

Ad copy strategy



Expert Series #3

The comprehensive guide to
unleashing the power of your
ad copy



Contents

1. The right ad for the right person	3
2. Granular beats general	5
Leverage account structure to write better ad copy	7
Is it worth all the effort?	7
3. Understanding searcher intent	8
The perils of blended intent	9
How we deal with blended intent	9
4. Next level keyword stuffing	10
5. Unleashing the real power of ad testing	12
Testing the code logic	13
Go big or go home	13
6. Differentiated results	14
How do we know these things?	15
7. Make better business decisions	16
An opportunity to run better tests	17
Price points and promotions	18
Making bold claims	18
Know your customers	18
Shape your customer cohort	19
Beware click-through rate	20
8. Don't go testing the wrong thing	21
You've learned very little	22
And you just wanted to learn how to write a headline	22



1. The right ad for the right person

At Segmatic, we don't think about ad copy the way other advertisers do.

For us, really effective ad copy combines great writing and great account structure. The writing gives us a framework that we populate with keywords. Our advanced account structure lets us do really effective keyword stuffing at enormous scale, and it gives us the power to target our ads really effectively.

Our aim is always to show the right ad to the right person at the right time. Done right, this means that an ad will seem to the user like it was custom-written to respond not just to their search term but to their intent—to whatever was in their mind when they searched. A great ad should feel like the answer to the question they were asking when they entered their search.

To implement this ad copy philosophy, we've developed a methodology that's a bit revolutionary. As with everything we do, it's a granular, controlled approach that retains its granularity at scale; and it's built on big, complex, well structured accounts.



A great ad should feel like the answer to the question the searcher asked.

We create hundreds of thousands of individual ads for every account, all of them optimised for character limits and keyword stuffing. We use advanced targeting techniques, integrated into our account structure and ad copy approach, which ensure that we serve the most effective ad every time, out of the hundreds of thousands of ads we have built.

In the first part of this guide, we're going to explain our approach to ad copy and the question of searcher intent. We'll also explain some advanced keyword stuffing techniques.

In the second part, we'll look at a pretty revolutionary application of ad copy testing: how we use it not just to test how our ads are performing, but also to help our clients make better decisions in all areas of their business.

We'll start by asking two questions: what is ad copy about; and what makes good ad copy?

2. Granular beats general

First things first, how is an ad triggered?

Someone types a search term into Google, and our ad appears in their results page. In between, a couple of important things happen. To start, the search term is scanned to see if it matches our keyword logic. If there's a match, then we enter the auction to determine whether our ad will be shown and, if so, where it will appear on the page.

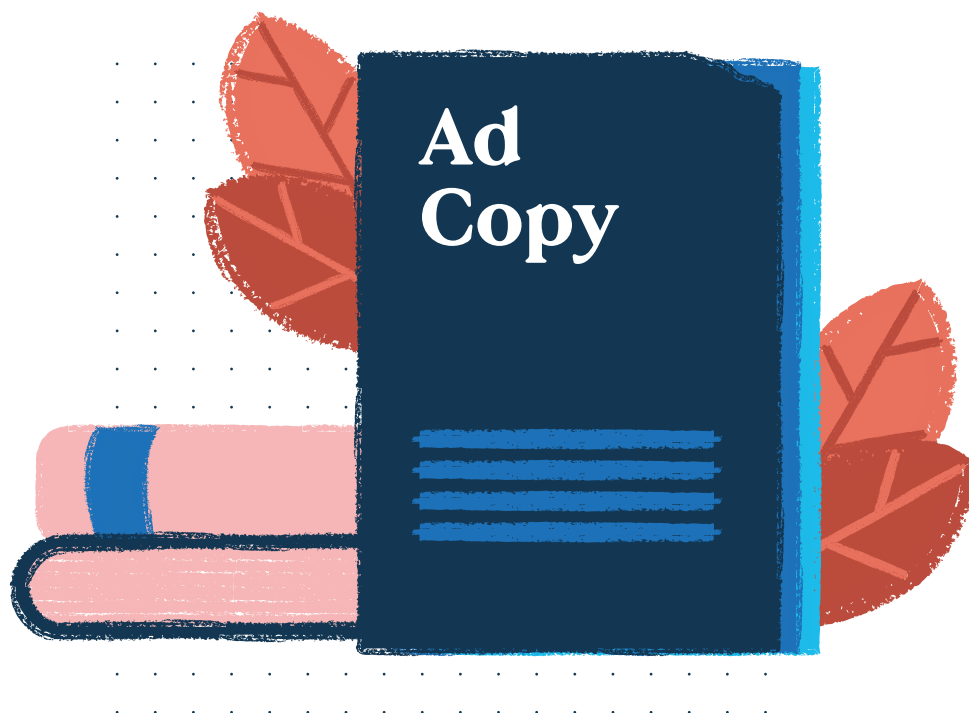
What's different about our approach is that we take granularity to incredible extremes.

