PUBLIC LIBRARIES LEADING THE WAY

Google Us!

Capital Area District Libraries Gets Noticed with Google Ads Grant

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Increased choices in the marketplace are forcing libraries to pay much more attention to how they market themselves. Libraries can no longer simply employ an inward marketing approach that speaks to current users through printed materials and promotional signage plastered on the walls. Furthermore, they cannot rely on occasional mentions by the local media as the primary driver of new users.

That's why in 2016, Capital Area District Libraries (CADL), a 13 branch library system in and around Lansing, Michigan, began using more digital tactics as a cost-effective way to increase our marketing reach and to have more control over promoting the right service, at the right time, to the right person. One example of these tactics is ad placement on the Weather Channel App. This placement allows ads about digital services like OverDrive and hoopla to appear when certain weather conditions, such as a snowstorm, occur in the area.

In 2017, while attending the Library Marketing and Communications Conference in Dallas, our Marketing and Communications Director had the good fortune of sitting in on a presentation by Trey Gordner and Bill Mott from Koios (www.koios.co) on how to receive up to $10,000 of in-kind advertising every month from a Google Ad Grants (www.google.com/grants). During this presentation, Koios offered participants a 60-day trial of their services to help secure the Google Ad Grants and create a few starter campaigns. Google Ads are text-based and appear in the top section of Google's search results, along with the ads of paying advertisers. Nonprofits in the Google Ad Grants program can set up various ad campaigns to promote whatever they like—the overall brand of the library, the collection, and various events, meeting room offerings or any other product or service. The appearance of each Google Ad is triggered by keywords chosen for each campaign. After CADL's trial period expired, we decided to retain Koios to oversee the Google Ad Grants project.

While the library has used Google Ads for the sharing of video, we had not done much with keyword advertising. So, we were excited to learn more about the process of using keywords and the funding available through the grant. We viewed this as a great new tool to add to our marketing toolbox. It would help us achieve a few of our marketing goals: expanding our overall marketing reach and digital footprint by 50 percent; increasing the library's digital advertisement budget by 300% (by using alternative funding); and promoting the right service at the right time.

GETTING STARTED

Koios coached us through the slalom course of obtaining accounts and setting them up. To secure the monthly ad grant, we first obtained a validation key from Tech Soup (www.techsoup.org), the nonprofit that makes technology accessible to other non-profits and libraries. That, in turn, pre-qualified us for a Google for Nonprofits account. (At the time, we were able to get a validation token from our existing Tech Soup account, but Koios currently recommends starting by registering a 501c3 Friends organization or Library Foundation with Tech Soup whenever possible.) After creating our Google for Nonprofits account, we used the same account username to create a Google Ads account. Finally, to work efficiently with Koios,

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we provided them access to our Google Analytics property (which we have configured to scrub patron identifying information) and our Google Tag Manager account (with the ability to create tags that we in turn review and approve). If you are taking the do-it-yourself approach, Google has a step-by-step Google Ad Grants activation guide and extensive help online.

