



Custom Solutions, Strategic Growth



Google Ads Click Fraud vs. Lead Fraud: What's the Difference for Senior Living?



Google Ads is one of the most commonly-used platforms for earning fresh leads in the senior living industry.

On paper, it's practically perfect – it's a generally low-cost, on-demand, highly-controllable way to reach out to your primary prospects and give them the information that they need when they want it.

And like most marketing strategies, there's more to Google Ads than what's on paper.

In fact, one of the most common complaints about Google Ads is that it brings in unqualified leads for senior living.

This may be true to an extent – even the best-laid marketing plans earn unqualified leads sometimes – but it can also be the result of one of the most dreaded words in marketing.

Fraud.

So what does fraud look like on Google Ads? How can you detect it? And once you do, what can you do about it?

We'll cover that in detail in this guide. We'll separate fraud into two broad categories: Click fraud and lead fraud.

After that, we'll talk about what you can do to fight back against the fraudsters.

First, let's establish how Google Ads works.

How Does Google Ads Work?

Google Ads is the foremost pay-per-click (PPC) advertising system in the world. It has more advertisers and earns more revenue than any other search engine, primarily because it advertises on the most popular search engine in the world!

Because Google fields so many searches in a day, it had to figure out a way to make its advertising as fair, fast, and honest as possible.

In that respect, here are the broad strokes of how Google Ads functions for search advertising:

- You sign up for free.
- You create a campaign around keywords related to their industry.
- You create an ad(s) combining text, images, and links to show up when someone searches.
- You set a daily budget you'd like to spend on the ads.
- When someone searches your keyword, your ad makes an attempt appear.
- Before appearing, Google looks at you and all other advertisers targeting that keyword.
- The advertiser with the biggest budget is listed first.
- All other advertisers are listed subsequently.
- Only the advertiser who gets a click pays – all others do not pay for simply showing an ad.

In essence, Google's goal was to only charge advertisers for ads if they had the chance to earn a lead from that click.

This is an excellent concept overall – but click fraud and lead fraud throw wrenches into these spokes.

To talk about how, let's start with click fraud.





Click Fraud Overview

Click fraud is when a robot or group of people click on ads to make an advertiser spend more money on fewer potential leads.

In this context, a “robot” is typically a computer that’s programmed to look up keywords in a search engine and then “click” on a designated ad result.

At times, the robot can become a lead by being so intelligent that it can fill out and submit a form – though this is increasingly not the case since the 2020s when Google Ads discovered how to effectively crack down on click fraud.

It still happens – though not nearly to the extent it used to happen.

(Thank you, CAPTCHA!)

In fact, Google issues refunds and / or credits for any clicks it detects to be fraud automatically, helping to immunize advertisers to the budget-draining impact of robots.

There is also a suite of new software companies and products designed to identify click fraud more effectively using proprietary means. Many of these companies integrate with Google Ads directly to help add a new layer of protection to ad campaigns, and they may even help you report fraud to earn a refund.

However, click fraud can also come from people either individually or at scale.

How Can Click Fraud Happen?

Individually, you may have one person at a competitor clicking on your ads to drive up costs – but not to any serious degree. And if the same person clicks your ad multiple times, they increase the chances of having their clicks flagged as fraudulent so that your business is protected.

But at scale, this is a different story.

Groups of people – sometimes called click farms – exist around the world for the singular, fraudulent purpose of clicking ads.

They may consist of any number of people on any number of digital devices earning a paycheck for clicking as many ads as possible in a given timeframe.

They can also use technologies like virtual personal networks (VPNs) to change their IP addresses and make it appear as though they're different people in different locations to avoid regular fraud indicators.

Even so, this level of fraud is still detectable by Google Ads and third-party providers. The sheer quantity of clicks isn't easy to hide, even when clever fraudsters incorporate VPNs into their processes.

While you may still pay for fraudulent clicks at some point – from robots or click farms – the impact they have on your Google Ads campaign is fairly negligible, especially as you learn more about your target audience, how they use search engines, and what makes them engage with your community.





How Do You Detect Click Fraud?

Aside from Google's automated fraud detection systems, you can keep an eye out for the following “red flag” of ad fraud: *A spike in clicks in a single day – or even a few hours – without making any other changes to your campaigns.*

A sudden spike in clicks is uncommon because generally speaking, Google's ad markets are stable unless competitors enter your space, leave your space, or change their budgets.

A leap in clicks may mean that a competitor has left your space or decreased their budget. In that case, you should see increased click performance for multiple days.

But if clicks return to normal levels the next day, then you have an “anomaly” on your hands.

This anomaly represents a one-time increase in the clicks and costs of your campaigns. If there are no other clear indicators of your campaigns or competition changing, it could be click fraud.

