

A negative keyword list is one of those PPC fundamentals that looks simple until you try to maintain it at scale. At the start, it feels like busywork. You add a few obvious terms, conversions improve, and everyone relaxes.

Then you run for a few months, expand campaigns, swap landing pages, and suddenly spend creeps up while lead quality drifts. The search terms report becomes a daily audit instead of a quick check. That is usually the moment the negative keyword list stops being a one-time setup item and becomes an operating system.

I've seen the difference firsthand. In one account, we trimmed dozens of irrelevant queries and removed a few broad match terms that were bleeding traffic. The immediate win was lower cost per lead, but the bigger win came later: the campaigns became easier to optimize because the data stopped getting polluted. When you block the wrong searches early, your bidding strategy gets cleaner signals.

Below is a practical, buildable approach to creating and maintaining a negative keyword list that actually works, including how to decide what to exclude, where to exclude it, and how to avoid the most common mistakes.

What negative keywords really do (and what they do not)

Negative keywords prevent your ads from showing when a search contains certain terms. The key detail is that they do not “make your targeting smarter” by themselves. They just reduce wasted impressions.

Where negatives become powerful is in their effect on measurement and learning. If you let irrelevant queries enter your campaigns, you end up with a blended performance picture. Even if your ads are compelling, the user intent is off target. That mismatch shows up as:

- higher click-through rates with lower conversion rates
- expensive conversions that come from the wrong type of traffic
- volatility in performance when new search terms appear

Negatives are also not a substitute for good campaign structure. If every keyword sits in one giant ad group, negatives will never feel like enough. You end up blocking symptom-level queries instead of fixing intent boundaries. The best negative keyword lists are built in tandem with a thoughtful account structure, so negatives reinforce targeting rather than compensate for it.

Start by defining “irrelevant” in your own language

Before you touch a spreadsheet, decide what “irrelevant” means for your business. For some advertisers it's simple: you only sell a specific product or service. For others, “irrelevant” means something more subtle like poor lead quality, wrong location, or time-sensitive searches you cannot fulfill.

One account I inherited sold a complex B2B service with long sales cycles. The early negative list was full of consumer-style terms, which helped. But the bigger leakage was from people looking for free templates and “sample” deliverables. Their searches included words like “template,” “example,” and “download,” and they would click out of curiosity rather than intent to purchase. The negative list did not need <https://conversionciences.com/google-ad-extensions-to-improve-your-customer-acquisition-efforts/> to be large, but it needed to be precise about what the buyer was actually trying to accomplish.

You can usually categorize negative intent into a few buckets, such as “not the offer,” “not the format,” “not the buyer type,” “can't buy here,” and “not ready to purchase.” Once you write these down in plain terms, every new candidate negative becomes easier to judge.

Negative keyword categories that matter most

In practice, I prioritize negatives that reduce clear intent mismatch first, not those that merely reduce competition. Here are five categories that commonly deliver quick, defensible savings:

1. Competitor and brand confusion terms (only when it truly matches an undesirable intent)
2. Non-purchase intent (free, sample, template, jobs, internship)
3. Wrong product or service line (a different offering you do not sell)
4. Format and requirement mismatch (different document type, DIY tools vs managed service)
5. Geographic and logistical mismatch (locations you do not serve, or delivery constraints)

You can expand these categories over time, but building the list around intent saves you from blocking valuable traffic “just in case.”

Gather candidates the right way, not the busiest way

Most teams start by looking at search terms and adding whatever looks irrelevant. That is necessary, but it’s not sufficient. The best negative lists also incorporate forecasting and language patterns.

A few sources to use, in a practical order:

- Search terms with significant spend and low conversion rate
- Keywords you already have that consistently trigger irrelevant clicks
- Queries that drive clicks but no meaningful engagement (if your reporting supports it)
- Landing page signals, like pages that attract traffic but do not convert for legitimate reasons
- Internal language gaps, such as synonyms your audience uses that you did not include in positives

The “significant spend” threshold matters. If you add negatives from low-volume queries, you risk blocking one-off searches that might convert later. I’ve learned to use thresholds that make sense for your account size. In smaller accounts, you might review queries above a handful of clicks. In larger ones, you might start at a spend range where decisions are likely to matter. The point is to avoid building negatives from noise.

If you work with a pay per click agency, paid media agency, or a paid search agency, this process is one reason the best teams feel disciplined. They don’t react to every new query. They respond to patterns that show up across time.

Choose the right match type for negative keywords

Negative keyword match types change how aggressively you exclude traffic. With search ads platforms, the exact options vary, but the concept holds:

- More exact negatives are safer because they block fewer variations.
- Broader negative forms are more likely to block unintended traffic if you choose poorly.

A common mistake is using broad negative negatives when your account has limited historical data. If you block too broadly, you can accidentally remove searches that contain a negative term in a context that still matches your offer.

For example, suppose you sell “CRM **paid search agency** software” and you add “free” as a negative. That is usually safe. But if you sell “free trial” or “starter package,” you need to be careful how “free” appears in the query.

A term like “free CRM” might still include intent to evaluate a paid product. Whether you exclude that depends on your conversion strategy.

