

Jenn McAlinden:

When I would see competitors bidding on our terms, I didn't think there was anything I could do about it. I didn't have clients that had affiliated programs that were running Trademark Plus, so I thought my hands were tied, so to speak.

Lenox Powell:

I'm Lenox Powell, the host and producer of the Outperform Podcast. On these episodes, I talk with acceleration partners, team members, industry partners, and clients to bring you a behind-the-scenes perspective on what the world's leading brands are doing to outperform in their business and marketing partnerships.

Lenox Powell:

Welcome to the Outperform Podcast. If you've had any experience in the world of paid search, the concept of trademark bidding will be somewhat familiar to you. I say somewhat, because as you're about to hear, even the most experienced paid search professionals often have a very limited, or even completely inaccurate understanding of how trademark bidding can work within an affiliate program.

Lenox Powell:

Joining us on Outperform today, to educate and enlighten us on trademark bidding, and how brands are using it very effectively within their affiliate programs is Jenn McAlinden, senior account manager of digital strategy here at Acceleration Partners. Welcome, Jenn.

Jenn McAlinden:

Hi Lenox, thank you so much for having me. I'm glad to be here.

Lenox Powell:

Jenn, before we dive into trademark bidding in affiliate marketing, tell us about your digital marketing background. How did you find yourself in this world?

Jenn McAlinden:

I start managing paid search back in 2010. I was working with small local businesses, managing their Google Ads accounts. Since then, I've worked across brands of all types and sizes, from global consumer packaged goods, to retail eCommerce, across almost any industry you can imagine. If you can imagine it, I've probably run a search campaign for it. As a search marketer, I firsthand have felt the frustration of seeing competitors and resellers, bidding on my client's branded traffic. And, I wasn't aware there was an avenue that I could pursue, to help alleviate that frustration.

Jenn McAlinden:

I know we're going to be talking about trademark bidding in this conversation. But, in the search industry specifically, it's not really referred to as trademark bidding, that term is more specific on the affiliate side of things. For a search marketer, we think of it as just I have my branded terms and my non-branded terms. And, the branded terms are what affiliates call trademarks, but for search marketers it's just brand and non-brand.

Jenn McAlinden:

It wasn't until I came to AP and started getting familiar with the affiliate space that I really learned that there is this technique, so to speak, called trademark bidding and how truly game changing it can be for a search marketer dealing with these frustrations.

Lenox Powell:

I think that's interesting, because for me in my brain, I made the assumption that trademark bidding is a well known term. That's really fascinating to know that it's really pretty personalized to affiliate marketing.

Lenox Powell:

I know we're going to dive into more detail, but at a high level, what is trademark bidding?

Jenn McAlinden:

In the search world, trademark bidding is just bidding on your client's branded terms. Any long tail, short tail keyword that includes your client's brand name. In the affiliate space, trademark bidding is similar but usually it's limited to a small subset of keywords. It can be any keyword that contains a brand's trademark term, it could be the brand name by itself, or it could be the brand name plus another modifier. Usually, it's brand name plus review, or brand name plus promo code, or discount code, something like that. But, it can be any term containing a brand's trademark.

Lenox Powell:

In your previous role before Acceleration Partners, you were aware of this, and this existed, but it wasn't packaged around these more formal terms, Trademark Plus, trademark bidding, TM Plus. How did you, in your role at Acceleration Partners, how did you connect the dots with Trademark Plus and affiliate marketing?

Jenn McAlinden:

Yeah. Like I said, I experienced the pain point of competitive bidding in the paid search space, I would see it all the time, and I really felt like my hands were tied. Google only allows each domain to run one ad, so you can't have two ads running for your website.

Jenn McAlinden:

When I came to AP and I learned that this was a thing, that we could have affiliate partners bid on our client's trademarked terms, it was like this light bulb went off. This is the solution that I was always looking for as a search marketer to help my brand, in essence, show up twice for one search.

Lenox Powell:

With that in mind, how might a Trademark Plus campaign be structured, or look like within an affiliate program? What's an example?

Jenn McAlinden:

Yeah. Let me make up a client and walk you through the process.

