Search term analysis

SEGMATIC

Expert Series #2

The comprehensive guide to using search term analysis to understand searchers & build better campaigns

Contents

1. Go where the data sends you

At Segmatic, we believe that once you've built a campaign, pretty much every decision you make on matching—positive and negative—can be made by looking at your search term data.

Let's say you have to do search term analysis for a major shirt brand; but, just to make it interesting, let's imagine you have literally no concept of what a shirt is. There is no reason why you cannot do that search term analysis really, really well.

The reality (and therefore our philosophy) of search term analysis is that this it is absolutely possible to carry it out regardless your level of product understanding and expertise, no matter what you're advertising. The key is to listen to the search term data and go where it sends you.

The data will tell you how to build out a campaign, and what to negative. If you're selling shirts, start on day one with +SHIRT; then read the search term data that this generates and use it to decide where to add a keyword or a negative. All you have to do is repeat this step until you have a fully built out, perfectly optimised account.

The better we are at this analysis, the more refined and efficient our campaigns become.

At Segmatic, we follow the data religiously, adding keywords that are relevant to and prevalent in our campaigns, and negative matching whole swathes of keywords that are losing us money or threaten to in the future.

We also do a couple of things that nobody else is doing. For example, we take a proactive, clue-based approach to our analysis. This lets us anticipate future search trends and respond to them before they happen. In this guide, we've written a step-by-step guide that sets out how we do this, and how you can implement it today.

Our distinctive approach is possible because of the way we manage and present our search term data. We use our own software to automatically disaggregate the data that Google gives us and present it in a more user-friendly and actionable format.

This approach works because the better we are at search term analysis, the more refined and efficient our campaigns become, and the less time we waste looking at endless lines of data. This frees us up to do more important things like developing the big picture strategy, and figuring out what to call the clothes we wear on the top halves of our bodies. (They're kind of like a sort of a torso bag, but with arm tubes. But that's not important right now.)

Finishing search term analysis

Our aim for search term analysis is to not have to do search term analysis anymore. We want to get to the point with every campaign where it's no longer part of our day-to-day account management. And, we think this should be your aim too.

Thanks to the approach we'll explain in this guide, twinned with strong account structure (which we explain in full in Expert Series #1 guide), we have basically finished search term analysis for our more established clients.

Our aim for search term analysis is to not have to do it anymore.

Each morning, we look at their data and, unless someone coined a new word overnight, we take a moment to appreciate the fact that our campaigns are perfectly aligned with the thoughts and needs of searchers; and then we move on to solving the bigger strategic challenges that will deliver big wins for our clients.

Once we've actioned everything that the search term data tells us to action, we should be live on every relevant search term and negative matching every irrelevant one. On the rare occasions when we do have to take action, the Segmatic platform makes it simple to negative match or add keywords across multiple campaigns, and to generate optimised ad copy for any new keywords—even more time is saved because we religiously followed what the search term data told us.

How we achieve these results

To create effective ads that inspire people to click and convert, you need to understand what those people are searching for and what they want to buy. Google helps with this by providing data on how our ads performed when they were triggered by actual searches.