To write great ad copy, we focus on the relationship between search term and ad; and we aim for the greatest possible level of granularity in connecting the two.

The more specifically tailored your ad copy is to the search term, the more success you're going to have. At a very basic level, you want to give people what they asked for.

The key to this is keyword stuffing, which basically means taking words from the search term and stuffing them into the ad copy. Today, everybody does this because it's incredibly powerful. In tests comparing ad copy with and without keyword stuffing, stuffed ads win every time. We've tried to create non-stuffed ads that beat stuffed ones and it's really hard to do—especially as you get into medium- and long-tail search terms.

None of these ideas—keyword stuffing, granularity—are particularly new or revolutionary. What's different about our approach at Segmatic is that we take granularity to incredible extremes. We have accounts with 700,000 individual ad groups, each with its own ad copy. We have systems for keeping these ads organised and triggering the right one every time.



Leverage account structure to write better ad copy

This works because our account structure lets us build enormous accounts while retaining control and granularity.

Our campaigns are made up of lists of many, many keywords—Product Lists and Product Modifier Lists. We draw on these lists for words to populate our ads.

The way we structure our ads remains fairly consistent regardless of what we're selling and what people are searching for. For example, let's say someone searches for either: 15.5" white men's shirts or 15.5" blue men's shirts.

In either case, we want to show them an ad with this structure:

Headline: <colour> <gender> shirts. (The headline should repeat the search term, using the keywords that triggered the ad in the first place.)

Description Line 1: <offer> (for example, '50% off today')

Description Line 2: <USP> (for example, 'High quality shirts today')

Display URL

This structure stays the same, and we fill in the blanks with terms from our lists. The challenge is choosing the right terms from the right list in response to a particular search term.

Is it worth all the effort?

Even building on solid account structure, this takes time and effort, and at this point you're probably wondering if it's worth it, or is it overkill to have thousands of ads. You can only automate this up to a point—the character limit that applies to each part of the ad complicates things. There will be times, lots of them, when you want to display the ad you know is optimal but you can't because someone decided that the word orange should have twice as many letters as red.



People are 50% more likely to click on an ad that includes their search term.

The question of effort versus return is one that we've tested thoroughly. 80% of the staff time and energy goes into getting this system set up, and once it's up and running it's not so onerous to keep it going. We know that people are 50% more likely to click on an ad that includes their search term, which makes it an easy decision in the end.

What we've found is that this approach gives you a very large number of small wins, which accumulate together into a payoff that far outweighs the investment of time and energy.

3. Understanding searcher intent

Given that our aim is to serve ads that respond to searcher intent, we put a lot of effort into figuring out the connection between search terms and intent.

We use insights from past campaign data to identify correlations. Where we see strong correlation, what we call highly correlated intent, we can use that insight to display an ad that reflects not just the keywords that someone has typed into Google but their intent in searching.

The perils of blended intent

Highly correlated intent is the good kind. The bad kind is something we call blended intent.

Let's say you're bidding on the keyword PENS in broad match modified (BMM), so +PENS. This keyword is triggering for lots of search terms that include the word pens, including disposable pens and fountain pens. The problem here is that these are different types of product; so it's really hard to write good copy for a single ad that's triggered by both of these search terms.

Sure, disposable pens and fountain pens perform the same function, but beyond that they are fundamentally different products; and the people looking to buy these different products will respond in different ways to different ad copy.



Blended intent leads to suboptimal ad copy and lower click-through rates.

There's also a difference in intent here: disposable and fountain pens have different price ranges; and people tend to order disposable pens in bulk whereas fountain pens are generally bought one at a time, or two at a time if someone has a treaty that needs signing.

This is an example of what we call a blended keyword, or a blended intent keyword. It's a bad thing for a couple of reasons. First off, it's triggering the same ad copy for customers with very different intent. It also leads to suboptimal ad copy and lower click-through rates.