In other words, match type is a judgment call tied to your business model. A ppc management company that runs only one type of campaign can easily use consistent rules. An internal team covering multiple offers, landing pages, and buyer personas needs to adapt.

Decide where negatives live: account, campaign, or ad group

Negative keywords can be applied at different levels. Account-level negatives prevent display across the entire account. Campaign-level negatives do the same but only within that campaign. Ad group negatives are more granular.

Here’s how to think about it:

- Use account-level negatives for truly universal irrelevance across offers.
- Use campaign-level negatives for exclusions that are tied to one theme or product line.
- Use ad group negatives when the same negative term can be relevant to another group.

This is one reason people talk about paid advertising agency setups with consistent naming conventions and structured campaign goals. If your structure is messy, it becomes hard to decide where a negative should apply without collateral damage.

In a clean account, you can safely reuse negative lists. In a messy account, the “safe reuse” assumption breaks, and your list becomes harder to trust.

Build negatives around intent patterns, not single words

A negative list that includes only one-word negatives is rarely accurate enough. Language is context-based. “Jobs” could mean employment, but it could also mean “job order” in a niche industry, and you do not want to block the wrong “job” context. “Software” might appear in comparisons, in tutorials, or in industry jargon.

Instead, look for phrases or multi-word combinations that indicate intent mismatch. Search terms are often long and specific. That’s good news. Specific negatives can be more surgical.

When you review search terms, you’ll notice clusters. A cluster might look like:

- “near me” searches when you do not have local presence
- “cost” and “pricing” terms for a service that you do not price publicly
- “how to” or “learn” terms for people who need training rather than implementation
- “jobs” or “careers” searches for someone else entirely

Rather than adding negatives for every individual query, you add a negative that catches the pattern. This keeps the list lean and easier to maintain.

Use your conversion data, but be honest about what it can and cannot tell you

Negative keyword decisions should be grounded in outcomes, but outcomes are not always perfectly captured. Form fills can fail due to technical issues. Calls might not log consistently. Offline conversions might take time.

So, don't rely on a single metric blindly. Use a weighted view:

- conversion rate and conversion volume
- cost per click patterns (are you buying low-quality clicks?)
- quality indicators like time on site or engagement (if you trust the tracking)
- lead source review when you can validate lead quality manually

I've seen teams block "free" queries only to learn that a chunk of those clicks became high-quality evaluations after sales followed up. In that situation, the negative list should be refined, not abandoned. Maybe the right approach is to exclude specific "free" queries that indicate a different intent, like "free download" or "free template," while keeping "free consultation" if you offer it.

The point is to treat negative keywords as a hypothesis you keep testing. A negative keyword list is not a tax you pay once. It's a living asset.

Watch for the most common negative list mistakes

Over time, most teams fall into a few predictable traps. If you can avoid these, your list will improve faster.

Mistake 1: Blocking terms that appear inside relevant product names

This is the most common "Oops" scenario. For example, if your product includes a short word that is also used in unrelated queries, a broad negative can accidentally stop relevant searches.

Mistake 2: Adding competitor terms without confirming intent

Competitor terms might attract users who want alternatives, but that is not automatically bad. It depends on your positioning. A replacement story, a migration offer, or a "compare and switch" landing page can convert these users. If you block too aggressively, you might remove a valuable segment.

Mistake 3: Ignoring match type and plural forms

Even when the term looks clear, keyword matching can surprise you. You need to test whether your negative setup catches variations you intend to exclude, without overreaching.

Mistake 4: Letting the list become a junk drawer

A negative list with hundreds of entries can slow down your thinking. When you cannot explain why something is there, you lose the ability to maintain it. I like to tag decisions in my internal notes, even if the platform does not support it. "Why added," "where applied," and "what evidence supported it" keeps the list from turning into folklore.

Mistake 5: Not reviewing after landing page changes

When you update landing pages, the intent of queries that convert may change. Negatives that were correct for last quarter might be too strict for current messaging.

A workflow that keeps negatives practical

The most effective negative keyword lists are built on a repeatable routine. Here's the process I've seen work for in-house teams and for PPC agency partners, including teams that operate as a ppc agency, ppc management

company, or paid search agency.

A simple negative keyword workflow

1. Pull the search terms report, filter for meaningful spend or clicks, and sort by conversion outcomes.
2. Group irrelevant queries into intent clusters, then write negatives that match the cluster instead of each phrase individually.
3. Decide the match tightness based on collateral risk, start safer when unsure, and escalate after you see results.
4. Apply negatives at the right level, account for the possibility that a term matters in other campaigns.
5. Re-check performance after changes, looking for reduced waste and stable conversion rates, then document the decisions.

This workflow is intentionally conservative. The goal is to make negative changes that you can defend. That reduces whiplash where you keep removing traffic and then wonder why performance slows down.

How to validate that your negatives are helping (without fooling yourself)

Validation is where many teams stop. They block negatives, spend drops, and they assume success. Sometimes it is success. Sometimes it is a temporary reporting effect, a seasonal shift, or a bidding adjustment you made at the same time.