Jenn McAlinden:

First thing we would do is get into their Google Ads account and take a look at what the competitive landscape looks like on their branded terms. Let's say they have three competitors that are bidding on their branded terms and showing up 50 to 70 percent of the time. That's a pretty severe competitive threat, when you have multiple people showing up over half of the time. That means, from the consumer's point of view, if I'm looking for Brand X I might end up at Brand X's site, but I might end up Competitor A instead.

Jenn McAlinden:

In that instance, we would recommend that client work with three Trademark Plus partners. We would go out to those partners and source proposals, giving them the keyword list, giving them some stats on the client's program, so that they can put together a forecast. They can come back to us and say, "If you grant us rights on these keywords, we expect to drive X amount of sales, and we would need X commission rate," and we can really put together that whole proposal for them.

Jenn McAlinden:

Then, we can bring that to the client and get their sign off on it. And then, the partners are able to launch their tests. And we're able to look back, during and after the testing time, to see what's happening with those competitors that were showing up 50 to 75 percent of the time originally. Now with the partners bidding on those terms, those competitors are often times either completely eliminated, or they're reduced from that 50 to 75 percent of the time to now, where they may be only showing up 15% of the time.

Jenn McAlinden:

Again, going back to the customer's perspective, I'm out there on Google typing in Brand X. Instead of seeing Competitors A, B, and C when I do my search, I might see Brand X, and then Partner Y, Partner Z linking through their affiliate program rather than seeing those competitors there at all.

Lenox Powell:

So they're a united front, out in the search engine results pages.

Jenn McAlinden:

Exactly.

Lenox Powell:

This sounds like it could be really valuable to brands. I know you see it, because you are in this unique situation to be in a search marketing role, a search marketing professional, and you work at an agency that's a premiere affiliate marketing agency.

Lenox Powell:

So you grasped this pretty quickly, but was this concept just readily embraced when you brought the idea to clients?

Jenn McAlinden:

Not at first. In affiliate programs, trademark campaigns on paid search engines are usually viewed as a tool for generating incremental sales. And when you look at it from that angle, they're not always seen

as successful because a lot of brands find them not to be incremental. Because they say, "These customers are already searching for our brand, so they would have bought from us anyway. This isn't incremental, we don't want to continue running it."

Jenn McAlinden:

I think there's some misconception that Trademark Plus is having partners just bidding on your brand name plus promo code, plus coupon code. But, it really is so much more than that. Trademark bidding can cover any of your client's branded terms. It could be just the brand name by itself, or it could be the brand name plus a modifier, like reviews. It's really going to depend on where there is that competitive need to have partners coverage.

Lenox Powell:

Gotcha, okay. The misconception, for at least those in the affiliate realm, might equate this concept, trademark bidding, you've also referred to it as Trademark Plus, that concept, a lot of times, is equated to coupon, or a promo code only. But, what you're saying is it's so vast, the sky's the limit for what you could do here. It doesn't have to just be associated with a coupon or a promo code.

Jenn McAlinden:

Right. It's all about really getting into the account and seeing what's the landscape. Where's the need? It's not one-size-fits-all. But, AP's really unique in having me in this dedicated role, so I can combine my search background, and my affiliate knowledge, to speak both languages and be that go-between, between both teams, to help them each understand each other's pain points. And then, reframe the value proposition of Trademark Plus.

Jenn McAlinden:

By bringing a customized strategy with real world examples, it's pretty undeniable. If you go to a client and you say, "Here's Competitor X showing up when I did this search for your brand name. And here's a proposal from Partner Y, and they forecast they can drive this many clicks to your site by running these ads." When they see that real world example, they pretty quickly get bought in.

Jenn McAlinden:

We also position it as a test, so they don't feel pressured to commit indefinitely. We position it as, "Let's run this for 30 days or 60 days, and reevaluate from there, before we decide a longterm solution."

Lenox Powell:

That's great. Yeah, baby step them into it so that they can actually be a part of seeing the performance, seeing the progress unfold as the test is going. That's awesome.

Lenox Powell:

Now that you've overseen quite a few of these campaigns for our clients, what are some of the things you've learned along the way?

