



ClickEquations, Inc.
555 North Lane
Conshohocken, PA 19428

T (484) 362-2360
F (888) 749-2054
www.clickequations.com

Impression Share: The Little Known Metric with Big Impact

A CLICKEQUATIONS WHITE PAPER

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Impression Share: The Little Known Metric with Big Impact

What if your paid search ads didn't run?

You picked the keywords, placed the bids, people searched, but your ads didn't show up? It happens every day. In almost every one of your campaigns.



It's documented in a metric called **Impression Share** (in Google AdWords; there is no MSN or Yahoo equivalent yet.)

Impression Share (IS) displays the percentage of the time that your ads were displayed to people who entered search queries which match your keywords (at their specified match types).

100 minus Impression Share, e.g. 67%, is the percentage of the time your ads didn't run when you thought they would.

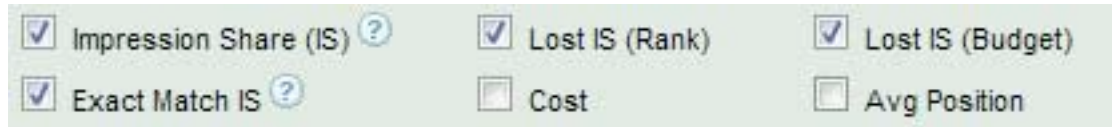
If your campaigns are profitable, the missing impressions are missing profit. Who can afford missing profit these days?

Three things stand between you and this extra profit:

1. Getting your Impression Share metrics.
2. Knowing what they mean.
3. Taking the steps necessary to drive Impression Share up.

FINDING IMPRESSION SHARE

To get an impression share report most people have to go to the Reports tab in AdWords, build a Campaign report, and edit the fields to include IS, Lost IS (Budget), Lost IS (Rank), and Exact Match IS. You can't access these metrics at the Ad Group level (a shame we'll decry another time).



Impression Share Options in Google Adwords Report Configuration

If you use [ClickEquations](#), you can see Impression Share right in the Campaign reports, or in any report or dashboard built in Excel with [ClickEquations Analyst](#).

Campaign	Impressions	IS	IS Budg	IS Rank	IS Exact
GS DHP Brand	3,454	78.44%	0.00%	21.56%	87.47%
GS Health-Nat-Remedies	6,915	74.01%	0.00%	25.99%	88.87%
NE_GS-City & Comps	6,266	71.97%	0.00%	28.03%	71.97%
GS Food Branded Cat	18,394	63.96%	0.00%	36.04%	88.04%
GS doghouse-Organic Food	17,340	56.60%	0.00%	43.40%	80.34%
GS Food Branded	104,030	56.35%	0.11%	43.34%	86.87%

Impression Share Metrics in ClickEquations

UNDERSTANDING IMPRESSION SHARE

There are four Impression Share Metrics. IS, IS Budget, IS Rank, and IS Exact. The first three are relatively straight forward. The last is a bit confusing.

- **Impression Share** = The percentage of the time your ads were shown (for this campaign) out of the times it was eligible to be shown. Eligible means the search matched your keyword, your account was active, the geo-targeting and day-parting and other settings were right, etc.

The next two metrics explain the Impression Share you didn't get. If your Impression Share is 70%, then your Lost Impression Share is 30%. But why didn't your ads run those times? The next two metrics tell you:

- **Lost IS (Budget)** = The percentage of impressions lost due to budget constraints
- **Lost IS (Rank)** = The percentage of impressions lost due to low Ad Rank (cost-per-click bid x Quality Score).

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So $\text{Impression Share} + \text{Lost IS (Budget)} + \text{Lost IS (Rank)} = 100\%$. These tell you what you got and what you didn't get, and why.

EXACT MATCH IMPRESSION SHARE: THE UGLY STEPSISTER

The last impression share metric is trickier. For that reason, it probably doesn't get the attention it deserves.

- Exact Match IS = The impression share of your campaigns as if your keywords were set to Exact Match. That's the official Google definition - the one that seems generally misunderstood.

So let's try it a different way. Exact Match IS tells you the percentage of the time when your ads were displayed for search queries that exactly match the keywords in your campaign.

