WeAdU · Field Guide

Google Ads Best Practices for **Multi-Brand** Resellers

2012 Edition

The year Google Shopping stopped being free – and what a reseller carrying several brands should have done about Product Listing Ads.

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1. The year Google Shopping stopped being **free**

On May 31, 2012, Google announced that Google Product Search would become Google Shopping and move, in Google's words, to "a purely commercial model built on Product Listing Ads". Free product listings ended in the United States: from October 17, 2012, Google Shopping results in the US came only from merchants running Product Listing Ads, ranked by a combination of relevance and bid. Google's stated reason was data quality – "we believe that having a commercial relationship with merchants will encourage them to keep their product information fresh and up to date." For a reseller carrying several brands, the question changed overnight from "is my feed accepted?" to "which brand's products am I willing to pay for, and how much?"

- Link Merchant Center to AdWords and have Product Listing Ads live before August 15, 2012. Merchants who did received a 10% monthly credit on their US Product Listing Ads spend through December 31, 2012 – on the condition, spelled out on August 7, that they promoted all of their online inventory and complied with policy. Merchants active on Product Search as of May 30 could also claim a $100 AdWords credit.
- Do not stop at the first campaign that the simplified setup flow of July 2012 walked you through from inside Merchant Center. It was the fastest way to be live and the slowest way to learn: one bid for every brand, every margin and every price point.
- Set a budget per brand from day one. Once bid was part of ranking on the Shopping tab as well – Google confirmed on August 7, 2012 that it had "recently started" ranking that way – a pooled budget let whichever brand had the highest prices and the most searches absorb the spend, whether or not it had the best margin.

2. Product targets: five attributes, and **brand** is one of them

In 2012 a Product Listing Ads campaign was steered by product targets built from feed attributes: *brand*, *product_type*, *condition*, *adwords_grouping* (one value per product) and *adwords_labels* (up to ten values per product), plus a catch-all "All products" target. Targeting by product ID, with a bid per item, only arrived on October 2, 2012. Google's own implementation guide advised identifying "a handful of big impact products or product categories" and focusing on "high value segments"; practitioner guidance published within months was more direct – "set up an ad group for each brand, and within that ad group, set up a target for each brand." For a reseller, brand was the natural first split, because it is the dimension along which margin, trademark permissions and supplier relationships actually differ.

- One ad group per brand, with a brand product target and its own bid. Where budgets needed to differ – a flagship brand against a long tail of smaller ones – one campaign per brand tier, since budgets sat at campaign level.
- Reserve *adwords_grouping* for the one dimension you will always need, such as margin tier, and use *adwords_labels* for what changes: clearance, promotion, seasonal lines. Both values had to be written into the feed, so the feed, not the AdWords interface, was where the structure lived.
- Build targets that do not overlap. Practitioners of the period warned that overlapping targets "essentially compete against one another"; a product sitting in a brand target and in an "All products" target is a product with two bids and no clear owner.
- After October 2: item-level targets and bids for the handful of products that carried the season, on top of the brand structure rather than instead of it.

3. Brand, MPN, GTIN: the **identifiers** that decided whether a product could show

The feed rules that governed 2012 were set the year before. From May 3, 2011, feeds targeting the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Germany had to carry at least two of three unique product identifiers – *brand*, *mpn* and *gtin* – with a GTIN required for media, an ISBN for books, and exemptions for apparel and one-of-a-kind items. From September 22, 2011, *google_product_category* was required for Apparel & Accessories, Media and Software, and apparel feeds in the US, UK, France, Germany and Japan needed *gender* and *age_group* (plus *color* and *size* in the US), along with *image_link* and *availability*. For a reseller the *brand* field did double duty: it was one of the identifiers that kept a product approved, and the key that product targets read.

- One spelling per brand across the whole catalogue, checked on every feed update – a brand target only serves the products whose brand value matches it, so every variant spelling is a product the brand's bid never reaches.
- Take MPN and GTIN from the manufacturer's price list, not from a product page: a wrong identifier is a disapproval, and a disapproval is an invisible product.
- Keep the feed fresh and complete. Google's stated rationale for charging was fresher data; a stale price on a paid listing is the fastest way to pay for a click that cannot convert.