How we deal with blended intent

If we want to sell pens to either cohort, we need to write ad copy that's tailored individually to each group of potential customers, and that, using good account structure, is shown to the right person at the right time.

One way to do this is by forcing the match. This is something we do when we're bidding on the same keyword in exact match and broad match modified. First, we build out fountain pen and disposable pen as two different keywords, and make appropriate ad copy for each of them. Then we use negative matching to make sure the keyword matches only on exact and never on BMM. Because our click-through rate is better on exact match, we can afford to bid higher than we would on BMM.

Of course, disposable pens and fountain pens is a simplistic example but it helps to explain a philosophy that we apply across all of our accounts. In this case, it's not hard to avoid blended intent because we can understand, to a usable degree, the intent of the searcher based on their choice of search term. We know what type of pen they're looking for.

What we aim to achieve is highly correlated intent. This leads to optimal ad copy and a higher click-through rate.

4. Next level keyword stuffing


In the early days of paid search, the search term was the only information we used to understand the searcher's intent. Over time, we learned to layer in insights like the searcher's age, gender, location, whether they're searching on mobile or desktop, and what time they searched.

We factor these insights into bidding strategy, and more recently a lot of advertisers have started to use them to inform ad copy, with the help of Google's ad customisers.

With ad customisers, we can use these insights to make our ad copy more effective. They tell us the gender and age of the searcher, and we can serve up different ads to different searchers based on these insights. We also get location information from Google and use it in the same way.

These three insights mean that we are now creating much richer, more targeted ads than we could using insights from the search term alone.

Before ad customisers, if someone searched for *Birmingham mechanic*, we could show them an ad with the headline 'Birmingham mechanic'. That search term would trigger our ad group with the keyword *BIRMINGHAM MECHANIC* and serve them up an ad with a headline that reflected their search. This was great for us because people are far more likely to click on an ad that includes their location in the ad copy.



Ad customisers give insights that let us serve up different ads to different searchers.

If, however, somebody in Birmingham searched for *mechanic*, we used to show them a generic ad. Now, using ad customisers, we know where they are even if they don't give us that information in the search term, and we feed that location into the ad copy. The same goes for gender and age. We can serve up an ad for men's shirts to a man who just searched for *shirts*, or choose adjectives to describe a restaurant based on the age of the searcher.

For one of our clients, an online network of independent mechanics, click-through rate doubled when we included location in the ad copy. That's because we were selling a location-specific product—a mechanic in your area to fix your car. The effects are less dramatic, but still significant, when you're selling something global.

Ad customisers have actually been around for a while now, but not all advertisers have figured out how to get the most out of them, which is strange, because of the bump in CTR you get from including a relevant location in ad copy happens even when the searcher hasn't actually included that location in the search term.

Segmatic has been ahead of the game in ad copy thanks to our aggressive search term-based ad copy, and we've built on that by taking full advantage of ad customisers.

Gender and age are a little more complicated, because it's not a matter of just plugging the searcher's gender or age into the ad copy. Instead, we create separate ad groups for each gender and age range. This is the sort of job that's a pain to do using Excel and Google Ads Editor, which may explain why most people aren't taking advantage of what ad customisers offer. But, as we keep pointing out, the upfront investment can be justified by the boost in performance, if the strategy is applicable to what you're advertising and your customers.

5. Unleashing the real power of ad testing

After years of experimenting, we've come to the conclusion that there are two types of tests that are useful. And these are the tests we run on our ads:

- We test the code logic
- We test big

We run tests to check that our ad copy is performing well. Mostly, we test the ad copy logic, rather than testing different words.

That sort of testing is important, but it's not what really excites us about ad copy testing. What really excites us is something that nobody else is doing: running tests on ad copy and using the results to inform business decisions outside of paid search.

We use our ad copy testing as a laboratory: running tests on different versions of ads to help clients answer questions about all areas of their business, many of which are unrelated to paid search. We might run a split test on two ads with a different price point, and use the results of that test to inform the company's pricing policy—online, and in bricks and mortar stores.

In this section, we'll look at testing code logic first, then we'll get into the fun stuff.

Testing the code logic

This is about testing the structure of our ad copy, not the words. We might do a simple test on two headlines. Should the structure of the headline be:

- <colour> <gender> <product>
- Buy <gender> <product>

Everything in brackets will be populated with values from our product lists and product modifier lists in response to the keywords that trigger the search.

