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# Advertisers Can't Quit Google, Despite Complaints About Traffic and Ads



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By Catherine Perloff

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**No matter how** annoyed publishers and advertisers get with Google, they just can't seem to quit it. Some publishers complain that Google searches are directing less traffic to their sites lately. Some advertisers say Google search ads aren't showing up next to the terms they paid for, but rather against other terms. And yet both groups say they're continuing to spend more money on Google search ads.

The reason? Publishers and advertisers have no other good option, even as the rise of ChatGPT has shown signs of sapping Google's power in the Web ecosystem. The phenomenon helps explain how Google is maintaining double-digit search ad growth—11.7% in the second quarter, slightly faster growth than the first quarter—despite signs that people are searching for information less on Google than they used to.

## The Takeaway

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- Websites are increasing their Google search ad spending to draw traffic
- Advertisers are spending more despite complaints that search ads have been less efficient lately
- Advertisers say Google ads are not appearing next to complex questions as often as they have in the past

“It’s not like you’ve got this wonderful assortment of good alternatives,” said Sam Tomlinson, an executive vice president at search-focused marketing agency Warschawski. “There’s no ads on ChatGPT at this point. Bing ads suck more than Google ads.”

Google’s strength in search may soon be further weakened. A federal judge is expected to rule within weeks on how Google should overhaul its search business in response to his finding that Google had an illegal monopoly in general-purpose search engines and in search text advertising, the ads that appear at the top of search results.

The Department of Justice and other plaintiffs in the case have asked for sweeping remedies, including forcing Google to share data with its search engine rivals and potentially even split off its Chrome browser, seen as a key distribution channel for Google Search.

Publishers’ complaint is that they’re getting less traffic from Google searches these days, which may be a result of either ChatGPT drawing away some queries or the impact of Google adding AI Overviews to its searches. A survey by Pew Research published in late July found that “Google users were less likely to click on result links when visiting search pages with an AI summary compared with those without one.” (Google says the study used a flawed methodology.)

Despite their complaints, some publishers say they are willing to spend more money on paid ads to drive traffic if it declines.



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“The immediate reaction when you lose organic search, you have to make it up somewhere, and paid search is the next best bet,” said Richard Chandler, vice president of media for online education company Stride. It considered beefing up its paid search spending a few months ago when organic search dipped, although the search decline eventually rebounded, and in the end the company didn’t increase spending on search ads.

Calvin Nichols, head of paid search at ad agency Wpromote, estimates that more than half of his advertiser clients have seen declines in traffic to their sites this year, sometimes by double digits. Of those clients that have seen a decline, at least half have responded by spending more on Google ads, he said.

“A lot of clients have seen that organic presence erode, and they’ve moved some efforts into the paid component,” he said. “That doesn’t mean they’re happy about it.”

In a statement, a Google spokesperson said: “AI features are driving growth in Search, including commercial queries, and people are asking longer and more complex questions, creating new opportunities for brands to be discovered. Advertisers invest in Search Ads because they work and we have introduced features like AI Max to help our partners appear in these new moments.”

### Less Efficient

Meanwhile, Tomlinson says he is frustrated that Google search ads are becoming a less efficient way of delivering the results that he wants. Tomlinson buys Google ads on behalf of a brand of skin care cream that retails for over \$100, bidding on the term “night cream” or “night cream with retinol.”

Lately, though, he has noticed that the ads appear next to specific brand names, rather than general questions about night cream. And the brands are down-market from the product he is advertising. Since an ad for a skin cream that costs \$135 might not appeal to a shopper looking for a cheaper product, the spending is wasted.

As a result, Tomlinson said his clients end up spending more money to reach the same number of customers. He estimated that around 60% of search ads now appear next to the queries where clients want to be. A year ago, more like 80% to 90% of ads appeared in the desirable spots.

Despite these recent shortcomings, Tomlinson says his clients aren't pulling spending from Google, because even search ads that appear in less desirable spots offer a “superior return” to other outlets.

Tomlinson speculates that this shift results from changes in how consumers use Google search. Instead of typing “skin care cream” into the Google search bar, for example, they're more likely to type specific brand names. He thinks that's because they're more likely to begin their search for skin cream on ChatGPT. By the time they get to Google, they're not looking for new products. “What's left for Google tends to be much more of a specific search where people know far more [precisely] what they want,” Tomlinson said.

As a result, Tomlinson speculates, Google has fewer broad-ranging searches to place ads against, which leads it to place the ads his clients pay for against other products' brand names.

The same change in consumer behavior may explain why advertisers are spending more money on search ads to appear next to specific brand names. The price for advertisers running ads on their own brands increased 16% in the first half of this year, but only 3% on other search terms, according to data from ad agency Tinuiti. Three ad buyers said their investment in brand search has recently outpaced investment in other terms.

Google says it prioritizes sending traffic to the web and is designing its AI search to help people explore the Web. The company also disputes that search queries are declining. CEO Sundar Pichai told analysts last month during the second-quarter earnings report that “overall queries and commercial queries on search” both grew year over year, and that new artificial intelligence features were helping drive the growth.