One minus Exact Match IS is the percentage of the time when someone typed exactly your keywords in as their search query and Google still didn't show them your ad.

HOW TO USE IMPRESSION SHARE

The IS metrics are great because they tell you things you could otherwise never know about your campaigns.

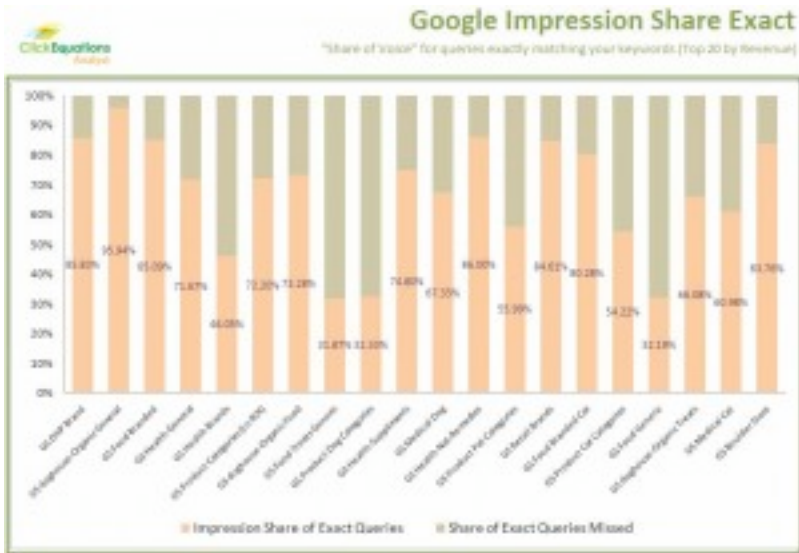
Foremost, they tell what you're getting and what you're missing in terms of impressions - and from there the calculation of missing clicks, conversions, and even revenue/profit is rather simple (see chart 2 below).

We can finally at least partially answer the perennial question 'How much more could I make from my paid search campaigns?'

STEP 1: START WITH EXACT MATCH IS

Although it somehow seems offered as an afterthought metric, it's a good idea to start by looking at your Exact Match IS.

This simplifies the world and if you're buying anything near the right keywords provides a sense of how you're doing in terms of getting shown to the people looking for you.



Google Exact Match IS (Chart from ClickEquations Analyst)
 ([Click to enlarge](#) - Opens your Internet browser)



Exact Match IS Graphed As Revenue & Click Opportunity
 ([Click to enlarge](#) - Opens your Internet browser)

If your Exact Match IS isn't high (as usual there's not simple way to say what that means, but let's go with 70% or higher) then you really need to work your way down the list and think about your keywords, bids, quality score, ad copy etc.

Think about it this way: if Google doesn't think it's worth their while to show your ads to people typing in exactly the keywords you're buying, how can you expect them to think running your ads is worth it for search queries you aren't even directly buying?

THE IMPORTANCE OF CAMPAIGN ORGANIZATION TO IMPRESSION SHARE

To solve our problems we'll have to follow the path through our campaigns.

Impression Share forces us, if we look at it hard enough, to understand the roles of both bids and quality score, to think about our match type strategies, to organize our campaigns more effectively, to include the right keywords not just the most keywords, and to broadly see how interconnected the many options really are in a paid search campaign.

Does It Matter?

But before we get much further, there is something else about Impression Share that should be discussed.

Impression Share is only provided at the campaign level.

In most accounts, campaigns are roll-ups of many ad groups, and ad groups are roll ups of many keywords. Usually keywords and ad groups are not all of the same type or importance.

So before getting too flustered about missing impression share it's worth stopping to decide if it matters, or more precisely if you can actually tell if it matters.



Suppose we have a campaign called 'Bedroom Furnishings' which contains 27 ad groups for everything from 'nightstands' to 'sheets and pillow cases'. Within each ad group are 50 to 500 keywords, of various levels of importance and at various match types and bids.

For this business, suppose that within Bedroom Furnishings, 70% of sales are bedroom sets, 10% are headboards, 8% are lamps and the remainder are all kinds of little things. (assume all of these sales are profitable.)