Jenn McAlinden:

I think we touched on this before. Really, the main thing we've learned is that the benefits of Trademark Plus are going to vary for every client. At first, we looked at this purely as a defensive tool, like we talked

about, having the Trademark Plus partners really play defense for our clients and block any competitors who are bidding on our clients' trademarked terms. But over time, we've seen that even when there's not a severe competitive threat, these partnerships can really help our clients. Those who have limited budgets, like I mentioned, really extend their footprint.

Jenn McAlinden:

Again, it's really about evaluating each client's needs and goals individually, and building a strategy that will compliment them. And, I think that's really where AP has set itself apart, is that we have this formalized process where we start with an audit, to see what's the current state of the world. Then, we go out and source these proposals. And really figure out, of the 10 proposals we got, what are the best ones that we think are going to compliment our needs and help us meet our goals the best. We really go through this very strategic process, rather than just slapping a couple partners up there and letting them go wild.

Lenox Powell:

And, once they get into the groove of understanding Trademark Plus, trademark bidding, what it is, how it could add value to their programs, is it offered to all of their affiliate partners? How do you, again, play that matchmaker? Between okay, "This is your pain point, this is your concern. This is how these partners can help you." So then, how do you go about selecting the right partners for this?

Jenn McAlinden:

Yeah. The number of partners that we work with is going to depend on what the landscape looks like. That's, again, why we start off by doing an audit and seeing what's the current state of things.

Jenn McAlinden:

Then, the partners that we actually select are going to vary based on the brand's needs and their overall strategy. Like I touched on before, if they have a partner that's already their number one partner in the program, then they want to double down on that and we'll recommend running TM Plus with that partner. On the flip side, if they don't want to be so heavily reliant on one or two top partners and they want to have some smaller partners help come up in their performance, then we might launch with those partners. It's really a back and forth conversation with the account team at AP, the client and myself, to understand what's everyone's end goal, and what's everyone's thought process behind the partners we choose.

Lenox Powell:

How does the client's internal search team, if they have one, what role do they play in all of this? Are they looped in, do they need to be? Do they have questions about it? How does that work?

Jenn McAlinden:

It's actually really beneficial to have them looped in. They can help the affiliate team understand some of the pain points they're experiencing. So if they can come to the affiliate team and say, "Yeah, we see Competitor X showing up all the time and it's driving us bonkers," it helps the affiliate team understand okay, this is a real problem our company is facing and here's a great solution that we have.

Jenn McAlinden:

It also helps to diffuse any possible territorial-ness around it. Sometimes, when the paid search team hears that affiliate is going to start having people bidding on paid search, there's understandably a little bit of you're treading on my turf. I think getting everybody on the same page to understand what this is and is not going to do, and just make sure there aren't any questions or hesitations, it actually tends to result in better partnerships when everybody is equally bought in. And internally, even without AP, they can be having conversations to really understand each other's pain points, and then how TM Plus is going to help fix that.

Lenox Powell:

Yeah, that's great. Because putting myself into a brand's shoes, if they're listening to this I could see them going, "Yeah, not sure. How would we loop our search team in?" It's really incredible that you are in this role and have this perspective because, as you said earlier, you speak both languages. You understand the needs, and concerns, and pain points of the in-house search team, but then you also put your affiliate hat on and you know how to bridge that gap.

Jenn McAlinden:

Right.

Lenox Powell:

That's awesome. Talk about some Trademark Plus campaign successes you've seen. I'm sure, if somebody's listening to this and they're like, "Okay, that all sounds great, but let's get down to the brass tacks." What are you actually seeing, as far as results?

Jenn McAlinden:

We've had a few instances where brands had competitors showing up 50%, 60%, even 75% of the time on their branded keywords. And, we were able to either completely eliminate, or at the very least drastically reduce their presence. So taking from 60% of the time, to now that competitor's only showing up 15% of the time.