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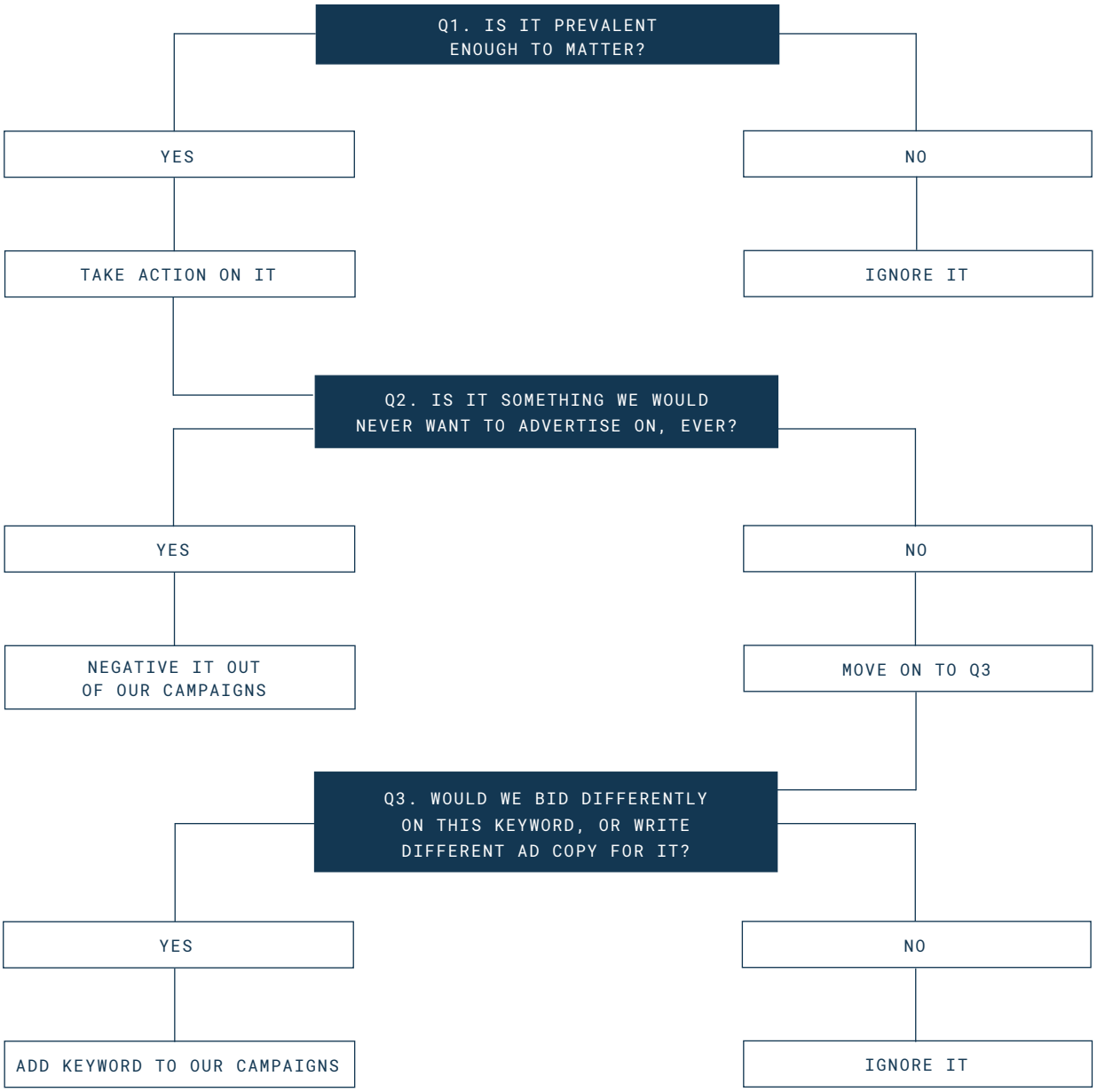
Google provides this data in the form of a big list of search terms that triggered our ads. The list might contain great new search terms that will lead people to buying our product, as well as irrelevant search terms that we don't want anything to do with.

When we see a new search term in the data, we have a decision to make: add a positive keyword, add a negative keyword, or do nothing.

2. The decision tree

To decide on which course of action is best for a new keyword we spot in the search term data, we use what we call the decision tree: and like all trees, it is made up of three yes-or-no questions, which together guide us through how to respond to the new term.



How to use the decision tree

Like all trees, our decision tree is pretty easy to follow.

Let's look at a step-by-step example to show how this process can be used to build out an account. Imagine, if you will, that you're in the business of selling formal shirts.

To begin, you build the simplest account possible; on day one, you go live on the keyword SHIRT in broad match modified—just +SHIRT, nothing else, and no negatives.

On day two, you look at your search term analysis for day one, and you notice two things:

1. After `shirt`, the most common word is men.
2. `football` is appearing in the search terms, but it's not converting (because you don't sell that type of shirt).

So, you go live on +MEN +SHIRT, and you negative out `football`.

You also work your way through the other 500 unique words, using the decision tree and taking action on the ones that need action. Do that well and you should never have to act on any of those 500 words again.

You can achieve perfectly optimised accounts that reflect the search term data.

By day four, you've gone through that process a few times and you're doing a little better: you're making sales from people who searched for `men's shirt`, and you're also no longer losing money from people looking for football shirts and clicking on your ad.

Repeat this process every day until you're like our client TM Lewin; that is to say, live on everything you should be live on and negative matching everything you should be negative matching.

It is entirely possible to execute this approach perfectly, even if you didn't know what a shirt is, or what football is. The data tells you what people are searching for, and how well or poorly these keywords are serving you. The data tells you what you need to know, and what action you need to take.

If you are systematic in your approach and go where the data sends you, you can achieve perfectly optimised accounts that reflect the search term data. The result of this is that you'll spend on keywords that make you money, and you won't waste a penny on keywords that don't.

We have also developed two extremely helpful shortcuts that let us skip ahead in this analysis process: data aggregation and clue-based search term analysis. Let's take a look at them.

3. Shortcut your way to the top

These are two tactics you need to master to best implement this approach to analysis your search term data, so you can achieve the sort of results we've gotten used to in Segmatic.

The first is data aggregation. Google provides search term data in a format that's not useful for our purposes: hundreds of thousands of rows of search terms. This is too much data for anyone to sift through manually and hope to make good decisions, plus it's grouped by search term rather than keyword.