There's no question of mixed intent here, so we can be confident that we're just testing the ad copy logic. That, in a nutshell, is how we test our ads.

Go big or go home

This is the fun part—where our ad copy testing busts out of the lab and answers real business questions that go way beyond paid search.

For the most part, testing big means testing propositions and USPs. Leaving the active code logic as it is, we might run a simple split test on these alternatives for ad copy:

- 'All shirts 30% off'
- 'All shirts 50% off'

Just how big are we talking?

We call this testing big because it's not just testing the ad copy. Oh no, it's far bigger than that. You can use Google Ads to figure out business problems like 'what price should I charge for my pens?'

In the example above, we're effectively testing pricing strategy. If you want to know whether you should offer a free 30-day trial of your service, running a split test on your paid search campaigns is a powerful way to answer the question—where you use the real decisions of real and potential customers.

This works for baseline pricing as well as propositions. Should a regular subscription to your service cost £25 a month or £26.50? Ad copy testing can tell you that.

6. Differentiated results

Search terms tell us a lot. At Segmatic, we build campaigns made up of thousands of isolated units, reflecting many different levels of intent on the part of the searcher. Someone searching for `blue shirts` has a different intent to someone searching for `white shirts`, so they should see a different ad.

Search terms can give us other, more nuanced, insights into intent. People searching for `microwave pizza` prefer to buy their pizzas in bulk. These people clearly don't have a minute to spare; and if they can't wait the 15 to 20 minutes it takes a pizza to cook in an oven, they're not going to waste time regularly re-ordering small numbers of pizzas.

People searching for `neapolitan pizza`, on the other hand, are going to buy their pizzas one at a time; and they're probably going to buy a different one next time.

How do we know these things?

These insights aren't just the result of idle speculation. They're the result of idle speculation leading to testable hypotheses that can then be verified or disproved using our campaign data.

At Segmatic, our advanced account structure means that we can run as many tests on an account as we have keywords. For some accounts, this means we can run thousands of individual tests that yield meaningful, usable results. Good account structure means we can analyse ads for `microwave` and `neapolitan pizza` separately because we've split them into different isolated units. You couldn't do that if you were just bidding on `+PIZZA`.



Because we've split them into different isolated units, we can analyse our ads separately.

Imagine you're a pizza retailer, selling both `microwave` and `neapolitan pizzas`, and you can't decide whether to price their pizzas individually or in a multi-pack. The reason you can't decide is that both approaches are correct: you should be pricing `neapolitan pizzas` individually and `microwave pizzas` in multi-packs.

7. Make better business decisions

The mistake a lot of companies make with this type of testing is to take the mentality of retail and apply it to online advertising. With retail, you'd test two different ads in two different shops and see which gets the better result. They're not thinking big enough.

If you were to try to split test microwave pizza vs. neapolitan pizza on the keyword +PIZZA, you wouldn't learn anything because you'd just be testing intent—which type of pizza did the searcher intend to buy all along. This fundamental flaw of mixed intent applies to this proposition test just as it does for the ad copy split test for men's and women's shirts.

An opportunity to run better tests

Propositions seem simple, but they're not. At Segmatic, we've developed a set of ideas around propositions that combine better ads, better ad copy testing, and testing big.

As far as we're concerned, there are two types of proposition you can express in a Google ad:

- Price point or price promotion: for example, '4 shirts for £100' or '50% off hotel rooms'
- A claim about your product or service: for example, 'We invented the shirt', 'Free delivery', or 'Take back control'

For the most part, both types of proposition are straight forward. Stick the price point, promotion or claim into the ad copy; repeat for hundreds of thousands of ads; bish-bash-bosh, the job's a good'un.



Price points & promotions

One job that truly is a good'un is that of using ad copy to test and refine pricing strategy. In our experience, while tests of ad copy can give you performance uplifts of 1, 2, or 3%, tests on price points and propositions offer uplifts of between 10% and 40%.

To do this, you have to understand who you're advertising to; and you really have to understand who's clicking on your ad. Before we write a word of ad copy, we want to know what percentage of the people who click through are converting. For the people who do convert, we want to understand as much as possible about their behaviour and how we can change it. Finally, we need to know how much money we're making from these people.



To write more effective ads, you must understand the diversity of searchers.