In other words, only 3 of the 27 Ad Groups represent 88% of the company sales and profit.

In this case all the Impression Share metrics are useless.

The campaigns and ad groups are not organized in a way that allows us to use the IS information as it is provided.

There are too many different types of targets mixed into a single campaign. For some of the ad groups it contains we really want all the impressions we can get. For others, there are more firm ROI targets and beyond a certain point we can't afford to bid. Still others just don't matter much.

If we want to use and benefit from IS metrics, we need to reorganize so that one campaign holds the large volume (and profit) ad-groups, and within those ad-groups only the successful corresponding keywords.

Move the marginal keywords and ad-groups into their own campaign that can be tracked separately. And move all the other ad groups and keyword into a third campaign.

This is the minimum reorganization to make IS useful.

- At this point we can look at the IS metrics for our 'large volume and profitable' campaign and reasonably obsess about every % we miss.
- We can watch and work on the 'marginal keywords and groups' for these high profit categories, and make smart choices to improve them both in performance and IS.
- And we can watch the IS for all our other categories but probably not do too much about them.

A BAG OF ROCKS AND DIAMONDS (OR, YOUR DISAPPEARING PROFIT)

Let's think of the whole point another way.

Pretend you had a bag filled with 10,000 rocks and 100 diamonds. If you knew the bag had a hole and a few dozen things had fallen out, you'd be concerned - but really not know how serious the problem was. Maybe all you lost was a few rocks.



Wouldn't you feel better though if you could put the diamonds in their own little bag and really make sure that nothing fell out?

Keywords and ad groups are the same way. You can't take great care of the good ones when they're mixed in with all the junk. Separate and segregate.

Impression Share is another place where getting average data for a disparate set of things can greatly diminish the value of the information. It's up to you to organize so that the metrics provided are useful.

CORRECTING IMPRESSION SHARE PROBLEMS

The four impression share metrics tell you if your ads are running when people type search queries that match the keywords you're bidding on.



Very rarely will you find that the ads in your campaign are running anywhere near 100% of the time. Often you will find that they're not running 25%, 50%, even 75% of the time when you probably expect that they'll appear.

This will be shocking to some, and should be considered a huge problem.

The only reason to bid on keywords is if you want your ads to run when matching queries are typed. There is no logic to the idea that missing impression share is 'ok' because you don't need the 'extra impressions'.

- Isn't it possible that the impressions you're missing are the best - meaning highest converting - impressions? Or the most competitive impressions - those others are trying the hardest to take away from you? Do you really want to buy only the remnant impressions?
- Or it could be that you're getting the best ones, and missing the worst impressions - particularly if you have much lower impression share than impression share exact match (and if you're keywords are well chosen). It could be that you're missing lots of weirdo-broad-match Google Gumbo queries that you wouldn't want anyway.

The point is that lost impression share is an uncontrolled mystery.

If your campaigns have high amounts (say over 30%) lost impression share you're letting Google decide how and when to advertise your site and spend your money.

Shouldn't you decide?

PROFITING FROM IMPRESSION SHARE: DIVIDE AND CONQUER

The first step to profiting from Impression Share is to break down your campaigns into logical units for which IS becomes meaningful. IS metrics across campaigns with dozens of dissimilar ad-groups aren't actionable.

Of course, re-organizing campaigns is a large and difficult process. AdWords Editor makes it possible in a simpler matter than before, but it's still a lot of work.

At a minimum your 'must win' ad groups should be isolated in ways that give you good visibility into their IS performance. Your core brand terms, which [we've written about before](#) in terms of organization, are a good place to start.

Next, create a "slum" for your losers, misfits, and keywords of questionable origin. Every campaign has them, ad groups that are a bit of stretch, a test, perform terribly but are hung onto for sentimental value, whatever.

Get anything you really don't care about, or know deep down isn't likely to work moved out of your bread-and-butter campaigns and onto 'short bus' campaigns.



You can let them run there, work on improving them, ignore them, whatever. But they will no longer be mucking up the impression share metrics in your more meaningful campaigns.

