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OCTOBER 2018

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A Pay-Per-Click Primer

FIRMS IN COMPETITIVE AREAS CAN CAPTURE BUSINESS BENEFITS FROM PPC'S MARKETING PRECISION, COST EFFECTIVENESS AND FLEXIBILITY.

By Welton Hong

We live in a polarized time. Americans have never been more divided over politics, over the best way to learn math, over whether *The Last Jedi* was the best *Star Wars* movie or the worst. There's not a lot of room for nuance or gray areas; pick your side and defend it adamantly.

The debate over pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, particularly as a marketing tool for death-care businesses, is obviously minuscule in comparison to these great conflicts, but it's a critical one as funeral directors in the digital age determine the best way to capture business in competitive areas.

I'll certainly touch on the detractors' points as well because it's important to know the entire picture before investing in any marketing tool.

With that said, as someone who specializes in driving quality online leads to the phones of funeral homes, I can confidently tell you this: If you're in a competitive area and your goal is to rapidly increase at-need calls, there's simply no better option right now than a PPC campaign.

Yes, pay-per-click costs money (the word "pay" is right there in its name, after all) and marketing firms that prefer to promote alternative options will happily point to engagement statistics that might sound a bit concerning when taken out of context.

However, when we take the complete picture into account, PPC actually provides an excellent return on investment for funeral homes:

- PPC provides the fastest way to be seen at or near the top of search engine results for your specialty and area.
- You only pay when someone clicks on your ad (sending the visitor to your website), so you're not just paying for "impressions."
- It's the most flexible type of online advertising. You can revise your ad at any time and watch the new version go live almost immediately.
- PPC is laser-targeted, meaning that your ads are only seen by people searching for the keywords you specify: "Corpus Christi cremation," "Newark burial," "Milwaukee funeral," etc.
- It's incredibly easy to understand the effectiveness of a campaign. Metrics are automatically generated and are simple for a layperson to comprehend.

Given its many advantages, I used to be surprised that more funeral homes did not use PPC. But then I realized that quite a few funeral directors didn't even know what it was. Some had never heard the term; others had heard of PPC but knew little of what it entailed.

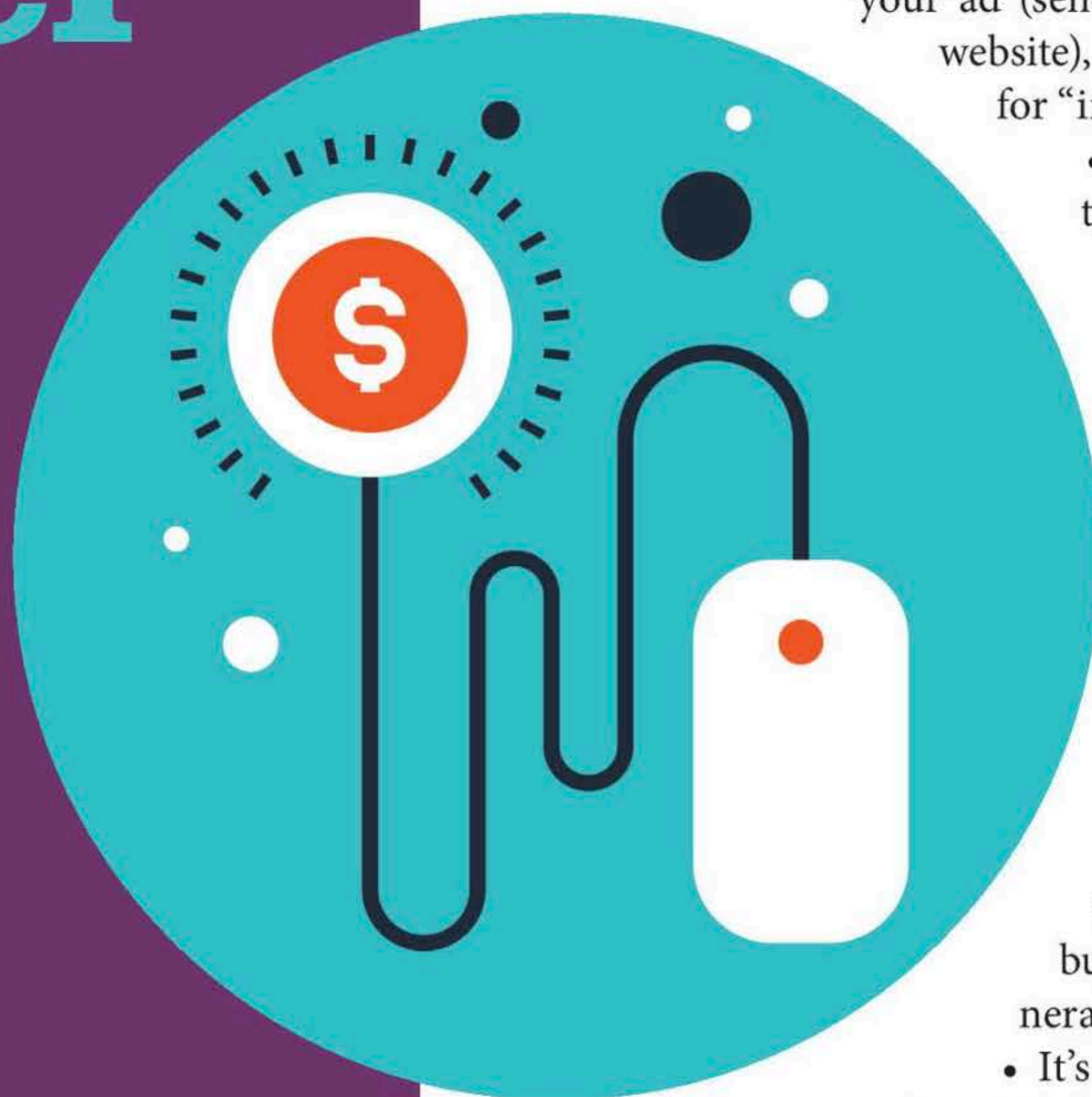
I think it's safe to assume that includes some readers of this article, so let's cover the basics.

