



HOW TO MONITOR AND DETECT INVALID AD ACTIVITY



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INTRODUCTION

Paid media is a core marketing channel for brands of all sizes, but whether you're spending £100 or £100,000 per month, you want to know that your budget is being spent on the thing you're expecting. Click fraud and similar concepts have been bubbling just below the surface for many years, but as Google increases the level of automation, it's understandably increasing the level of concern around issues of ad spend and exactly where it's going.

There have been several tools launched that promise to discover every invalid click on one of your ads, but – in truth – Google has actually improved considerably in its ability to detect and remove the invalid clicks and interactions from campaigns. In this eBook we'll show you how to check your campaigns for invalid clicks and interactions, how to try to limit their number by making better ads, and how to check manually if you want to make sure you're not missing anything.



WHAT ARE INVALID CLICKS AND INTERACTIONS?

While the majority of tools tackling this issue will focus on click fraud specifically (usually bot driven/click farm clicks), there are a few types of invalid activity that Google is checking for when it automatically checks interactions with your ads. Google checks dozens of data points from IP addresses to duplication, the time and timing of interactions and more – all of which will result in your account not being charged.

INVALID CLICKS

When Google considers a click illegitimate, your account is not charged for them, and they will not affect your account statistics (you can check for invalid clicks, however, which we'll get to). Google states that it closely monitors all clicks for anything illegitimate which could have been generated by repeated manual clicks, or by automated tools, robots or other deceptive software.



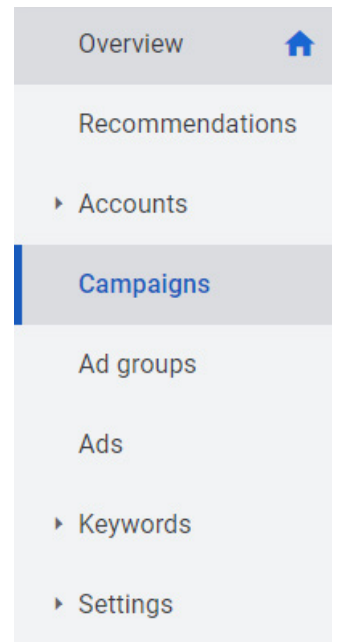
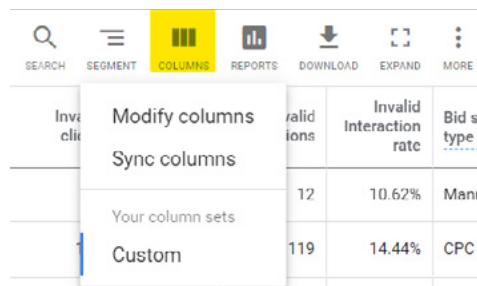
INVALID INTERACTIONS

Invalid interactions are those which could have been the result of prohibited methods; this includes repeated manual interactions, automated tools, bots or any other deceptive software.

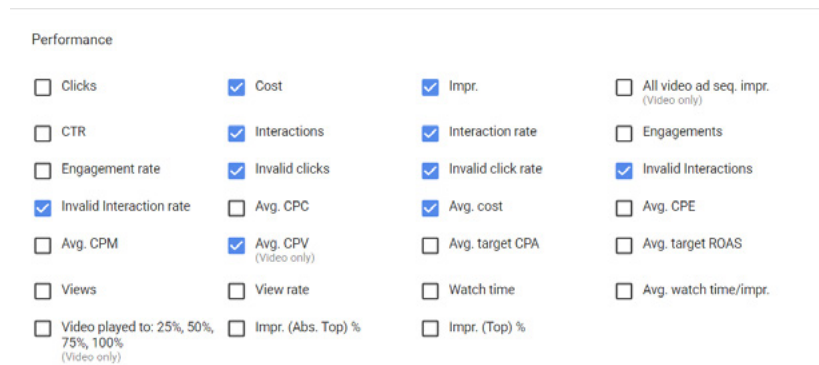
HOW TO FIND INVALID CLICKS AND INTERACTIONS IN GOOGLE ADS

Invalid clicks and interactions are a campaign level metric, and can be added to the tables on that page. So, from your account overview, select 'Campaigns', this will give you a timed series above and a table below.

Above the table (but below the timed series), you will see a menu that allows you to modify the table. Select the 'columns' option, then 'Modify columns'.



This will open up a screen with a number of different column options. To see your invalid clicks/interaction metrics, you just need to expand the 'Performance' option. This will give you a tick box list from which you can select the metrics.



Once you've selected the invalid metric options, you can save and see them feature as additional rows in the table on your campaign page.

Invalid clicks	Invalid click rate	Invalid Interactions	Invalid Interaction rate
12	10.62%	12	10.62%
119	14.44%	119	14.44%
91	13.38%	91	13.38%
7	11.11%	7	11.11%

5 TIPS TO AVOID INVALID CLICKS

One of the best ways to solve the issue of invalid clicks and interactions is by ensuring your ads are set up well in the first place – prevention is often better than a cure, after all. Here are five things you can do to reduce your exposure to invalid clicks.

1. SET AUTOMATIC TAGGING

If you're using Google Ads campaigns to generate traffic for your landing pages, then enabling auto-tagging attaches a GCLID-parameter (a Google Click ID – a unique identifier) to the URL of the landing page, this helps to identify this specific pageview as a click on your ad.

2. SET APPROPRIATE GEOTARGETING

Using geotargeting is primarily a case of best practice, but it can also help to prevent click fraud and invalid clicks and interactions. By blocking IP addresses in irrelevant locations (whether that's local, city, region or continent level) from viewing your ads, you can dramatically cut your exposure.

3. SET BUDGETS

Whether a limit to clicks or spend, setting and monitoring budgets may not exclude the possibility of click fraud or other such activities, but it does set a firm limit on the amount that such activity can cost you and allow you to catch it earlier.

