

Advertisers on Google Are Told to Keep It Proper

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IN the haphazard world of instant messaging and dashed-off e-mail messages, where "kk" isn't a typographical mistake but just the latest bit of Internet slang (it stands for kays, or O.K.), does anyone really care about style and grammar anymore?

Google does. Taking the stance that unorthodox usage and punctuation and slang create a less straightforward searching experience, Google's AdWords division, which is responsible for the contextual ads that appear alongside search results, insists on standard English and punctilious punctuation. Cater to teenagers hooked on text messaging? This is a world with no "dealz 4 u." To those who say, "Grammar schmammar, this is advertising, after all," Google might suggest: "Schmammar is not a word. Try 'Forget about grammar' instead."

David Fischer, director for AdWords, said: "We really focus on creating ads that at the most basic level have proper spelling and grammar so that they're clear to users. We really encourage clear, effective, to-the-point communication to searchers."

I run an online clothing store, and advertising on search engines is important to me. At the height of the holiday shopping frenzy, I received a heart-stopping note from Google, informing me that my ads were being suspended for failing to meet guidelines.

My hot holiday item was a pair of rather sassy women's underwear, so I was certain that the objection was to some particularly saucy ad copy. Yet I discovered that my

hp invent

» Roll over for more info

The only thing better than the products are the prices.

» Shop now

Hot I

Advertisement

Featured Product

Lingo.com
Broadband phone service for \$19.95/mo.

Advertisement

Ad

Real Estate
nytimes.com/realestate

Affordable LIVING

Where can you find cheap apartments in NYC?

indecency was far more shocking. I had made an error of style.

The e-mail message said my ad text "includes phrases that do not meet our grammar requirements." The offending phrase was "check em out." Google suggested replacing it with "check them out."

All I could do was laugh. Since when does anyone care about grammar and style on the Web? Would my little colloquialism really bring so much chaos to the searching experience of Googlers?

From Google's point of view, the answer is yes. Clarity is more important than tone.

Is Google an Internet incarnation of the grammar prescriptivist, insisting that language has rules and that communication without those rules leads to confusion and the decay of civility? Could advertising's dangling participles and the unrelenting trend of sentence fragments be at the root of our collective information overload? I consulted a leading prescriptivist, Robert Hartwell Fiske, the author of "The Dictionary of Disagreeable English: A Curmudgeon's Compendium of Excruciatingly Correct Grammar." This is a man who does not confuse lay and lie, a man who describes as boneless those who too readily expand their lexicon to include misusages. Yet Mr. Fiske shrugs at sloppy usage in advertising.

"Advertising is a creative profession, so I feel copywriters and the like should be allowed a certain license that others -- in more staid jobs, let's say -- are not permitted," he said. "If a misspelling or questionable grammar serves a purpose, I have no objection whatever to em instead of them, or, say, like instead of as. Your em, I gather, is meant to suggest a tone, a friendliness that they would not so easily convey."

Advertising breaks language conventions on purpose. For example, the slogans Think Different and Got Milk? imply a product (and a customer) with a funky willingness to break the rules.

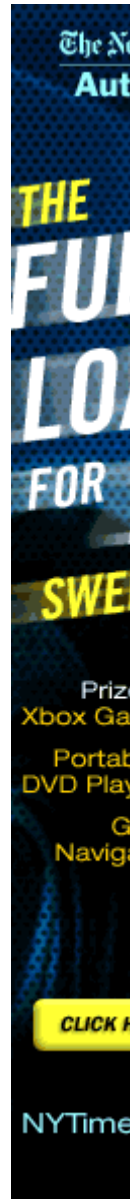
Google maintains an in-house style guide, which it says is a living document, expanding over time to include neologisms and pop culture references.

Also in Real Estate:

- [Apartment under \\$1,200 a month in Manhattan](#)
- [Apartment under \\$1,200 a month in Queens](#)
- [Apartment under \\$1,200 a month in Brooklyn](#)

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"We started seeing the word bling pop up periodically," Mr. Fischer said. "At first it raised some questions, but it's made its way into being acceptable. We measure by the standard of, is this going to be clear to people? 'Yada yada yada' is going to be well understood by some and not by others."

AdWords submissions are screened by an automated system that flags flagrant violations like multiple exclamation points. Ads that clear this hurdle are posted on the Web, but eventually reviewed by editors.

My own unscientific tests indicate that slangy writers who escape the wrath of their own spell-checker will also make it through the automated Google review. For better or for worse, my terribly written ad offering "kickin' gifts for peeps like u" was still available a week later.

Google's style guide is written by an editorial staff that is in a constant conversation with advertisers who push and pull at the standards. The team includes people with a "passion for finding mistakes and an ability to offer suggestions when they see things that aren't clear," Mr. Fisher said.

Overture, which feeds search-related ads to its parent company, Yahoo, as well as to MSN Search and AltaVista, also has an official editorial policy. Like Google, Overture does not allow excessive punctuation, gratuitous symbols or the use of unjustifiable superlatives like best or tastiest, nor does it permit the use of words in all capital letters, unless they are trademarked that way.

These aren't problems with which print media, in classified or display ad departments, have had to cope. Fran Wills, vice president for interactive media for the Denver Newspaper Agency, which manages The Denver Post and The Rocky Mountain News, said that newspapers accept advertising through a more supervised process.

"Unlike Google, most of our ads get placed by a human talking to a human," Ms. Wills said. "They are submitted into the paper or the Web site by customer service folks who work directly with the advertisers. Google's ads are just placed online without any human interaction."

Ads are reviewed as they are submitted, and the Denver papers do so without an official style guide. Like many papers, they have policies regarding libel, slander and

offensive language, but otherwise do not pull ads unless they are incomprehensible.

Do badly written ads reflect poorly on the newspaper or confuse readers? No, Wills said, "it's the advertiser's ad."

Google's style guide applies only to advertising and not to any other aspects of Google's services, like search results, titles indexed on Google Scholar or items found for sale at the Froogle shopping site. These listings are automatically produced by Web crawlers, so none are checked for grammar, spelling, usage or compliance with any sort of punctuation or capitalization guidelines. I found 723 results for the offending phrase "check em out" on Froogle.

Of course, trademarks are sacred and Google does not ask advertisers to modify the spelling of their products, services or names. If so, it might have to begin with itself; as millions of millions of people have probably forgotten, the correct spelling of the word that gave birth to the company's name is googol.

Ads by Google	what's this?
Nano Material Technology nano thermal spray is stronger than steel at a fraction of the weight nanothermalspray.com	
Cisco Equipment & Memory Cisco systems router, switches Cisco memory. Low price guarantee www.cisco4less.com	
Save up to 90% off Retail Used/Refurb Cisco 7000 Series routers, components, & memory. www.networkliquidators.com	

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