling together these decisions in a short working document:

- What conversions are counted, and how confident are you that tracking is correct?
- Which campaigns are expected to produce immediate revenue, and which are expected to assist?
- What budgets and constraints exist today, and what was true historically?

This is where many audits fail quietly. People jump into keywords and ad groups before they confirm whether the account is measuring the right outcomes. If conversion tracking is broken, the audit becomes a debate about the wrong numbers.

Validate tracking and measurement before you judge performance

When I'm auditing a paid search account, the first "section" is measurement, even if it means delaying the fun part. A PPC management company can spend months optimizing and never recover if conversions are misattributed, duplicated, or not sent.

Here are the checks I consider non-negotiable:

Confirm the conversion actions used in optimization Sometimes the account is optimized toward a conversion action that the business no longer cares about, or it's mixing page views with form submissions. Look for any major changes in conversion settings or tag implementations.

Look for sudden drop-offs or reporting gaps A common pattern is that tracking fails, then gets fixed, then fails again after a site change. If you see a "cliff" in conversions, verify it against deployment logs if you have access.

Audit attribution settings and conversion windows Attribution windows matter when long cycles exist. If the account changed from, say, last click to data-driven attribution, the trend lines may shift even if user behavior did not.

Check for duplicate conversions If both a site tag and a server-side event are firing for the same action, you can inflate conversions and misstate CPA. That leads to overspending and overly aggressive bidding decisions.

Make sure lead quality signals exist If you optimize for form fills but sales rejects most leads, you can still improve performance by filtering negatives and adjusting ad copy, but you should be careful about calling it “success” based solely on volume.

Even a basic audit should include a tracking reality check. If you can’t trust the conversion data, you’re auditing dashboards, not marketing.

Segment performance with intent, not just campaign names

Once measurement checks pass, you can analyze performance. The most useful paid search audits don’t treat all campaigns as equal. They segment by intent level and by how the user arrives.

A fast but professional segmentation might look like:

Brand vs non-brand Brand searches typically convert at higher rates and often deserve tighter control, but they can also reveal issues like trademark overlap or wasted spend on generic terms.

Product or service category vs generic solutions People searching for a specific product category usually have clearer intent than people searching for “best way to” language.

Top-of-funnel research terms vs conversion-ready terms If your account has content-style landing pages, you should expect different conversion rates. Treating them the same leads to bad budget decisions.

Device and geography Mobile performance can diverge due to landing page speed or form friction. Geo differences can expose shipping coverage gaps, local messaging issues, or compliance requirements.

This is also where match type and query structure matter. Two campaigns with the same CPA can behave differently during budget changes if one is driven by narrow, high-intent keywords and the other is driven by broader queries that only look profitable under current traffic patterns.

In my experience, campaign naming conventions are often inconsistent. A “Search - Brand - US” campaign can still include non-brand terms if someone added broad match keywords without strict negatives. That’s why I prefer segmenting by query intent and landing page mapping, not just by the campaign name.

Analyze search terms like you’re building a map of intent

Search term reports are where paid search audits get real. You don’t only want to see which terms triggered clicks, you want to see whether the triggered terms align with the promise in the ad and the relevance of the landing page.

I approach search terms in layers:

Start with what you should not be paying for Identify terms that generate clicks but no conversions, or conversions that are clearly low quality. Then trace those terms back to the match types and ad groups that allowed them.

Then check the “almost right” queries These are the searches that convert rarely, but sometimes they do. They often point to gaps in keyword coverage, missing negatives, or ad copy that doesn’t match the user’s exact problem statement.

Look for high-performing long-tail patterns A paid advertising agency can use these to expand into more precise keyword sets. The goal is to scale what works while controlling the spillover.

This is also the best place to review negatives. Many accounts build negatives only based on obvious junk. Pro audits catch subtle irrelevance too, like city terms that fall outside service areas, or competitor names when those campaigns are not aligned to the company’s strategy.