You can also compare the amount of traffic to your website in Google Analytics attributable to the “Paid Search” channel against the clicks you earn in Google Ads. If the numbers are in the same ballpark, then the clicks are likely legitimate.

However, if you see a significantly higher number of clicks in Google Ads than traffic attribution in Google Analytics, you may be dealing with a robot committing click fraud. This happens when a robot is so intent on clicking as much as possible that they engage with your ad and then leave your website *before* the Google Analytics script on your page can track them.

The timeframe where that can happen is so infinitesimally small that it's almost impossible for a person to do once, let alone dozens or hundreds of times.

With this in mind, how do you report click fraud if you suspect it?

How Do You Report Click Fraud?

The best way to report click fraud is to submit a ticket via Google Ads.

You can do this through your Google Ads portal by clicking the “Help” icon (shaped like a question mark) in the top navigation bar. Then, just follow the instructions to submit a ticket via email or chat, and someone can double-check your findings to resolve or escalate the situation.

With all of this said, what about lead fraud?

Lead Fraud Overview

Lead fraud is the act of deceiving search engine users into becoming leads for companies that are unable to work with them.

In other words, it’s an intentional process of driving unqualified leads to a business for any number of reasons – the least of which is competition!

Lead fraud typically doesn’t happen on Google Search, so if you’re an advertiser who *only* advertises on Google Search, then you likely won’t encounter this issue.

However, if you’re a community with a smaller budget trying to earn leads against major competitors, you might use something in Google Ads called **Search Network Partners**.

How Can Lead Fraud Happen?

Search Network Partners are companies that ‘white label’ the Google search engine’s capabilities for any number of reasons.

The US government is a search partner that uses Google to help website users find information about government programs and assistance. In 2015, [Yahoo! negotiated a custom contract with Google](#) to essentially be a search partner.

The vast majority of search partners are not publicly available though, and Google does not share that information unless it concerns a major business partnership.

In other words, any number of search partners may be out there looking to make a quick buck off of hosting Google Ads.

Because these search partners work outside of Google on a licensed basis, they may cleverly figure out ways to earn more revenue by serving additional ads and getting more clicks per user.

One highly-effective method of this includes the search partner being a Google Ads advertiser.



In this scenario, the search partner creates a Google Display campaign where they show a combination of text and imagery to encourage a user to click.

The advertiser – the search partner – chooses the text and images to show. They also choose the destination page to which the ad leads.

Conceivably, a search partner can take out a display ad with whatever text they want, link it to *their* white labeled version of Google Ads, and show ads to get clicks.

They can also set up additional pages to encourage *additional* clicks. This may include clicking on buttons with different keywords written on them, allowing a user to effectively click a pre-ad before going to a list of *regular* ads.

This is where things get tricky. The search partner is aware that they're letting a user make a choice that's independent of the first ad, but the user doesn't know that. In fact, they think that they're still on the way to discovering whatever was promised in the initial ad. Then, whatever company gets that user's second click has to address potential problems with the initial ad.

Here's a real-world example:

Let's say a user is looking for senior living accommodations. They arrive on a website where an ad promises senior living for \$300 per month – a *very* low price.

The user clicks the ad because it's an exceptional offer, and they go to the search partner website.

The search partner shows them a list of keywords that the user can click, like "Senior Living Near You" or "Maryland Senior Living."

The user clicks one of those, still under the impression that they're researching opportunities for \$300 senior living.

Instead, the search partner takes the user to a list of ads for the keyword they clicked – meaning that the user is not looking at communities that offer \$300 senior living. *The user doesn't know that*, so the user clicks the ad that most appeals to them – typically one that talks about luxury or upscale living – and they go to the community's website where they submit a form or place a phone call to get in touch.

A salesperson at the community sees the form submission or receives the phone call, and they're baffled; *'why would someone ask a luxury senior living community about \$300 per month accommodations?'*

The salesperson has a very difficult conversation ahead of them, dealing with the dashed hopes of a lead who thought they found a once-in-a-lifetime bargain.

The salesperson is angry. The prospect is emotionally crushed. The marketing team paid for the lead.

But nobody at the company *ever* promised \$300 per month senior living.

The search partner did.

To make matters more complex, this issue is far more challenging to detect than click fraud.

How Do You Detect Lead Fraud?

Detecting lead fraud requires vigilance, active campaign maintenance, and a keen eye for detail.

It may also require a salesperson to take a moment to ask an unqualified lead how they heard about your community in the first place!

Before you get into this work, it's important to note that you should always use the [Negative Keyword](#) tool in Google Ads to help refine lead quality.

(Don't resort to the process below unless you've already exhausted your negative keyword work and you're still seeing unqualified leads come your way.)

First, go into your Google Ads portal and select the "Campaigns" option in the left-hand menu. Then, click the word "Segment" on the middle menu bar and select "Network (with search partners)."