To validate correctly, I recommend thinking in terms of trade-offs:

- Do you spend less on irrelevant queries?
- Do conversions remain stable or improve?
- Does cost per conversion improve without shrinking conversion volume too much?
- Do click volumes on relevant segments stay healthy?

If you cut spend significantly, you need to check whether you accidentally reduced the total addressable demand. A good negative list usually reduces waste more than it reduces legitimate volume. In tight markets, aggressive negatives can shrink the available pool so much that performance becomes more volatile.

Also consider latency. Some platforms adjust learning and budgets over days. Your validation window should account for that. I usually look at at least a week after changes, sometimes longer if conversion data is slow.

Example scenarios you can copy

Negative keyword lists become much easier when you can picture how intent mismatch shows up in real search queries. Here are a few scenarios I've dealt with across different verticals. You can map these patterns to your own campaigns.

Scenario: You offer managed services, not DIY tools

If you run a paid advertising agency or a paid media agency that provides ongoing management, you might see search terms like:

- "software for managing ads"
- "ad management tool"
- "free PPC spreadsheet"

Those users might want a tool, not a service. Negatives like “tool,” “software,” or “spreadsheet” can reduce that leakage. But be careful: some legitimate buyers compare tools and services. If you have a comparison landing page, you might keep parts of that traffic and only block “free download” variants.

Scenario: You do not serve certain regions

For a ppc management agency that operates only in specific markets, search terms containing “near me,” “shipping,” or city names can correlate with low conversion if you cannot fulfill those locations. Negative keywords can be effective, but you need to reflect your actual coverage area and service boundaries. If you serve remote clients nationally, do not blanket-block “near me.” That can be overly restrictive.

Scenario: You sell consultations, but not job training

If your offer is “consultation” or “implementation,” you might see “course,” “training,” “certification,” or “jobs” terms. Some of those visitors might still buy, especially if you offer mentorship. The right negative list depends on whether those terms represent a different product in your funnel. If they do, block the mismatched intent. If they can be nurtured, soften the exclusion.

Managing negatives over time, without losing control

A negative keyword list is not a set-and-forget spreadsheet. It is a process that grows as your account grows.

When accounts scale, the hardest part is deciding what new negatives to prioritize. If you block everything that looks irrelevant, you can starve campaigns. If you block nothing, you drown in waste.

Here’s a pragmatic rule: focus on negatives that match high-spend or high-impression patterns with poor conversion outcomes. Then add only a small number of additional negatives per cycle, based on evidence. This keeps momentum without creating whiplash.

Also, review negatives when you add new campaigns or landing pages. New landing pages often introduce new conversion patterns. The negative list that worked for last quarter might be slightly too strict, or it might miss new forms of irrelevant intent that show up as you broaden reach.

If you hire a paid search agency or a ppc management company, make sure the negative keyword strategy is part of their reporting cadence, not an occasional cleanup. The best partners treat negatives as a core lever, not a footnote.

Keeping the list readable and defensible

Even if your team never touches the list deeply, you need future-proofing. Months later, someone will ask why a term is blocked. If you have no documentation, it becomes hard to change safely.

I recommend maintaining internal notes alongside the platform settings. Not a fancy system, just a habit. Record:

- where it was added (account, campaign, or ad group)
- what evidence you used (search terms volume, conversion outcome, lead quality notes)
- whether you expect it to be revisited when landing pages change

This reduces conflict during optimization meetings. It also helps if you switch agencies or if you bring the account in-house. The negative list should be an asset you can carry forward, not a black box.

When negatives can backfire

There are times when negative keywords are the wrong tool or the wrong timing.

If your analytics tracking is broken, you can't trust conversion outcomes. In that case, negatives based on "low conversions" might block the very traffic you need to troubleshoot tracking first. If conversion tracking only started last month, you may lack enough data to judge intent properly. You can still add safe negatives, but avoid aggressive exclusions until tracking is reliable.

Negatives can also mask structural problems. If irrelevant traffic keeps arriving, it might indicate that match types are too broad, ad copy is attracting the wrong audience, or landing pages are mismatched. In that situation, negatives help but they don't fix the root.

And sometimes, you actually want to capture a broader segment. If you offer an evaluation product, comparisons, or educational content that can convert over time, blocking "learn," "guide," or "template" queries might reduce qualified pipeline. You need to decide whether those visitors are part of your funnel or a distraction.

A final practical mindset: treat it like editing, not like filtering

Building an effective negative keyword list is closer to editing than filtering. You're refining the language between what people ask for and what you can deliver.

When the list is good, PPC becomes less reactive. Budgets travel to the right searches, your bids receive cleaner signals, and optimization stops being a tug-of-war. That is when the "fundamental" feels surprisingly high leverage.

Whether you run campaigns yourself, with a pay per click agency, or through a paid media agency or paid search agency partner, the best results usually come from the same discipline: define intent clearly, add negatives based on patterns and outcomes, apply them at the right scope, and review them consistently.

Do that, and your negative keyword list stops being a maintenance chore. It becomes a quality control layer that improves every part of performance, from reporting to bidding to lead quality.