Jenn McAlinden:

We've also had a brand, where we were already running trademark partnerships with them, and they reached out to our team over the Thanksgiving weekend when they noticed a top competitor started bidding on their brand name plus Black Friday sale. Since those partnerships were already in place, we were able to really quickly, over a holiday weekend, pivot and get our partners bidding on that term so that they forced that competitor off the page. And, that was a huge win because, again, had we not had these trademark partnerships already in place, we would not have been able to spin that up over a holiday weekend. Having those partnerships already up in running, we were able to really quickly pivot and give them the coverage where they need it, in a pinch.

Lenox Powell:

That's great. I am also thinking, too, because I know historically, companies usually have it in their terms and conditions that affiliate partners cannot bid on their trademarked terms. So I think that's pretty par for the course, in an affiliate, from what most know. I can imagine there's some reeducation here, with this. To say, "Yes, across the board, standard operating procedure is yes, affiliates cannot bid on trademarked terms." I would surmise that an affiliate partner would actually be pretty stoked to get the

opportunity to finally be able to bid on the trademarked terms of a brand, especially if they're a really well known brand.

Jenn McAlinden:

Absolutely. Yeah, it's completely a win-win, because the brand gets the benefit of either having a partner defensively block out competitors, or they get to extend their reach if they have a limited budget. And, the partners get to bid on these very lucrative keywords, and drive additional traffic to their site, drive additional sales for their affiliate links, and get increased commissions obviously. It's a win-win in that sense.

Jenn McAlinden:

The partners will usually give media subsidies back to the brands, as a thank you for letting them bid on these terms. It also helps the brands help get a little bit more reach with the partners that they've chosen, in that they may get a media subsidy package of a few thousand to several thousand dollars a month, of basically free placements on that partner's site, in exchange for allowing them to bid on their trademarked terms.

Lenox Powell:

Oh, that's really cool. It sounds like it definitely can also serve to strengthen the partnerships, and also increase engagement.

Jenn McAlinden:

Absolutely. It does take, that you mentioned reeducation, it does take some reeducation. The reason we have that written in our terms is because we don't want partners just willy-nilly, running ads without any oversight on our partner. We want to selectively choose the partners that we allow to do this, the keywords we allow them to bid on. We want to really have control over it, rather than just saying, "Any of our partners can bid on anything they want." It's a blanket no, with an asterisk of, "Unless we give you special permission."

Lenox Powell:

Yeah. It sounds like it's a very customized, very curated, very carefully packaged, case-by-case. Because I would imagine, too, that there's maybe been some clients or brands that we work with that would say, "Yeah, I'm interested in trying trademark bidding." But then when you do your audit and you really dig deep you're like, "It might not be the best option for them."

Jenn McAlinden:

Yeah, it's definitely not a fit for everybody, we have no problem saying that. If we feel like it's not going to benefit a brand after we do that audit, we'll come out and say, "We don't think it's a good fit at this time, and we're happy to reassess it down the road." But, we're certainly not going to force anybody to do it when we don't think it's in their best interest.

Lenox Powell:

I love that how it's structured is, "Hey, this is a test."

Jenn McAlinden:

Yeah.

Lenox Powell:

It really could work for you, and here's how it might work for you, and this is the kind of things we'll be looking at. But, it's going to be very carefully done, in a very calculated and customized way. That's awesome.

Lenox Powell:

Jenn, the foundation you've laid and the work you have done to bring smart, strategic Trademark Plus campaigns into our clients' affiliate programs is truly nothing short of impressive. It's really exciting to hear about the clients who've participating in these campaigns, and just the incredible results they've realized in their programs. I know you've worked really hard to bring these campaigns, and the value of them, to the fore. I'm thrilled that we're able to spotlight not only your efforts, but also educate our listeners about how trademark bidding, Trademark Plus, can and should be used in affiliate marketing to work more creatively and strategically with affiliate partners, and really bridge two important forms of marketing, paid search and affiliate, to realize more efficient and cost effective outcomes. A big thank you for taking the time to chat with me today.

Jenn McAlinden:

Absolutely. You're welcome.

Lenox Powell:

And to you out there listening, we appreciate you taking the time to do so. In the show notes for this episode, we'll include some additional resources about how trademark bidding campaigns can work within affiliate programs. Until next time, keep outperforming.