We ask these questions because the cohort of people who type in a certain search term tend not to be homogenous. The longer the tail, the more homogenous they become. But for shorter, simpler searches, you need to understand the diversity in this group. For example, we know that 80% of the people who search for *men's shirts* are themselves men. The other 20% are women; and we probably want to show them a different ad to the one we show men.

Once you understand this diversity within each cohort of searchers, you can write more effective ads for each sub-group. You might show them different promotions, or the same promotion phrased in a different way. You might even show them different prices.

If you're displaying multiple ads on the results page, you can even tweak each of them to appeal to a different sub-group.

Making bold claims

The key with making claims about your product is that you have to understand what characteristics of the product appeal to the type of people who are searching for it. The best way to do this is to analyse your product and its characteristics based on actual search terms.

If you're selling loans, you need to know if people are searching for loans with low rates of interest, high rate of approval, or quick approval.

A lot of advertisers do this, but most don't do it very well—they run a split test with one low interest rate ad and one quick approval rate ad and they compare the results. That's not going to tell you anything. You need to take a cross-section of ads in each category and compare them all against each other, then decide what's best. This will also tell you if 'Get a loan quick' is more appealing to borrowers in a hurry than 'Cash paid in 10 minutes'.

As with price points and propositions, the best outcome of all may be three ads in the results page, one for each characteristic, each appealing to a different segment of your target audience.

Know your customers

These types of test will tell you a lot, but they're more likely to be conclusive and useful when done in conjunction with other forms of customer research. We like surveys, either: email surveys of existing customers; or pop-up surveys for non-customers

Our favourite is a pop-up on the landing page that appears just as people are about to exit, asking why they're leaving without buying something.

Evidence from these surveys can challenge or confirm findings from our paid search testing, both of which are good outcomes; giving us insights into our real and potential customers that we can use to design better ad copy tests.

Shape your customer cohort

At Segmatic, we think of our ads as one stage in a sales funnel. We can use the ad to better understand our customer cohort, as we’ve shown, but we can also use it to shape the makeup of that cohort.

Different price points and promotions will attract different types of customer—who behave in different ways and offer different long-term value.

Take for example a campaign run by a bookmaker for a major sporting event. They tested three ads with different Description Lines:

- ‘Bet £10, get £20’
- ‘£50 free bet’
- ‘£250 bet bundle’

Running a split test on the three options with each one leading to a different landing page, they found a huge difference in the characteristics and betting behaviour of the people who clicked on each of the ads.

The first difference was socioeconomic, with high-income customers much more likely to click on the £250 bundle. Even more interesting is the fact that even though CTR on that £250 bundle was relatively low, the lifetime value of those customers was significantly higher for the bundle punters than it was for the other two propositions.


DESCRIPTION LINE	CLICK-THROUGH RATE	CONVERSION RATE	LIFETIME VALUE
Bet £10 Get £20	High	High	Low
Matched £50	High	Medium	Medium
£250 Bundle	Low	Low	Very very high

The ad copy in this case determined not just the number of customers coming into the sales funnel, but also the type of customer and those customers’ behaviour.

