WeAdU · Field Guide

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

2020 Edition

The year free listings came back, the search terms report went quiet, consent entered the tag and demand swung week by week – what a multi-brand reseller should have done.

WeAdU · Google Premier Partner · Google Ads practice since 2002

In this edition

1. Free listings return: the Shopping tab, then Search, then the world
2. The search terms report goes quiet
3. Smart Shopping learns new customers and shipping promises
4. Consent mode and the end of third-party cookies, announced
5. Merchant Center in 2020: descriptions required, promotions on free listings
6. Buy on Google goes commission-free
7. Reading demand that swings week by week
8. Europe: free listings through any comparison-shopping service
9. What was new in 2020 – and what each thing turned into
10. What the numbers showed: a record season, and Shopping's share dips
11. A five-minute check

1. Free listings return: the Shopping tab, then Search, then the **world**

On April 21, 2020, with stores closing, Google announced that "search results on the Google Shopping tab will consist primarily of free listings" in the US before the end of April, and worldwide before the end of the year. On June 29 free listings reached the main Google Search results in the US, mobile first; on September 30 Google said they would be available globally from mid-October, and reported that "retailers running free listings and ads got an average of twice as many views and 50 percent more visits". For a reseller, the same feed that had been paid-only since 2012 now showed for free – in slots no bid controlled and no brand campaign steered.

- Opt in immediately and for every brand: a free listing is the product listing shoppers compare, and a brand absent from it is absent from the comparison.
- Treat feed quality as the only lever you have on free surfaces: title, image, identifier, price and availability decide which of your products show, since there is no bid to raise.
- Measure free and paid separately from October 22, when Merchant Center's Report Editor added impressions and click-through rate for free listings, and read the split per brand; a brand strong in free listings may need less paid support, not more.

2. The search terms report goes **quiet**

On September 1, 2020, advertisers saw a notice in Google Ads: "we are updating the search terms report to only include terms that were searched by a significant number of users. As a result you may see fewer terms in your report going forward." Seer Interactive measured the loss across its accounts at about 28% of paid search

budgets and 20.4% of clicks with no search term shown. For a reseller managing dozens of brand campaigns, the report had been the tool that caught one brand's campaign serving another brand's search; from September it caught less.

- Move the control from the report to the structure: an exact-match keyword for each brand's core terms in that brand's own campaign, and the cross-brand negative lists applied everywhere else, so that routing does not depend on what you can see afterwards.
- Read the terms you still see per brand for patterns, not for individual queries, and add negatives by pattern – a neighbouring brand's name, an accessory word.
- Keep the Merchant Center search-terms view for Shopping alongside the Google Ads one; Shopping titles, not keywords, decided which searches a tile matched.

3. Smart Shopping learns new customers and shipping **promises**

On July 15, 2020, Google added a new customer acquisition goal to Smart Shopping campaigns in the US, letting an advertiser set a value on a first purchase, and free and fast shipping annotations on Shopping ads. On May 11, a curbside pickup badge went into beta on local inventory ads in fourteen countries. For a reseller, a first purchase is worth more than its margin – it is a customer who will buy the next brand too – but its value is not the same for every brand.

- Set the new-customer value per brand campaign from that brand's repeat rate, not from the store average; a brand bought once a decade and a brand bought every quarter do not deserve the same bonus.
- Make the shipping promise true per brand before showing the annotation: a brand shipped from a supplier's warehouse in five days cannot carry the same "fast" as a brand held in stock.
- Keep the curbside badge on the brands actually in the store's stock; a badge on a special-order brand is a broken promise on a tile.

4. Consent mode and the end of third-party cookies, **announced**

On January 14, 2020, Chrome said it planned to phase out third-party cookies within two years; on September 3, 2020, Google launched consent mode in beta for advertisers operating in Europe, with two settings, one for advertising storage and one for analytics storage, so that tags could adjust to a visitor's consent choice. For a British or European reseller, the remarketing lists that had steered bids since 2013 and the Customer Match uploads since 2015 now had a technical dependency on a consent banner.

- Implement consent mode through the tag manager on every brand's page template, so a new brand landing page inherits it rather than being forgotten.
- Expect the audience lists to shrink where consent is refused, and read the shrinkage per brand; a brand whose shoppers refuse consent more often will show a worse measured return with no change in real return.