4. Trademarks in 2012: keywords open in your markets, ad **text** on conditions

By 2012 Google no longer restricted trademarks as keywords in the United States and Canada, the United Kingdom and Ireland, or the rest of the European Union and EFTA, where the change had taken effect on September 14, 2010. Ad text was another matter. In the US, since June 15, 2009, and in Canada, the UK and Ireland, since September 14, 2010, a reseller could use a brand's trademark in ad text if the landing page was dedicated to selling that brand's products and made the reseller relationship clear; elsewhere in Europe there was no such categorical exception, and a trademark owner's complaint was judged on whether the ad was likely to confuse. On October 31, 2012, Rosetta Stone and Google settled the most-watched US lawsuit over brand keywords, leaving the keyword side of the practice standing.

- Point each brand's ads to a page dedicated to that brand – a brand collection page, not a homepage shared by every brand you carry. In the markets with a reseller exception this was the condition that kept the brand name in your ad text; everywhere else it was the best defence against a confusion complaint.
- Make the reseller relationship visible in the ad and on the page, and keep the brand's products, prices and a way to buy on the page itself.
- One Search campaign per brand, so a complaint about one brand's ad text can be answered without pausing the others.
- Keep each brand's authorisation letter or distributor agreement to hand: complaints were resolved on evidence, and the reseller who could show the relationship kept its ads up.

5. Seller ratings and Trusted Stores: **trust** attaches to the store, not the brand

Seller rating extensions had shown a store's star rating next to its text ads since June 28, 2010, for stores with four or more stars and at least 30 reviews; in September 2012 Google added a freshness rule, counting only reviews from the previous 12 months. Google Trusted Stores, piloted from October 2011, opened to every US merchant on June 7, 2012, and by September 14, 2012 its annotations were appearing on Google Shopping product pages. For a multi-brand reseller these signals had one useful property: they belonged to the store, so a rating earned selling one brand travelled with the ads of every other brand in the account.

- Collect reviews continuously, through a source Google reads, rather than in campaigns: with a 12-month window, a review drive in one quarter is a rating that expires the next year.
- Treat shipping and service metrics as advertising inputs. Trusted Stores qualified stores on shipping reliability and customer service, and the badge then sat on every product you listed, whichever brand made it.
- Do not let one difficult brand – long lead times, high return rates – drag the store's rating down for all the others: fix the fulfilment or stop advertising the brand.

6. Close variants: your brand keywords now match **misspellings**

On April 17, 2012, Google announced that from mid-May, phrase and exact match keywords would "match close variants, including misspellings, singular/plural forms, stemmings, accents and abbreviations", quoting a 3% increase in clicks in its tests. Advertisers could opt out, campaign by campaign, in the keyword matching

options. For a reseller whose catalogue is full of brand names people misspell, this was mostly a gift – and a reason to look again at where the traffic of each brand campaign was really coming from.

- Delete the lists of misspelled brand keywords built up over the years, but only after reading the search query report of each brand campaign for a few weeks; the variants Google chose were not always the ones you had bid on.
- Keep the opt-out for campaigns where precision mattered more than volume – a brand whose name is one letter away from another brand you also sell, for instance – and leave it on everywhere else.
- Review negative keywords per brand campaign: a plural or a stem now matched more than it used to.

7. Dynamic Search Ads and remarketing lists: two **automations** worth a reseller's time

Two automations reached resellers in 2012. Dynamic Search Ads, in limited beta since October 20, 2011, opened to all advertisers in the days after October 25, 2012; Google reported that beta testers had seen, on average, 10% more traffic and conversions from AdWords. Remarketing lists for search ads went into beta on July 27, 2012, for managed accounts, alongside a single site-wide remarketing tag; Google Tag Manager followed on October 1, 2012. Each solved a multi-brand problem: Dynamic Search Ads covered the long tail of model names no keyword list keeps up with; remarketing lists let a store bid more for a shopper who had already visited, whatever brand had brought them in.

- Run Dynamic Search Ads on the brand's category pages rather than on the whole site, and add each brand's core terms as negatives in the dynamic campaign so it fills gaps instead of taking traffic the brand campaigns already win.
- Remarketing lists are store-level by nature: a visitor who came for one brand and returns searching for another is still your visitor. Bid up on them across every brand campaign, not only in the one that first caught them.
- Put the site-wide remarketing tag and the conversion tag through Google Tag Manager, so adding a brand or a page template no longer means editing every page.