The second tactic is where the magic happens: proactive clue-based search term analysis. We analyse the search term data to identify broader trends; and we use the insights to make projections and take pre-emptive action on things that will appear in our search term data in the future.

Making Google's data usable

Google gives us a big list of search terms. In one way this is very good, because the list reflects the totality of what people search for. But it's also annoying, though, because we bid on keywords not search terms; and Google's list makes no distinction between what's important and what's not.

We want to understand the prevalence of keywords—individually and in combination.

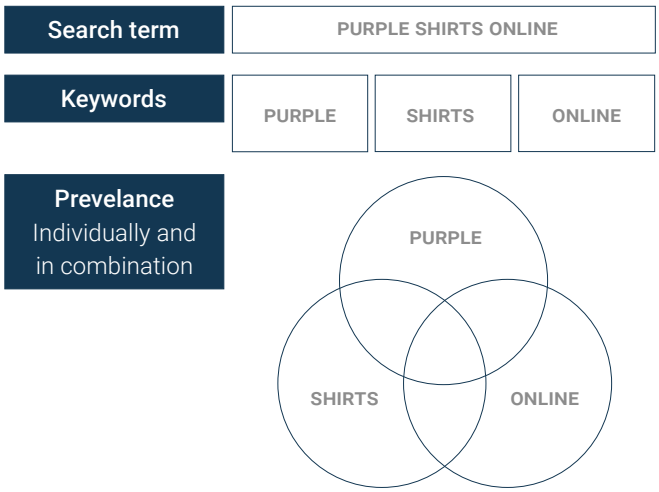
To achieve this, we start by splitting the search terms into individual keywords. Then, we count how many times each of the keywords appears in the search term data, individually and in combination, and we rank each of them by prevalence.

For example, we would split the search term `purple shirts online` into its constituent keywords:

1. PURPLE
2. SHIRTS
3. ONLINE

We add to these the other possible combinations:

4. PURPLE SHIRTS
5. SHIRTS ONLINE
6. the relatively unpopular PURPLE ONLINE
7. and of course, PURPLE SHIRTS ONLINE



By ranking these seven in order of prevalence, we get a list of keywords that we can use to make decisions on account structure, ad copy, and bidding.

To simplify this process, we've developed algorithms that run automate this frequency analysis, and tell us how many clicks and impressions we get for each of our keywords, and keyword combinations, over given period.

What do we do about 'sihrt'?

Next, we look at misspellings, plurals, and word groupings.

If someone types `sihrt` into the search box, it's likely that their intention was to type `shirt`, so we treat that search the same way we would if they had used the traditional spelling.

What we generate a comprehensive list of all possible misspellings of our keywords. We list `shirt` as the core search term along with all possible misspellings of `shirt` as linked search terms; and, they get grouped together in the database and treated in the same way.

Are 'shirts' any different?

We do the same for plurals. In most cases, a search for `blue business shirts` should be treated the same as one for `blue business shirt` because that person is looking to buy a blue business shirt.

Taking our big list of plurals, we set `shirt` as the core search term and `shirts` as linked: `shirt and shirts` get treated the same. And we'd do the same for `mouse` and `mice`, `spouse` and `spice`, and so on.

Clue-based analysis is a beautiful thing

So far, our explanation of our approach has been reactive—you look at the data and respond to it. This is how most people work—they go through the data row by row, spot things that are new or unusual, and take action on those things.

We take a fundamentally different and much more effective approach: proactive clue-based analysis. This radically accelerates our learning and lets us take action now on future trends. It's something that anyone running a PPC account should easily understand and immediately implement. And as an added bonus, it lets you make the jump from exact match to BMM without wasting time and money.

How to implement it

We scour our aggregated search data for search terms that suggest broader trends, treating search terms as clues to make projections and take action on things today that we predict will appear in our search term data in the future.

To give an example, we have a client that sells business shirts online. Looking at their search term data we spotted the term `Manchester United shirt`, which is certainly not a type of shirt they sell. The approach most people would take is to this is to negative out MANCHESTER UNITED, and move on to their next task. In a few months, they might see `Arsenal shirt` in their data and negative that out as well. That's the reactive approach.

Our proactive approach means that we see `Manchester United shirt` as a clue. It tells us that people are searching for football shirts generally and not just Manchester United shirts, and probably other sports shirts too. And we also learn that after their search, they're clicking on our ads, costing us money, and giving us nothing in return.

Who doesn't love a list?

When we see something like `Manchester United shirt`, we consider the broader context. We ask ourselves what does this suggest will appear in our search data in the future, and what realistic, coherent list of terms can we construct based on this insight? Simply put, we don't wait for the Arsenal shirt.

So, when we saw that first `Manchester United shirt` in the data, we made a list of all of the football teams in the world, and most of the other professional sports teams as well for good measure, and we negatived the entire list out of all our shirt campaigns.