5. Merchant Center in 2020: descriptions required, promotions on free **listings**

The June 15, 2020 product data specification update added *product_detail* and *product_highlight* attributes and, from September 1, 2020, made *description* required, with category-specific attributes enforced through limited performance. Free listings needed a Merchant Center feed, shipping settings and returns information on the site, under their own policies. On May 20, Shopify announced that its merchants could list products free on Google through its Google Shopping app; on October 22, Google opened promotions to all US retailers with faster approval and showed promotion annotations on free listings as well as ads, added Performance Planner for Shopping and auction insights by product category, and gave the Report Editor free-listing metrics.

- Fill *description* for every product of every brand before September 1 – from the manufacturer's data, with permission – and use *product_highlight* for the three things a shopper compares on that brand's models.
- Put shipping settings and the returns policy where free listings can read them; a brand with a supplier-specific returns rule needs that rule stated, not implied.
- Push manufacturer promotions through Merchant Promotions so they display on free listings and ads alike; the tile is the same tile.

6. Buy on Google goes **commission-free**

On July 23, 2020, Google announced that "sellers who participate in our Buy on Google checkout experience will no longer have to pay us a commission fee" – previously 5% to 15% – and opened the checkout to third-party providers, starting with PayPal and Shopify, in a US pilot expanding to all eligible sellers over the following months. For a reseller, the economics of section 6 in the 2018 edition changed; the brand-permission question did not.

- Re-check each brand's distribution agreement for marketplace and third-party-checkout clauses before enrolling it; zero commission does not change what the brand sees on the page.
- Enrol brand by brand, starting with the ones you hold in stock and fulfil yourself, because the program's ratings and its returns handling were the store's.

7. Reading demand that swings week by **week**

On May 7, 2020, Google published Rising Retail Categories, a Think with Google tool showing fast-growing product categories by country; the Insights page in Google Ads went into beta on October 6 and began rolling out on November 19, and Performance Planner reached Shopping on October 22. For a multi-brand reseller in a year when a category could triple in a fortnight and empty the next, the question was which brands to fund this week – and which suppliers could still deliver.

- Read category demand per brand weekly and match it against stock and supplier lead times before raising a budget; funding demand you cannot fulfil buys clicks on out-of-stock pages.
- Use auction insights by product category to see which competitors and which marketplaces entered the categories that surged.
- Plan with Performance Planner per brand campaign rather than for the account, because the swings were category-specific and so were the brands.

8. Europe: free listings through any comparison-shopping **service**

On February 10, 2020, Commissioner Vestager reported a "substantial increase" in the take-up of rival comparison-shopping services since the 2017 remedy. On September 30, announcing free listings for Europe, Google said merchants there could choose any comparison-shopping service to work with free listings, as they already could for Shopping ads. For a British or European reseller, the partner decision of 2017 and 2018 now covered the free surfaces too.

- Confirm with your comparison-shopping partner that it supports free listings before the mid-October roll-out, so that the free tiles carry the same "By …" label as the paid ones.
- Keep the arithmetic current: the partner's fee against Google's fixed margin, on your click volume, reviewed once a year.

9. What was **new** in 2020 – and what each thing turned into

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

- **January 14 – Chrome plans to phase out third-party cookies.**
- **April 21 – free listings on the Shopping tab (US).** Worldwide from mid-October.
- **May 11 – curbside pickup badge on local inventory ads.** Pickup annotations are standard in local inventory ads.
- **June 15 – product_detail and product_highlight; description required from September 1.**
- **June 29 – free listings in Google Search results (US).** Product knowledge panels with merchants' offers.
- **July 15 – new customer acquisition goal; free and fast shipping annotations; image extensions beta.** New customer goals in Performance Max; image assets.
- **July 23 – Buy on Google commission-free.**
- **September 1 and 3 – search terms report limited; consent mode beta.**
- **October 6 – Performance Max announced in early beta; Insights page beta.**
- **October 14 and 22 – GA4 becomes the default property; promotions on free listings, Performance Planner for Shopping, free-listing metrics.**

10. What the numbers showed: a record season, and Shopping's share **dips**

Adobe measured US online holiday spending from November 1 to December 31, 2020 at $188.2 billion, up 32%, with Cyber Monday at $10.8 billion, smartphones at 40% of revenue and curbside or in-store pickup reaching 25% of orders at the retailers that offered it. Merkle's fourth-quarter report had Google search spend up 12% on 12% more clicks, but Google Shopping spend up only 2% on 8% more clicks, text ad spend up 20%, and Shopping's share of retailers' Google search ad clicks dipping to 54% for the year's low point, with phones at 64% of paid search clicks. Tinuiti put phones at 74% of Shopping clicks and Shopping cost per click down 6% in the quarter. ROI Revolution, across 58 accounts, measured free listings at 7.2% of impressions and 4.5% of clicks, converting at 2.07% against 1.70% for paid Shopping.