8. What was **new** in 2012 – and what each thing turned into

Eight dated changes from the year, in order, each with what it became:

- **June 7 – Google Trusted Stores opens to all US merchants.**
- **July 12 – simplified Product Listing Ads setup from inside Merchant Center.** It walked a merchant to a first campaign with one bid; the habit of stopping there outlived the tool.
- **July 13 – Product Listing Ads reach mobile and tablet shoppers.**
- **July 27 – one site-wide remarketing tag, and remarketing lists for search ads in beta.**
- **August 7 – Google confirms the Shopping tab is ranked by relevance and bid, "just like Product Listing Ads".** Bid governed Shopping-tab placement from here on.
- **October 2 – product-ID targets and item-level bids.** The ancestor of item-ID product groups and of today's per-product value adjustments.
- **October 18 – Merchant Promotions in Google Shopping, with over 25 US retailers already in it.**

- **October 25 – Dynamic Search Ads announced for all advertisers.**

9. What the first paid holiday season **showed**

Independent measurements of the first fully paid holiday season, November 1 to December 31, 2012, agreed on the direction. Kenshoo, across its US retail clients, put the click-through rate of Product Listing Ads at 2.73% against 1.86% for the text ads of the same product campaigns, the cost per click at $0.47 against $0.59, and the return on ad spend at $4.82 per dollar against $3.68. Marin Software reported that Product Listing Ads' share of paid search clicks rose from 2.5% to 6.5% over the year, and that the share of budget advertisers put into them rose nearly 600% after the October switch. By the first quarter of 2013, RKG's e-commerce clients were spending a third of their Google budget on Product Listing Ads, at costs per click about 10% below text ads.

- Compare Product Listing Ads with text ads brand by brand, not in aggregate: an average that flatters the account can hide a brand where the tile never wins the auction.
- Move budget toward the format that pays for each brand, and keep the search terms that convert in text ads as exact-match keywords in that brand's Search campaign.
- Watch the cost per click by brand from one season to the next: the 2012 discount on Product Listing Ads was a feature of a young auction, not a law.

10. Europe: the investigation that would reshape **Shopping**

The European Commission had opened a formal investigation into Google's search practices on November 30, 2010, on complaints from rival search and price-comparison services. On May 21, 2012, Commissioner Joaquín Almunia set out four concerns, the first of them the preferential display of Google's own vertical search services, including shopping, and gave Google "a matter of weeks" to propose remedies. For a British or European reseller preparing for the paid model announced in November, none of this changed what to do in 2012 – but it is the origin of the market they sell in today.

- Prepare the feed for the February 13, 2013 switch in the UK, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and Switzerland as if it were the US switch of October 2012: identifiers, brand values, one structure per brand.
- Budget for a paid Shopping tab from the second quarter of 2013 onward, brand by brand, on the same margin logic as the US accounts.

11. A five-minute **check**

CHECK	WHY IT MATTERS
Merchant Center linked to AdWords; Product Listing Ads live before August 15; all inventory promoted	The three conditions of the 10% credit through December 31, 2012
One ad group per brand, with its own brand target and bid; budgets per brand tier	A pooled bid and budget follow price and volume, not margin
adwords_grouping = margin tier; adwords_labels = clearance, promotion, season	The structure lived in the feed, not in the interface
Brand, MPN and GTIN present; one spelling per brand	A wrong identifier is a disapproval; a variant spelling is an unreached product
Brand ads land on a page dedicated to that brand; reseller relationship clear	The ad-text condition where the reseller exception applied; the defence elsewhere
30 reviews at four stars in the last 12 months; Trusted Stores applied for	Store-level trust shows on every brand's ads
Search query report read per brand campaign since close variants began	Google's variants were not always the ones you had bid on
Item-level targets and bids on the season's top products (from October 2)	The first per-product lever, on top of the brand structure

About **WeAdU**

WeAdU is a Google Premier Partner and the current home of a Google Ads practice founded in 2002, focused on AI-boosted Google Ads for brand product resellers.

Across the client book: **$241M+** in sales generated, **$132M+** tracked in Google Ads, **$32M+** in ad spend managed and **5.3M+** conversions. **14 of 20** clients (**70%**) saw a higher ROAS, measured over 12 months.