THE FUNDAMENTALS

While there are other pay-per-click advertising systems, by far the most popular is Google AdWords, which is what I'll focus on here. The essentials remain the same across most systems.

If you had to encapsulate it in one sentence, PPC lets your website get premium placement on search engine results pages (SERPs) for the keyword phrases you select.

One misconception is that PPC lets advertisers blatantly buy their way to the best ad position (compared to other



advertisers) on the SERP. The belief is that as long as you out-spend your competition, you take the top spot.

Actually, Google determines how well your ad is positioned on the SERP using a formula that combines how much you bid for that keyword with the ad's Quality Score.

So what is a Quality Score? Glad you asked. It's a bit of a murky mix (intentionally, because that's how Google rolls), but we know the algorithm includes:

- Click-through rate (how many people click the ad)
- Relevance of keywords
- Relevance of ad text to what is being advertised
- Relevance of the landing page (typically the home page of a funeral home site)
- Historical AdWords performance.

PPC VERSUS ORGANIC

One thing you may hear from pay-per-click critics is that some searchers still feel more comfortable clicking on organic (paid) search listings than on paid ads.

While there's quite a bit of variance in recent studies of click-through percentages, it's fair to say that paid ads generally account for fewer than 10% of clicks on SERPs.

However, that statistic ignores several important factors, primarily that it takes a long time – typically from nine months to a year – to see any significant improvement in organic rankings from search engine optimization (SEO) efforts. So you could put a lot of time and money into great SEO and still not substantially improve your organic ranking for up to a year.

That's especially critical if you're in a highly competitive market. As of May 2018, the website with the #1 organic ranking on a SERP earns 32.5% of the clicks. Second place gets 17.6%, and it drops precipitously from there:

#3: 11.4%	#7: 3.5%
#4: 8.1%	#8: 3.1%
#5: 6.1%	#9: 2.6%
#6: 4.4%	#10: 2.4%

Only 8% of searchers even make it to the second page of organic results, so you're essentially invisible unless you can get onto the first page. And that can be tricky in a large metropolitan area with plenty of competition for burial and cremation services.

Which is not to say you should ignore SEO; it definitely pays off in the long run, and other than the resources (time and/or money) spent optimizing your website, it's essentially free advertising.

But if you're not seeing much website traffic now, you likely can't just wait for SEO to kick in, especially when you don't know whether it will be enough to land in those top two or three spots.

As more people turn to the internet to find death-care services, especially given the explosive popularity of smartphones and

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tablets, you need a definitive way to capture those leads. PPC delivers traffic almost immediately, filling in the gap until SEO lifts organic rankings.

Also consider that Google's parent company, Alphabet, which brought in more than \$110 billion in 2017, earns about 70% of its revenue from Google AdWords. That's roughly \$77 billion in one year just from its PPC service, which means Google is highly incentivized to ensure that PPC advertising remains highly effective and continues to promise users an excellent ROI.

THE BENEFITS

With many other types of advertising, you place the ad and hope it gets seen (and generates action) by the audience you're targeting. With PPC, your ad only appears to people specifically searching for what you provide in that particular area.

That might sound like a bug, not a feature, until you consider that you're not actually paying for the ad itself. You only pay when someone clicks on it, sending the searcher to your site. (Alternatively, if someone using a smartphone clicks on your phone number in a PPC ad, the "click to call" functionality creates an immediate phone call to your funeral home.)

If someone doesn't click, you pay nothing. Instead of being charged for the ad itself, you're charged for the visit to your website. And it clearly pays off. According to Google research, businesses make an average of \$2 in revenue for every \$1 they spend on AdWords.

PPC also makes it astonishingly easy to track the effectiveness of your ad. You can create a variety of ads with different phrasing and determine which ones generate the most clicks and conversions. You can also see which keyword phrases are most effective in generating traffic.

If a particular PPC ad isn't carrying its weight, you can revise it, submit it and watch it go live in a matter of hours.

That also provides an important secondary benefit. In addition to promoting your business, PPC is a precision tool to refine your marketing approach. By tracking the effectiveness of particular ads, you can determine the most effective language to target clientele in your area.

And while PPC certainly can help

generate preneed business, it's especially powerful for growing at-need calls. Obviously, families in at-need situations must find a local provider immediately.

By positioning your business prominently in targeted search results, PPC spotlights you to these families. Most are not going to waste time drilling down through a list of organic results. They need help now, and your firm will be there to provide it. ☰

Welton Hong is founder of Ring Ring Marketing (funeralhomeprofits.com) and author of Making Your Phone Ring With Internet Marketing: For Funeral Homes.



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