DESIGNING CAMPAIGNS

Spending money well is hard work and that holds true with keyword search ads as well. There are some performance and ad quality requirements in the grant program that must be observed to retain your monthly allotment. Understanding these guidelines and implementing campaigns that respect them, while working well enough to spend your grant allocation requires study and patience. Again, we relied on Koios to guide us. They helped us create campaigns and ad groups within those campaigns that were effective within the grant program.
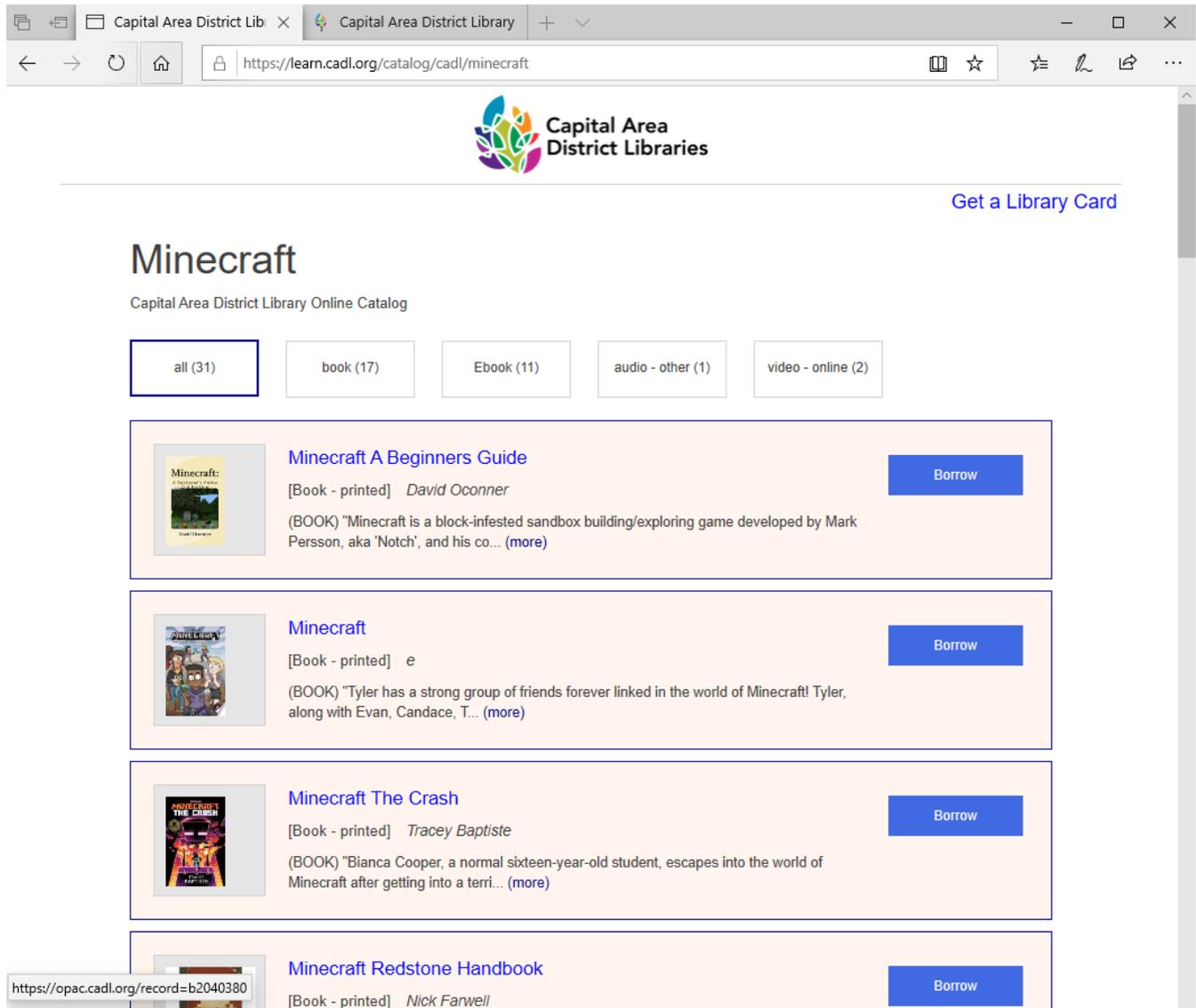

Figure 1. Example of Minecraft title keyword landing page created by Koios.

In August 2018, we started with campaigns for general branding awareness that included ads aimed at people actively searching for local libraries and our core services. These ads funnel users to our homepage and our online card signup. They are configured to display only to searchers who are geographically located in our service area. This campaign has been grown and perfected over 18 months into one of our most successful campaigns, garnering over 2,300 impressions and 650 clicks in January 2020, yet it spends just $450 of our grant funds. Another consistent performer for us has been our Digital Media campaign with ads targeting users searching for eBooks and audiobooks. By June 2019 we had grown our grant spend to $1,500 a month using 27 different campaigns.