4. USE HONEYPOTS

While CAPTCHAs will serve a similar purpose (preventing bot traffic completing forms etc.), they're also pretty awful UX. However, by using a 'honeypot' field on your forms – a field which is present in the code of the form but not visible to the user, you present the bot with the opportunity to tell on itself. While a human user will not be able to see the field, a bot will not only see it but complete it, allowing you to filter your results and remove bot traffic with ease.

5. TARGET YOUR ADS AT SPECIFIC SITES

Google will allow your ads to show on any site in the network that matches criteria you set, but many of these can be low quality sites which are at higher risk of click fraud. By limiting where your ads display to sites you know are high quality and of high relevance to your target demographics, you can limit your exposure.

HOW TO MANUALLY LOOK FOR INVALID CLICKS

This is a hassle, and will depend on how your server is generating logs, but manually checking for invalid clicks is possible with enough time and effort. While Google is good at detecting invalid activities, it's worth reviewing manually from time to time to ensure that nothing is being missed – and to help Google improve what it does.

In a piece on [ad traffic quality](#), Google gives the following examples of log file entries – one without GCLID (the former) and one with (the latter).

```
172.26.136.223 - - [19/Jul/2011:15:27:55 +0100] "GET /movies_GoogleAds.html HTTP/1.1" 200 8404 "www.google.com" "Mozilla/5.0 (Macintosh; Intel Mac OS X 10_6_8) AppleWebKit/534.30 (KHTML, like Gecko) Chrome/12.0.742.122 Safari/534.30" 172.26.136.223 - - [19/Jul/2011:19:21:43 +0100] "GET /movies.html HTTP/1.1" 200 8404 "www.google.com" "Mozilla/5.0 (Macintosh; Intel Mac OS X 10_6_8) AppleWebKit/534.30 (KHTML, like Gecko) Chrome/12.0.742.122 Safari/534.30"
```

```
172.26.136.223 - - [19/Jul/2011:19:21:43 +0100] "GET /movies.html?gclid=CLzkq4Lcz5ECFQcKGgodwjgiyA HTTP/1.1" 200 8404 "www.google.com" "Mozilla/5.0 (Macintosh; Intel Mac OS X 10_6_8) AppleWebKit/534.30 (KHTML, like Gecko) Chrome/12.0.742.122 Safari/534.30"
```

As you can see, there's plenty of information – from IP address to browser – and it's in this information you can look for discrepancies and irregularities.



Unfortunately, there can be tens of thousands of these entries depending on the period you're reviewing, so analysis is often better done with a tool, or depending on your level of fluency with various code languages, with Python. However, you can rename the .log file to .csv and open it in Google Sheets to at least begin the analysis process.

There is a fantastic blog on organising the data [here](#) (it also has some tips on using python for the analysis portion and for the adventurous). For beginners, however, there are a couple of things you can do to try to detect invalid activity beyond what Google might be detecting – however, both of these will need auto-tagging active in order to prove that an ad click has occurred.

CHECK IP ADDRESSES

For those still struggling to find the time to learn Python, getting it at least partially organised is a start, from there you can use free tools such as [Domain and IP Bulk Lookup Tool](#) to check for invalid and spoofed IP addresses and also for addresses that are located outside of you're the limits of your location targeting.

CHECK REFERRER ADDRESSES

Some ad fraud will disguise its origins using spoofed referral addresses, so a second method of detecting possible ad fraud is to check for invalid referrers attached to the GCLIDs of your ads.

HOW TO APPLY FOR A REFUND ON INVALID CLICKS

Any refund request will need to begin at Google's [Click Quality Form](#). You'll need to provide your Google Ads details and any evidence you've gathered of invalid traffic. Using the information you've gathered, fill out the IP addresses, affected campaigns, ad groups, keywords and date ranges of the invalid traffic.

In the section that asks you to attach a copy of your weblogs, you'll need to simply attach the raw log rather than the organised data. However, once you've filled in the appropriate sections, you can click 'submit' to file your refund request. Google will then notify you if your claim is approved. This can often take six weeks or more, but once done you'll see a credit under 'Tools & Settings', 'Billing', 'Transactions', 'Adjustments'.

CONCLUSION

Depending on your budget, basic monitoring of your campaigns will generally be enough to ensure that you're not spending your hard-won ad budget on invalid activity. Google is improving its ability to detect this activity, but it's unlikely to make a big push without some pressure from advertisers. For that reason, larger budget campaigns should take some steps to monitor for invalid activity – whether manually, or using code or a third-party tool – to ensure that they are double-checking Google's sums.



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Click Consult is a multi award-winning search & digital marketing agency with a focus on organic (SEO) and paid search (PPC). Part of global consumer brand business Ceuta Group, we have a team of 70-plus specialists and a portfolio of more than 60 clients worldwide.

Our complementary services include content marketing, social media and analytics. We can also offer training and consultation to support your teams or existing strategy.

Click was named both SEO Agency of the Year and Organic Search (SEO) Team of the Year 2020; ranks within Econsultancy's 'Top 100 Digital Agencies', and Prolific North's 'Top 50 Digital Agencies'. We're also a Google Premier Partner, and a Microsoft Advertising Select Agency Partner.

HOW CAN WE HELP YOU?

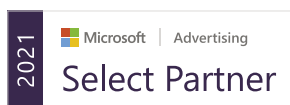
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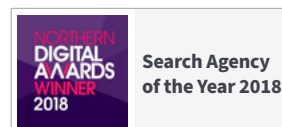
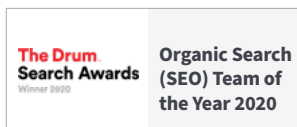
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