Check keyword and match type hygiene (and fix the root cause)

After search term analysis, you should review keyword hygiene. Match type is one of the biggest “hidden knobs” in PPC accounts because it changes who you show to and how aggressively the platform expands reach.

The common issues I see in audits:

Broad match creep Over time, broad match keywords can pull in queries that were never intended for that ad group. If the ad and landing page aren’t built for those queries, you get click volume with weak conversion.

Over-reliance on a small set of keywords When most spend is concentrated in a handful of terms, performance becomes fragile. Small shifts in auction dynamics can cause CPA swings.

Duplicate keywords across match types and ad groups This can lead to confusing ad serving behavior, where the account can’t reliably choose the intended ad and landing page.

Negatives that lag behind reality Negatives are not a one-time setup. Search behavior evolves, and seasonal terms appear. If negatives are outdated, broad match keeps reintroducing irrelevant traffic.

A pro audit doesn’t just remove or tighten keywords randomly. It ties each change to a reason. For example, if you see “pricing” searches converting poorly while “cost calculator” searches convert well, you might adjust ad copy and landing page alignment rather than just tightening match types.

Evaluate ad copy and landing page alignment as a single system

Paid search performance often breaks in the transition from click to landing page. The ad’s job is to earn the click, but the landing page’s job is to keep the user’s intent intact.

In audits, I compare:

The ad message to the query intent If someone **paid search agency** searched for “emergency plumber,” showing generic plumbing ads may still get clicks, but conversions will suffer due to mismatched urgency.

The landing page to the ad’s promise A “free consultation” ad that sends users to a generic homepage can increase bounce or abandon. The user expects an easy next step, not a scavenger hunt.

Form friction and user path Long forms, confusing questions, or slow page loads can quietly raise CPA even when clicks look reasonable.

Offer clarity If the offer on the page is buried, people drop. If it’s overstated, sales rejects leads.

When you do this correctly, you can uncover patterns that no reporting view will show. For instance, I’ve audited accounts where multiple ad groups led to different landing pages, but a single shared template created friction.

The data looked inconsistent across campaigns until we realized the page was not capturing the full intent from the ads. After we simplified the flow and made the landing page message match the ad, conversion rates improved without changing bidding strategies.

Audit bidding strategy and budget pacing like an auction analyst

Bidding is where the account starts behaving like a living system. Even if your keywords are solid, bidding can steer the account into the wrong traffic mix.

Here's what I review:

The bidding strategy type If the platform uses automated bidding, it depends heavily on conversion signals. If those signals fluctuate due to tracking issues or landing page changes, performance can wobble.

Budget pacing and campaign caps A campaign that never spends its budget may look "efficient" but not scale. A campaign that overspends early can inflate CPAs if it pulls in lower-intent queries to spend.

Seasonality and learning periods If you changed major settings, reduced budgets drastically, or launched new landing pages, you need to account for learning. Auditing too soon leads to false conclusions.

Search impression share and lost search due to budget If your budget is limiting, the account may underperform due to reach constraints, not targeting. In that case, the fix is not always "tighten keywords," it might be "allocate budget differently" or improve bid competitiveness where it matters.

One thing I watch closely: bidding decisions should be driven by stable measurement. If conversion tracking is noisy, automated bidding can spend confidently toward misinformation.

Find structural issues that create inefficiency

Sometimes the problem is not individual keywords or ads. It's the way the account is organized. Paid search accounts can become messy when campaigns are created quickly, then modified over time by different people with different assumptions.

Common structural issues include:

Overlapping targeting that competes with itself If multiple campaigns target similar keywords but send traffic to different landing pages, the platform can split traffic in ways that reduce clarity. That can harm both learning and performance.

Inconsistent geo targeting Ads and landing pages may assume a market, but campaigns may show in broader regions due to targeting settings or location expansion. That shows up as low conversion rates in certain geos.

Noisy ad group structure When ad groups mix unrelated offerings, you lose the ability to tailor ad copy and landing page flow. The account becomes harder to optimize because every query produces a blended outcome.