NOW OPTIMIZE EVERYTHING

Once you have reasonably tight campaigns, and clear IS metrics for these cleaned-up campaigns, you can start working on a fix to the real problem(s).

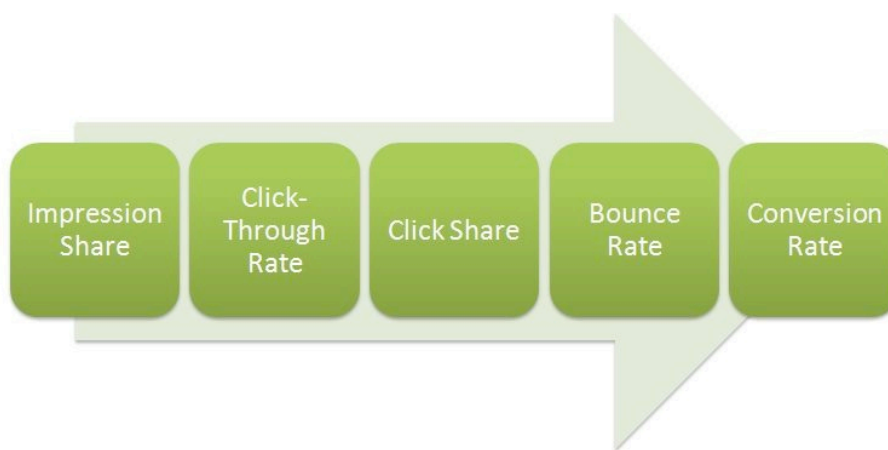
Except for one tiny problem: You can't fix what's causing lost impression share.

Lost impressions are a symptom of a much larger disease - the overall quality of just about every aspect of your campaigns design and performance.

So if you want to eliminate lost impression share, you're just going to have to improve nearly every aspect of your campaigns:

- Build out your [match type keyword traps](#). Increasing coverage of exact and phrase match terms, and bidding them properly, should garner more impressions for those terms for broad-match heavy campaigns.
- Harvest search queries to increase negatives and add new phrase/exact match keywords. Every step to remove excess and intelligently expand your keywords improves the value of the IS measurement and hopefully the number as well.
- Check and address [quality score](#) across your campaign. [Ad Rank](#) = bid × QS, and often QS isn't thought of enough.
- Write and test more text ads. This is the most overlooked effort in PPC, can drive quality score which drives ad-rank, and more importantly can multiple CTR by many times which grows everything positive.
- Bid differently. As a component of ad-rank, which plays a huge role in Impression Share, bids are a factor. Notice that bids don't have to be your first or only lever

Impression Share is an interesting, and perhaps unexpected, broad measure of the quality of our campaigns because of how it's influenced by the wide range of factors suggested above. Paid search is way too complex, and still too opaque (and perhaps inconsistent and imperfect) to pretend that it's a clear measure that will track 'campaign quality' in any precise way - but it is an indicator and one we can use in a surprisingly far-reaching way.



IMPRESSION SHARE WRAP UP

A lot of the paid search process happens without enough feedback or context.

Any available metrics that help us understand and measure the funnel we're trying to push people through, therefore, is very important.

Other than the laughably inaccurate traffic/click estimates in the keyword tool, impression share is our only way to get critical visibility into the size of the audience we're aiming at and keep a scorecard of our progress toward reaching it.

IMPRESSION SHARE IN CLICKEQUATIONS

We've included a few screen shots from one of the reports included with ClickEquations, which provides a graphic view of Impression Share.

[This video](#) from our 'ClickEquations in 90-Seconds' series provides a full tour of that report and the benefits it provides.

WHAT IS CLICKEQUATIONS?

ClickEquations is powerful paid search software that helps advertisers and agencies manage large campaigns more effectively and efficiently. Our web interface lets you control all of your campaigns, accounts and clients quickly and easily with full bidding, management and reporting features. ClickEquations Analyst, a unique Excel plug-in, gives you unlimited customization of sharable reports and dashboards and unprecedented analytics power. We have transparent, no hassle pricing with no setup fee and free support.

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