Another great example here is place names. There are over 6,700 place names in the UK, and you can't analyse them one by one. If you're selling something online, people searching for your product and a place name is kryptonite. It suggests that they want to buy locally, not online. For one of our clients, we found that if there was any place name in a search term, conversion rate dropped by 40%. Now we have lists of place names built into our campaigns, and we use it for any client that has that same need.

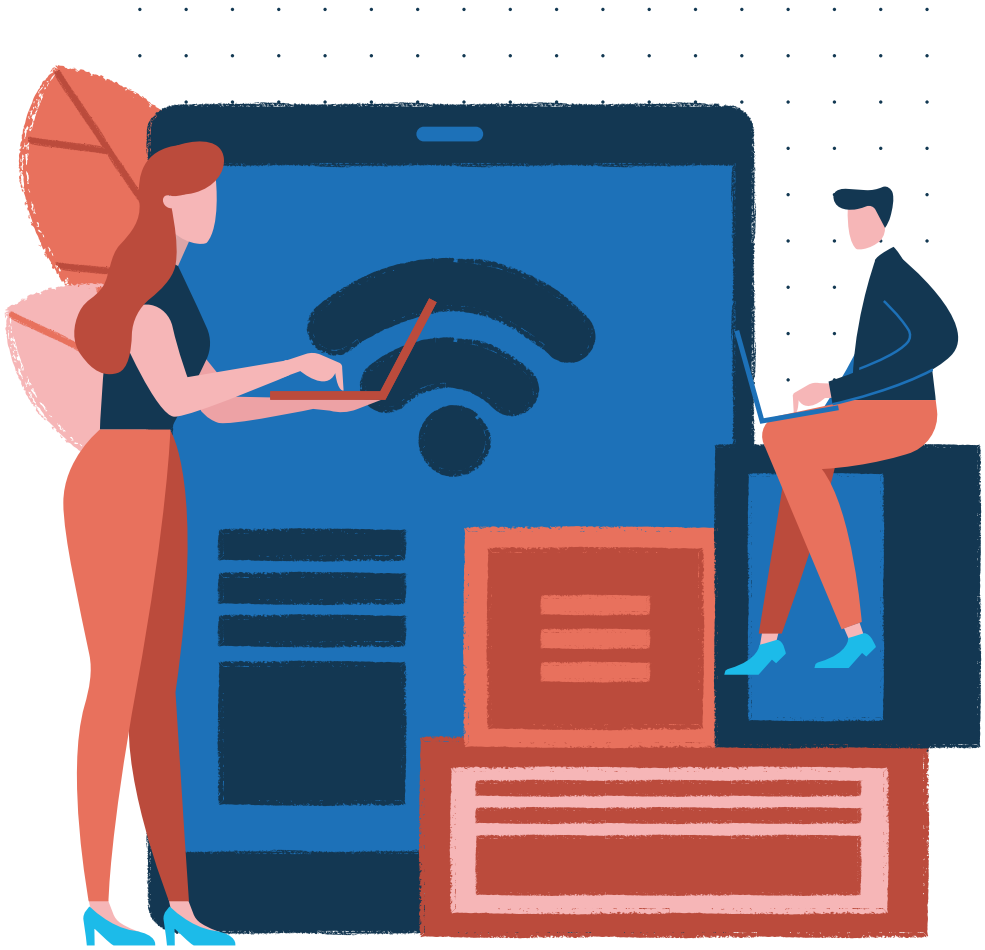
Graduate faster to BMM

With these shortcut tactics, we can move very early in the life of a campaign from being heavily reliant on exact match to using a lot more broad match modified (BMM). We have to use a certain amount of BMM: both because something like 30% of all search terms are entirely new—nobody has ever searched for them before—and also because low search volume means we don't get all the coverage we need from exact match.

The thing that prevents advertisers from graduating swiftly to BMM is that it takes too much time to experiment and learn. And while you're learning, you're spending. Proactive clue-based analysis lets us cut that corner, accelerates learning, and makes the move to BMM quicker. It clears a lot of irrelevant keywords out of our campaigns; and this efficiency in negativing cancels out the relative looseness of BMM compared to exact match.

This saves us money in the short term by making our spend more targeted: the sooner you can transition to BMM, the more profitable your campaigns will be in the long run.

4. Great analysis makes great accounts



The approach we've explained in this guide gives us really great results. We're at the point with our more mature accounts where we only have to make very occasional tweaks based on new insights from search term data.

It also gives us a nice workflow: everything that's already been actioned is filtered out, and we're only presented with things we need to consider and take action on. We never have to sift through hundreds of lines of search terms, so we can put our energy into making the important high-level decisions about whether and how to take action.

Finally, our gives us peace of mind. We know that we can't control the things that people search for, but we can build a system that means we never miss out on a new search term. We hope you can take on our approach, and get that peace of mind too.