Beware click-through rate

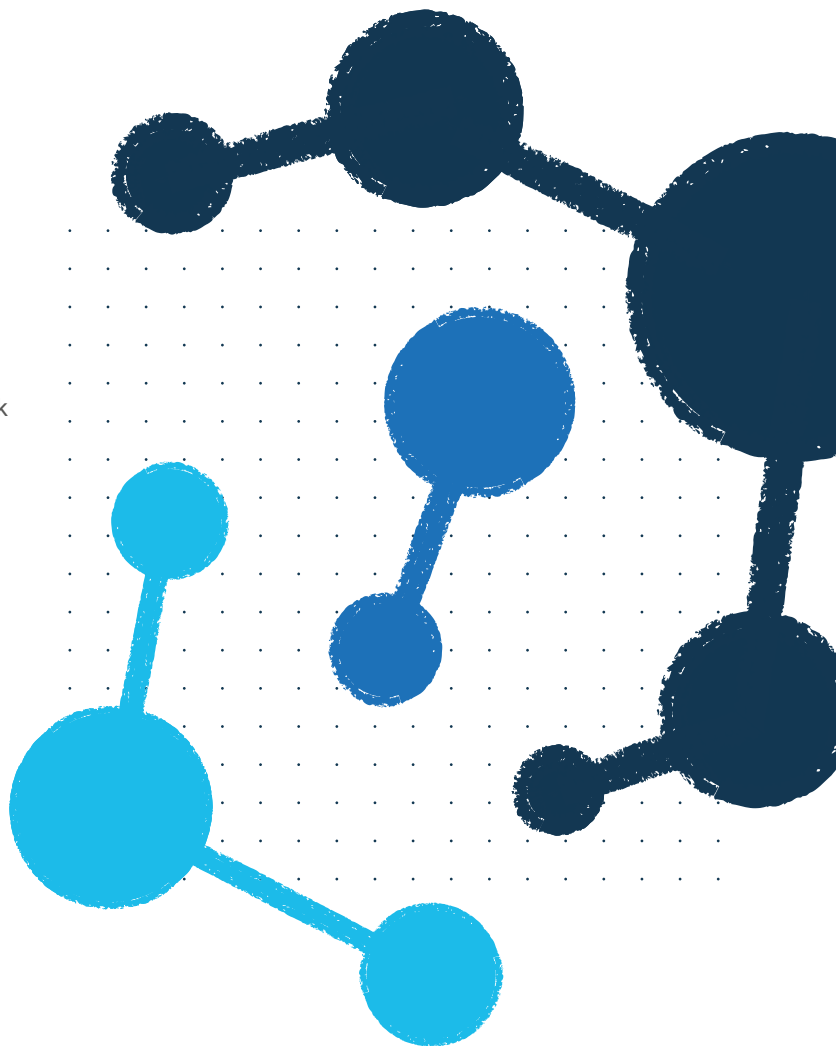
The first trap that a lot of advertisers fall into is to judge the success or failure of an ad based on its click-through rate (CTR). The reality is much more complex than that.

A common assumption is that click-through rate is the best measure of the success or failure of ad copy. CTR is one of many measures you should be using; but there are many cases where it's not the best measure to use; and in fact there are times when you don't want your ad copy to drive CTR.



CTR is just one of many measures you should be using.

An example is competitor terms: if we're advertising Coke and someone searches for Pepsi, you don't want a high click through rate because someone searching who searches for Pepsi and clicks on your ad is unlikely to buy Coke. What you want in this case is a low click through rate overall; but to make sure that anyone who does click through is open to the possibility of buying Coke. This is a tough needle to thread. But, it's doable if you're reading searcher intent and triggering good competitor ads.



8. Don't go testing the wrong thing

Testing big doesn't work for everything; so we're careful about what we test and how we test it. There's a general trend at the moment for testing to improve click-through rates and campaign performance overall. But, a lot of the tests that people run are fundamentally flawed. For starters, without realising it a lot of people are testing for the wrong thing.



Often, the problem is that you test is suffering from mixed intent.

A lot of the testing that's done on paid search campaigns tells us little of use. Here's an example: you're running two ads simultaneously on the keyword +SHIRTS because you want to see which ad yields a better click-through or conversion rate. Your plan is to run both ads for two weeks, figure out which is performing better, and then shift your ad spend to the better performing one.

You write two ads, one with the headline 'Men's shirts' and the other with the headline 'Women's shirts'. When you look at the results after two weeks, you see that the 'Men's shirts' ad gets 70% of the click-throughs or conversions, and 'Women's shirts' gets the other 30%. The problem here is that your test is suffering from mixed intent.

You've learned very little

All you've really learned here is initial intent—which you should have known already. 70% of searchers intended from the outset to buy a men's shirt, before they ever saw your ad. Your 'Men's shirts' ad wasn't any better or more effective than your 'Women's shirts' one: it just appealed to more people because more of the people searching on your keyword were looking for a men's shirt all along.

The real danger with this sort of test is that you might look at the results after two weeks and decide to only run the 'Men's shirts' ad. This would mean you're basically leaving the 30% of shirt sales on the table.

& you just wanted to learn how to write a headline

We did warn you that we don't think about ad copy the way other advertisers do. At Segmatic, we've probably given more thought and attention to what makes ad copy effective, and how to make effective ad copy, than anyone else.

The result of this thinking is an approach that's responsive to the searcher, and takes into account everything that we know about them and their intent. It's granular, which means thousands of ads built on really strong, well managed account structure. And it's inextricably linked to testing: with tests that improve our ads and bigger tests that help us learn about our customers, and the wider business, and ultimately help us make better business decisions.