The game changer for us has been working with Koios to create campaigns based on an export of MARC records from our catalog. We worked with Koios to massage this data into a very simple pseudo-catalog of landing pages based on item titles. The landing page is very simple and SEO friendly so that it ranks well in the split-second ad auction competition that determines whether your ad will be displayed. It has cover images, clear calls to action, loads fast, is mobile friendly and communicates the breadth of formats held by the library (see figure 1). Clicking the item title or the borrow button sends users straight into our full catalog to get more information, request the item, or link to the digital version.
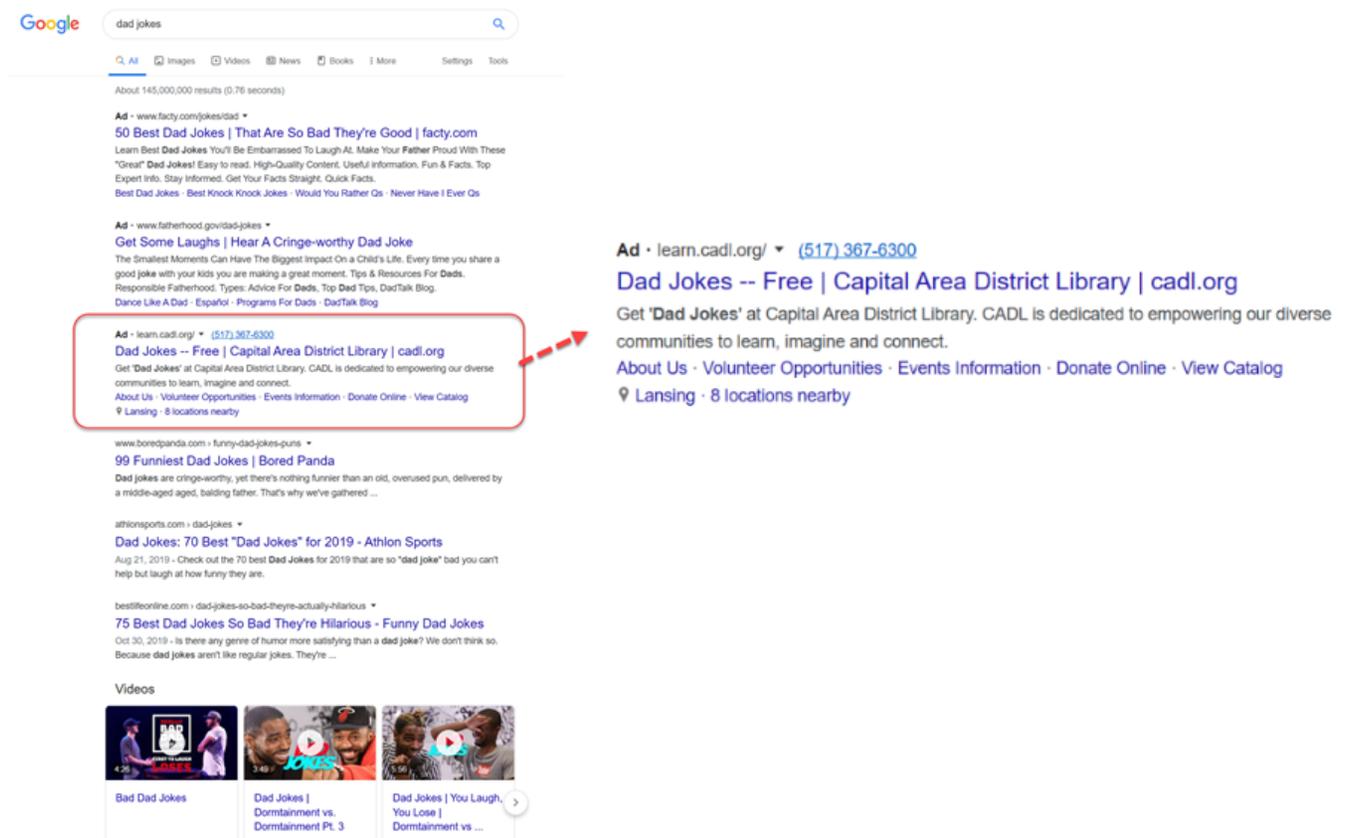