This will show you the amount of activity that came to your campaigns through Google.com and search partners. If you see that you have a large quantity of conversions coming from search partners, you know to dig deeper and go to the next step.

The next step is to go is the Google Ads "Keywords" menu. In this area, you want the menu selection called "Search terms."

This will show you all of the exact keywords that users entered into Google – or clicked in search partners – to arrive at your website.

Some of them should be obvious, like "senior living" or "senior living near me," but other ones may not be obvious or even completely false, such as "top new construction senior living communities in the USA 2023" or "\$300 senior living in my area," respectively.

Search partners should earn you some conversions and clicks. However, if one or a handful of those strange keywords is earning 80% or more of your conversions, you may be dealing with lead fraud!

The third step is to notify your team that this may be an issue and you're actively investigating. Be transparent and give everyone a chance to ask questions and get answers. Remind them that you're all on the same team, you're all working to the same goal, and no one is intentionally spending money on unqualified leads.

This opens up an important part of the conversation as well – asking the sales team to inquire where an unqualified lead heard about you. The more specific a prospect can be, the better.

If they say "a website," ask if they still have the URL handy or if they can look at the history in their web browser to remember.





If they say “Facebook,” ask for the name of the account.

The salesperson’s goal in this situation is to get as much specific information as possible to send back to the marketing team.

The final step is for the marketing team to follow up on the information from unqualified prospects. This is where you look up the website or social media account that the prospect mentioned in an effort to re-create the process they experienced.

Once you find it, keep an eye out for ads (if it’s a website) or posts (if it’s a social media account) that speak to senior living as a concept or industry – your community likely won’t be mentioned by name.

In the event you find the ad or post, click it and start walking through whatever experience it offers.

If you arrive on a page where you have a wide selection of clickable keywords, click one and see if you can make your own community show up in the results.

(Also, record the keywords in a document or take a screenshot so you can match them to the keyword report we mentioned earlier. This will show you definitively that these keywords are served to an audience of prospects who have been misled.)

If you can do all of this successfully, click the final ad to ensure you land on your website. If so, then you’ve successfully confirmed that your Google Ads campaign(s) is experiencing lead fraud.

How Do You Report Lead Fraud?

As you’ve most likely noticed, lead fraud is significantly more complicated than click fraud.

This is because from the perspective of robots and click farms, lead fraud can initially appear legitimate.

It’s not until you investigate more deeply that you can discover what’s truly happening – and even then, you’ll almost always require your sales team’s feedback.

In the event that you can re-create the process of lead fraud, it’s now time to document it. Take screenshots of the offending pages and websites. Record a video of you narrating the process and clicking through to your own website. Ensure that there’s no stone unturned in terms of your recordings and imagery. You want to ensure that your account for every possible item, so you have definitive proof.

Compile this proof into a slide deck or folder that you can share at the ready. Keep master copies of everything in a secure location on your company’s shared network and additional backups on your own computer.

This includes the names of the websites you've identified to be contributing to lead fraud.

Then, submit a ticket with Google Ads as you did before to start the conversation. If you spend more than \$40,000 per month in Google Ads, you may also have a direct contact at Google to whom you can send an email. Either way, they will likely first reply by talking about click fraud and how they can refund you.

Do not take this as the end to the situation. Keep the ticket open and keep the conversation going. Remind them that this is about fraudulent leads through search partners – not just click fraud – and that you have proof that you've already shared. Continue with Google until you reach someone who can help you achieve a resolution and – ideally – a refund.

It'll take time to wrap all of this up. Google is notorious for taking its time in reviewing fraud complaints because they require such an intense level of scrutiny.

In the meantime, you can update your negative keywords list to exclude the keywords that have been sending you fraudulent leads. Every morning, take a look at your search terms report for suspicious keywords that fit the profile of those you've already identified to be problematic. Then, update your negative keyword list with those terms.

As you continue building out your negative keyword list, you should see a decline – either gradual or sudden – in leads coming from those kinds of search terms. And as a result, your sales team should see fewer unqualified leads.

Does this fix everything with unqualified leads? No.

As we said before, even the most airtight strategy in marketing will earn a few unqualified leads here and there. But this work should cut down on a huge quantity of those problematic prospects, helping your sales team focus on the leads that matter and helping your marketing team spend its budget more pointedly.



Get Started with Google Ads for Senior Living

Google Ads sounds simple on paper – but it requires a lot of work, maintenance, and investigation to ensure budget is spent in the right places!

If you don't have the time, Senior Living SMART is here to help.

Our paid media team has years of experience in Google Ads, and they've developed proprietary methods of screening for unqualified and fraudulent leads.

Look no further than our team that specializes in senior living with a consistent track record of success.

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