Weak labeling and reporting discipline Without clear labeling, you lose the ability to run honest diagnostics. It's hard to explain performance changes to a stakeholder when you can't tell what actually changed.

If you're working with a pay per click agency or a PPC management agency, insist on an audit that addresses structure, not just tactics. The best audits explain why the account behaves the way it does, and structure is often the reason.

Create a prioritized fix plan (and resist the urge to change everything)

After you've confirmed tracking, segmented intent, audited search terms, assessed keyword hygiene, and reviewed ad and landing page alignment, you're ready for recommendations. But priority matters. A pro audit doesn't propose 60 changes. It proposes a sequence that reduces risk and increases learning.

I like to group fixes into three categories:

High-confidence measurement fixes These are tracking, attribution, conversion action settings, and any issues that would invalidate performance conclusions.

Targeting and relevance fixes Negatives, match type adjustments, query-level tightening, keyword-to-ad-group cleanup, and better mapping between search intent and landing pages.

Conversion rate and message fixes Ad copy refinement, landing page flow improvements, form simplification, and better alignment between the promise and the user's next action.

To keep it practical, I also consider what can be tested without disrupting the learning system. Sometimes you need to wait for data to stabilize. Other times, a small change like adding a tight negative list can immediately reduce waste without harming performance.

A quick way to prioritize audit findings

1. Fix any measurement problems that could change what success looks like
2. Remove waste first, using search term evidence and clear mapping to match types
3. Improve relevance by aligning intent to ads and landing pages
4. Adjust bidding only after signals are stable and landing experience is working
5. Expand budgets or scale winning segments after you prove consistent results across time

That sequence isn't a rule you must never break, but it reflects how most PPC accounts actually recover.

Audit at the right time frame, not just the latest week

Paid search metrics can look stable for a while and then change abruptly. That's why auditors should look across multiple time windows.

I typically compare:

Last 30 days versus the prior 30 days This reveals trend direction without ignoring recent shifts.

Week-over-week patterns around changes If you launched a landing page update, added new keywords, or changed bids, look for the immediate effects and the lagged effects.

Seasonal context If your category has predictable demand spikes, use ranges rather than strict comparisons. Otherwise, you might "correct" the account at the peak and hurt it after.

In one audit, an e-commerce client experienced higher conversion rates during a promotion. The internal team assumed their optimizations caused the improvement and rolled them out more broadly. When the promotion ended, CPA rose. The audit showed the real driver was traffic mix and conversion behavior during the promotion, not the keyword changes. We kept the improvements that held after the promo while rolling back tactics that only performed under promotion conditions.

This is the kind of judgment that separates a quick audit from something you'd hand to leadership.

Look for competitor signals and brand strategy issues without jumping to conclusions

Brand search performance can be tricky to interpret. If you run brand campaigns aggressively, CPCs may be higher but conversions might also be higher. If you underinvest in brand, you may lose impression share when competitors bid on your name or when users search for your product and compare options.

In audits, I look for:

Brand campaign coverage Do you own enough of your brand searches to protect message and conversion pathways?

Trademark or competitor keyword strategy If you bid on competitor terms, your landing pages and offers need to be clearly differentiated. Otherwise, you'll get clicks from curious browsers who do not convert.

Cannibalization between brand and generic campaigns If generic campaigns start capturing brand-like intent due to broad match, your account may overspend while brand campaigns underperform.

This isn't about moral certainty. It's about mapping strategy to outcomes. A paid search strategy that uses brand bidding to control message can be smart, while another account might benefit more from investing brand dollars into high-intent non-brand segments. The audit should reveal which approach is currently producing the desired economics.

Build an operational cadence, not a one-time project

The most useful audits don't end when the report is sent. They produce an ongoing cadence, because paid search is dynamic.

If you're working with a paid media agency, ask how they handle continuous audit work. A good PPC management company treats auditing as a routine, not a quarterly scramble. Even solo teams benefit from a consistent process for reviewing:

Search term waste and new negatives At least weekly or biweekly during fast change periods.