Figure 2. A user search in Google for "dad jokes" showing a catalog campaign ad. Grant program ads are displayed below paid ads. The format of the ad may vary as well. This version shows several extensions, like phone number, site links, and directions links.
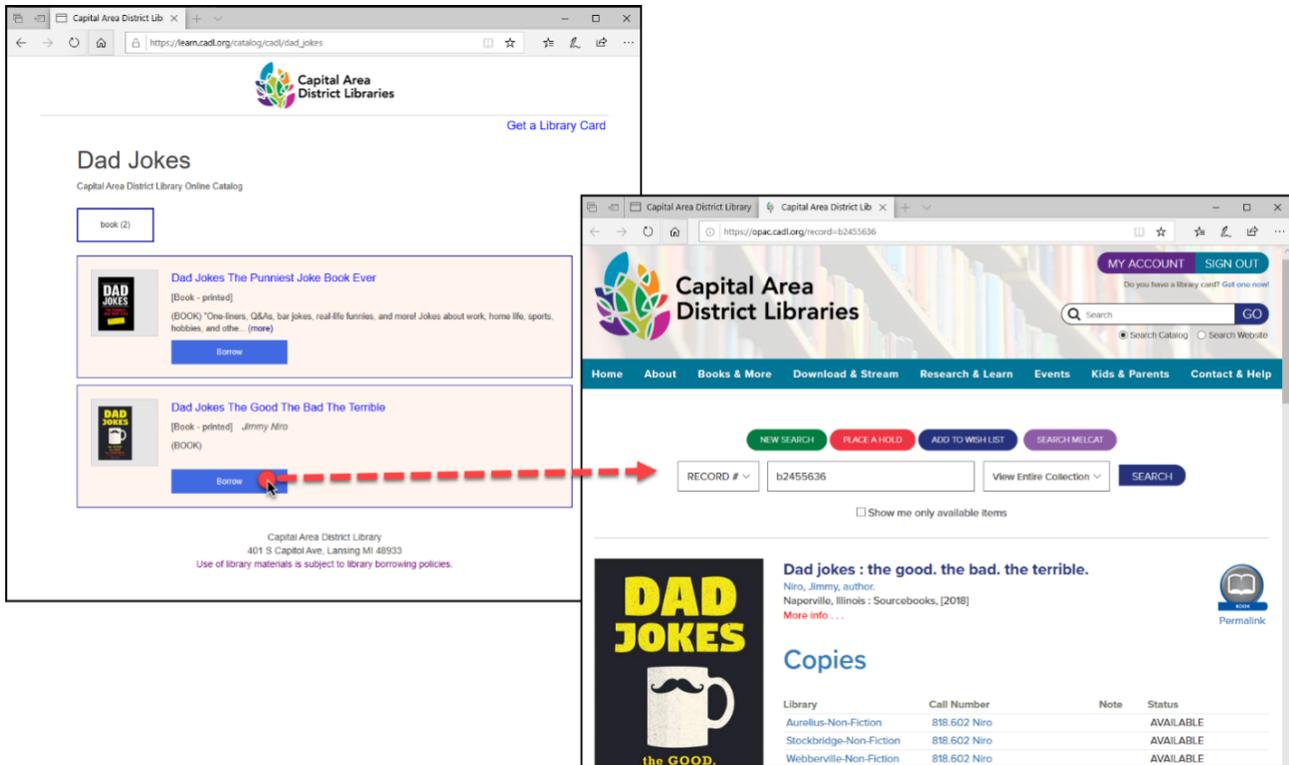
Figure 3. The landing page displayed to the searcher after they click on the ad and the resulting catalog page if the searcher clicks the Borrow button.

In Google Ads, Koios created 14 catalog campaigns out of the roughly 250,000 titles we sent them. Each campaign has keywords (single words and phrases from titles) derived from roughly 18,000 titles ranked by how frequently they are used in Google search. Again, these ads are limited geographically to our service area. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate what a Google searcher in Ingham County, Michigan, potentially encounters when searching for "dad jokes".

Since their inception in September 2019, these catalog campaigns have been top performers for us, generating clickthrough rates of 8-15% and a couple thousand additional ad clicks monthly, the aggregation of a small number of clicks on any one ad from our "long tail" of titles. We are now spending over $5,000 of our grant funds and garnering nearly 23,000 impressions and 3,000 ad clicks monthly.

RESULTS

In general, we find that our Google Ads have succeeded in drawing additional new visitors to our web site. Using our long-established Google Analytics implementation that measures visits to our website and catalog combined, we compared the third quarter of 2018, when we were ramping up our Google Ad Grants campaigns, to the third quarter of 2019, after our catalog campaign was firmly established. The summary numbers are encouraging. The number of users is up 17%, and number of sessions is up 4%. Within the overall rise in users, returning users are up 9%, but new users are up 25%. Therefore, we are getting more of those coveted, elusive "non-library-users" to visit us online. When comparing the behavior of new and returning visitors, we also see that the overall increase in sessions was achieved despite the head wind of a 4% decline in returning visitor sessions.

However, are the new visitors engaging? Perhaps the most tangible measure of engagement for a public library catalog is placing holds. We have a Google Analytics conversion goal that measures those holds. The

rate of conversion on the hold goal among new visitors rose 7%, while dropping 13% among returning visitors. From other analysis, we know that our highly-engaged members are migrating to our mobile app and to digital formats, so the drop for returning users is explainable and the rise among new visitors is hopeful. We are working on ways to study more closely these new visitors so that we can discover and remove more barriers in the way of them becoming highly engaged members of their public library.

FUTURE PLANS

With the help of Koios, new campaigns will be created to promote our blogs and podcasts. We will also link a campaign to our Demco events database. Finally, in partnership with Koios, we will work with Patron Point to incorporate our automated email marketing system into Google Ad campaigns. We will add campaigns for pop-up ads that encourage library card signup through our online registration system. Once someone signs up for a library card online, the system will trigger a welcome email that promotes some of our core services. This on-boarding set-up will also include an opportunity for the new cardholder to fill out a form to tailor content in future emails to their interests. Through all these means, CADL leads the way in delivering the right service, at the right time, to the right person.