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ABOUT THIS EDITION

This edition is a retrospective written in September 2026, not a document from 2012: it describes Google AdWords, Product Listing Ads, Google Shopping and Merchant Center as they worked that year, checked against sources published at the time or reliable later accounts, listed below.

Sources & further reading

Google, Inside AdWords / Google Commerce blog: "Building a better shopping experience" (May 31, 2012); "Helping businesses get started with Google Shopping: a new, easy way to create Product Listing Ads in Merchant Center" (July 12, 2012); "Reach mobile and tablet shoppers with Google Shopping" (July 13, 2012); "Simpler, more powerful tools to reconnect with your customers – and reach new ones" – site-wide remarketing tag and remarketing lists for search ads beta (July 27, 2012); "Helping Merchants Succeed: Updates to and Reminders for Google Shopping" – 10% credit conditions, Shopping-tab ranking (August 7, 2012); "Google Shopping: momentum and merchant success" – Trusted Stores annotations (September 14, 2012); "Google Shopping: transition update and new functionality in time for the holidays" – October 17 date, product-ID targets, item-level bids (October 2, 2012); "Showcase your promotions" – Merchant Promotions (October 18, 2012); "Boost your results with Dynamic Search Ads" (October 25, 2012); "Google Shopping goes global" (November 15, 2012); "New matching behavior for phrase and exact match" (April 17, 2012); "Connecting shoppers and great stores online" – Trusted Stores open to all (June 7, 2012); "Announcing Product Listing Ads" (November 11, 2009); Product Listing Ads roll-out to all US advertisers (November 11, 2010) and to the UK (November 1, 2011); "Introducing Dynamic Search Ads beta" (October 20, 2011); "Introducing seller rating extensions" (June 28, 2010); US ad-text trademark policy update (May 14, 2009); Canadian, UK and Ireland ad-text policy update and EU/EFTA keyword policy (August 4, 2010); "Introducing Shopping campaigns" (October 22, 2013), Shopping campaigns available globally (February 18, 2014), Shopping campaigns upgrade tool (August 2014); remarketing lists for search ads for all advertisers (June 25, 2013). Google Merchant blog: unique product identifiers, shipping and tax requirements (March 14, 2011); apparel attributes and google_product_category (July 2011). Google, Product Listing Ads implementation guide and feed guide (services.google.com, undated). Google Analytics blog: "Google Tag Manager" (October 1, 2012). blog.google: "It's now free to sell on Google" (April 21, 2020); "We're upgrading Dynamic Search Ads to AI Max" (April 15, 2026, updated June 11, 2026). Google Merchant Center Help, answer 6324351 (brand attribute, current). Independent: Search Engine Land – Product Search becomes Google Shopping (May 31, 2012), Trusted Stores badges in search ads (April 24, 2012), Trusted Stores opens to all (June 7, 2012), close variants (April 2012), Marin Software report on Product Listing Ads (January 2013), RKG report on Product Listing Ads costs per click (2013), forced close variants (August 2014), GTINs required from September 15, 2015 (September 2015) and from May 16, 2016 (February 2016), Merkle report – Shopping ads 60% of retailers' Google search clicks (Q1 2018), free listings worldwide (September 30, 2020); TechCrunch – transition completes October 17 (October 3, 2012), Google Shopping goes global (November 15, 2012), EU last chance (May 21, 2012), Rosetta Stone settlement (October 31, 2012), merchant feed rules (July 11, 2011); Kenshoo, 2012 Global Online Retail Holiday Shopping Report (January 10, 2013); Practical Ecommerce (July 3, 2012); The Next Web – worldwide trademark keywords (March 22, 2013); Bounteous – seller ratings update (September 11, 2012); Econsultancy – seller ratings (January 29, 2014); MarTech – Google Customer Reviews replaces Trusted Stores (April 3, 2017); Search Engine Watch – PLA campaigns retired (April 2, 2014); PPC Hero – Product Listing Ads campaign set-up and targeting strategies (February–April 2013); Internet Marketing Driver – product targets (April 27, 2011); Lexiconn (July 2011); ChannelAdvisor – feed specification changes (June 9, 2015); Dreyfus – Google's EU/EFTA trademark policy (September 23, 2010); Lengow – Google Shopping changes in Europe (2017); European Commission press release IP/10/1624 (November 30, 2010). Policies and product names have changed since 2012; the 2026 edition describes the current rules.