Performance drift in top campaigns If CPA increases while impressions and clicks remain stable, you may have a landing page or offer issue.

Conversion tracking integrity Tag changes, site redesigns, and new analytics deployments can quietly break measurement.

Auction volatility CPCs and impression share can change due to competition, seasonality, and bidding signals.

A one-time audit can be a snapshot. A cadence creates the ability to catch problems early, when they're cheaper to fix.

A minimal audit cadence that works in practice

- weekly: search term review for new waste and quick negative additions
- biweekly: ad and landing page alignment checks for top spend segments
- monthly: keyword hygiene, match type review, and structure cleanup
- quarterly: deeper attribution review, conversion action sanity check, and strategy recalibration

This is the “operating rhythm” I’ve seen work across accounts, from smaller budgets to more mature ppc management agency engagements.

How to work with a pay per click agency (or become one that audits properly)

If you’re evaluating a pay per click agency, paid search agency, paid advertising agency, or a dedicated PPC management agency, the audit process is a proxy for how they think. You can tell the difference between someone who performs an audit and someone who uses it to steer decisions.

Ask for specifics, not just generic recommendations. A strong audit should include:

Clear evidence Search term screenshots, spend and conversion breakdowns by intent, and mapping of issues to the underlying campaign structure.

Causality language Not just “CPA is high,” but “CPA is high because broad match introduced queries that do not align with the landing page promise.”

Test design If they recommend changes, they should explain what success looks like and what could go wrong. They should also mention how they will avoid destabilizing learning prematurely.

Follow-through They should propose an implementation plan and a timeline for follow-up reporting.

The most credible agencies often talk like operators. They explain trade-offs, for example, tightening match types will reduce wasted spend but may reduce volume, which can affect automated bidding stability. They also know when to accept lower CPA but slower volume growth, or when to accept higher CPA because the conversion lag proves efficiency later.

If you’re selecting a ppc agency or paid media agency, don’t be shy about asking how they audit. The best ones will have a repeatable approach, with room for judgment.

Common audit mistakes that cost months of performance

Even experienced teams fall into patterns that slow recovery. Here are pitfalls I try to avoid, because I’ve seen the aftermath.

Chasing CPA in the wrong segment If you cut campaigns with high conversion volume but longer conversion cycles, you can damage revenue even while improving CPA.

Ignoring landing page changes If someone updated the form fields or removed an offer, conversions may drop regardless of keyword quality.

Over-editing match types A sudden tightening can reduce data volume and delay learning. Instead, make controlled changes and watch query patterns.

Neglecting negatives until after spend grows Negatives are a defensive tool. If you wait too long, the account spends learning money on irrelevant traffic before you can shut it down.

Assuming platform recommendations are inherently correct Automated scripts can be useful, but they’re not a substitute for understanding intent and landing experience.

A pro audit creates clarity. It turns ambiguous “the account feels off” energy into a structured list of causes and fixes.

Putting it all together: what a strong audit output looks like

A high-quality paid search audit reads like an operator's report, not a spreadsheet dump. It should tell you what happened, why it happened, and what you should do next.

You want to see:

A measurement section that confirms conversion integrity and tracking reliability
An intent segmentation section that explains where performance is strong or weak
A search term and keyword hygiene section that identifies waste drivers
An ad and landing page alignment section that ties messaging to outcomes
A bidding and budget pacing section that respects learning and auction reality
A prioritized implementation plan with test expectations

If you're working with a ppc management company, ask them to present findings this way. It makes the report usable. It helps leadership understand trade-offs. It also makes it easier to hold the account team accountable in subsequent check-ins.

In the end, auditing paid search like a pro is less about finding fault and more about restoring a chain of intent. The user searches for a need, the ad promises a solution, the landing page delivers what was promised, and the conversion tracking tells you the truth about what happened. When that chain breaks, spending accelerates in the wrong direction. Your audit should rebuild the chain step by step.