- Read the dip in Shopping's share as the arrival of free listings and the surge in text-ad demand, not as tiles losing: compare paid and free per brand before moving budget.
- Treat the free-listing conversion rate as evidence that the feed is doing the selling, and put the review time where the feed's data comes from – the brand's own product data.

11. A five-minute **check**

CHECK	WHY IT MATTERS
Free listings opted in for every brand; feed complete enough to compete without a bid	The feed is the only lever on free surfaces
Exact keyword per brand and cross-brand negative lists in place before September	The search terms report now shows less
New-customer value set per brand from repeat rate; shipping annotations true per brand	One goal per campaign; brands differ
Consent mode deployed through the tag manager on every brand template	Audience lists now depend on the banner
Description filled for every product before September 1; returns policy stated	Required for ads; needed for free listings
Distribution agreements checked before enrolling a brand in Buy on Google	Zero commission does not change what the brand sees
Category demand read weekly per brand against stock and supplier lead time	Funding demand you cannot fulfil buys clicks on empty pages
Comparison-shopping partner confirmed for free listings (UK and EEA)	Same "By …" label on free and paid tiles

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.

Request the free Starter audit

Free. Delivered in 2 business days from read-only access. weadu.com/audit · jeff@weadu.com · Reseller case studies: weadu.com/case-studies

ABOUT THIS EDITION

This edition is a retrospective written in September 2026, not a document from 2020: it describes Google Ads, Shopping 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, The Keyword / Google Ads announcements: Chromium blog – building a more private web (January 14, 2020); "It's now free to sell on Google" (April 21, 2020); "Understanding rising consumer interests" – Rising Retail Categories (May 7, 2020); curbside pickup on local inventory ads (May 11, 2020); Merchant Center product data specification update (June 15, 2020, answer 9729512); "Bringing free retail listings to Google Search" (June 29, 2020); "Driving online sales" – new customer acquisition, shipping annotations (July 15, 2020); "Buy on Google is now open and commission-free" (July 23, 2020); "Measure conversions while respecting user consent choices" – consent mode (September 3, 2020); "Powering economic recovery through retail" – free listings in Europe (September 30, 2020); Advertising Week announcements – Performance Max beta, Insights page (October 6, 2020); "The new Google Analytics" (October 14, 2020); "Help shoppers find deals" – promotions, Performance Planner, Report Editor (October 22, 2020); Discovery ads available to all advertisers (April 2020); free listings renamed (December 15, 2020, answer 10178373); Insights page for all advertisers (April 14, 2021); conversion modelling through consent mode (April 15, 2021). European Commission press release IP/20/2347 – Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act proposals (December 15, 2020). Independent: Search Engine Land – free and paid listings FAQ (May 18, 2020), search terms report limited (September 2, 2020), Buy on Google commission-free (July 23, 2020), free listings globally (September 30, 2020), image extensions beta (July 15, 2020), Smart Shopping shipping annotations and new customer goal (July 2020); Seer Interactive – search terms removed for 28% of budgets (September 2020); Shopify Reunite announcements (May 20, 2020); TechCrunch – free listings in Search (June 29, 2020); Search Engine Roundtable – product data specification (June 16, 2020), free listings renamed (December 15, 2020); Wordtracker – Insights page beta (November 25, 2020); Merkle Digital Marketing Reports Q1 2020 and Q4 2020 (January 26, 2021) and Q1 2021 (May 2021); Adobe – 2020 holiday recap; Tinuiti – Google Ads benchmark reports Q4 2020 and Q1 2021; ROI Revolution – free listings, a year in review (2021); Kelkoo Group – Google Shopping timeline (Vestager, February 10, 2020); PPC Land – free listings removed across the EEA (September 19, 2026). Policies and product names have changed since 2020; the 2026 edition describes the current rules.