

The Best And Worst Of Paid Search, 2016

by Collin Colburn
October 7, 2016

Why Read This Report

Forrester applied its search marketing review methodology to more than 150 paid search ads from the travel, consumer packaged goods (CPG), automotive, financial services, business services, and consumer electronics industries to create performance benchmarks for marketers related to paid search ads. Compared with our 2014 assessment results, most ads performed better overall. But two-fifths of ads still failed, and all industries have room for improvement. This report guides marketers to craft more effective search engine ads.

Key Takeaways

Paid Search Ads Show Improvement

We reviewed 175 paid search ads and the majority of those ads passed our review. Compared to previous reviews, our assessment found better keyword presence and improved calls-to-action within paid search ads.

All Industries Can Improve The Performance Of Their Paid Search Ads

Each industry displayed common pitfalls. In this report, we give specific recommendations to marketers in each industry for how they can improve their paid search ads.

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Forrester reviewed 175 paid search ads according to our search marketing review methodology.

Related Research Documents

[The Best And Worst Of Paid Search In 2014](#)

[The Best And Worst Of Paid Search In 2012](#)

[Brief: Evaluate Your Search Marketing Programs](#)

Paid Search Ads Improve Considerably

The current iteration of Forrester's search marketing review, which was published in August 2016, provides marketing leaders with a comprehensive scorecard to track the successes — and failures — of their paid search and search engine optimization (SEO) programs.¹ We applied this review to identify paid search advertising best practices and pitfalls to avoid. To conduct our research, we:

- › **Selected a subset of our search marketing review.** Forrester's complete search marketing review methodology evaluates the user experience of natural search results and paid search ads. For this report, we evaluated only the visibility and copy of desktop and mobile paid search ads, and the usability of ads' accompanying landing pages.
- › **Reviewed 175 paid search ads.** We reviewed ads that displayed on desktop and mobile searches for six keywords across six industries: financial services, business services, consumer electronics, automotive, retail and consumer goods, and travel. Previous reviews evaluated as many as 300 or more ads. But this year, Google cut down on the number of paid search ads displayed for desktop search. Because there are no longer paid search ads along the right-hand rail, we only reviewed 175 paid search ads.
- › **Looked through the lenses of your customer.** With each ad, we asked, "How well does this ad meet an end user's needs?" taking into consideration how well each ad related to our intent, convinced us to click, and fulfilled our goal once we clicked through.

Search Ads Score Higher Than Past Reviews

We evaluated each paid search ad on six criteria relating to ad copy, call to action, and landing page experience (see Figure 1). Possible scores for each criterion ranged from -2 (severe fail) to +2 (best practice). Overall scores range from -12 to +12; +6 or higher is a passing score.

With an average score of +5.7, the ads we reviewed scored significantly higher than the +2.2 average in our 2014 study and the +4.6 average in our 2012 study, both of which applied similar methodologies.² Fifty-eight percent of the ads we reviewed this time — 102 of 175 — passed (see Figure 2). And, we found nine ads that achieved a score of +12 — that is an exemplary pass on all evaluation criteria. Improvement in this year's review can be traced to:

- › **Better keyword presence.** This year, 82% of ads had a searched-for keyword in their ad titles or copy, an improvement from the 60% of ads that did the same in 2014. And 23% of the ads we reviewed prominently displayed keywords in both the ad and the accompanying landing page. For example, Revlon demonstrates keyword best practices in its mascara ad (see Figure 3).
- › **More quality calls to action.** In previous reviews, less than 20% of ads contained a specific call to action or offer — like hosting a party without sending invitations. But this year, more search marketers decided to send out custom invitations to guests. In fact, 49% of the ads we reviewed

contained a specific call to action and utilized ad extensions — like ratings snippets or click-to-call functionality — in both desktop and mobile search ads. Chevrolet exhibits this best practice with multiple calls to action in its site links (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 1 Forrester’s Revised Paid Search Marketing Review Scorecard

Each review question is scored on a scale of -2 to 2:

+2	Strong pass: Exemplary; establishes or embodies an industry best practice
+1	Pass: Competent performance; business process is effective and users can accomplish their goals
-1	Fail: A hindrance; may interfere with business processes and prevent users from accomplishing their goals
-2	Strong fail: A major flaw; necessary process, functionality, or content is missing

1. Where does the paid search ad appear in sponsored links?

Your score

-2	Does not appear on the first page of mobile or desktop paid results for Google
-1	Appears on the first page of mobile or desktop paid results for Google
+1	Appears above the fold on the first page of mobile or desktop paid results for Google
+2	Appears above the fold on the first page of mobile and desktop paid results for Google

2. Does the keyword appear in the paid online search ad title and description?

-2	Does not appear in either the ad title or copy, and ad copy is not relevant to keyword
-1	Does not appear in either the ad title or copy, but ad copy is relevant to keyword
+1	Appears in either the ad title or copy
+2	Appears in both the ad title and copy

3. Does the ad copy “prequalify” clickers?

-2	So difficult to understand that it dissuades clicks
-1	Contains an aggressive offer that applies to almost anyone
+1	Weeds out searchers who obviously do not fit the ad or offer, but the offer itself is difficult to accomplish on a mobile device (such as downloading a PDF)
+2	Provides a unique message/offer intended to generate clicks from a specific group of users, and the offer is easy to complete on a mobile device

4. Does the ad contain a compelling call to action?

-2	Does not provide a call to action
-1	Includes a call to action that is confusing or not related to the user’s search
+1	Contains a general call to action that is clear and relevant to the keyword
+2	Contains a specific call to action or offer (such as “download a white paper,” or “get free shipping”) and utilizes ad extensions on mobile and desktop (such as click-to-call, directions, site links, or ratings snippets)

Scoring:

The top score possible is +12, the worst possible is -12, and a score of +6 or higher is considered an overall passing grade.

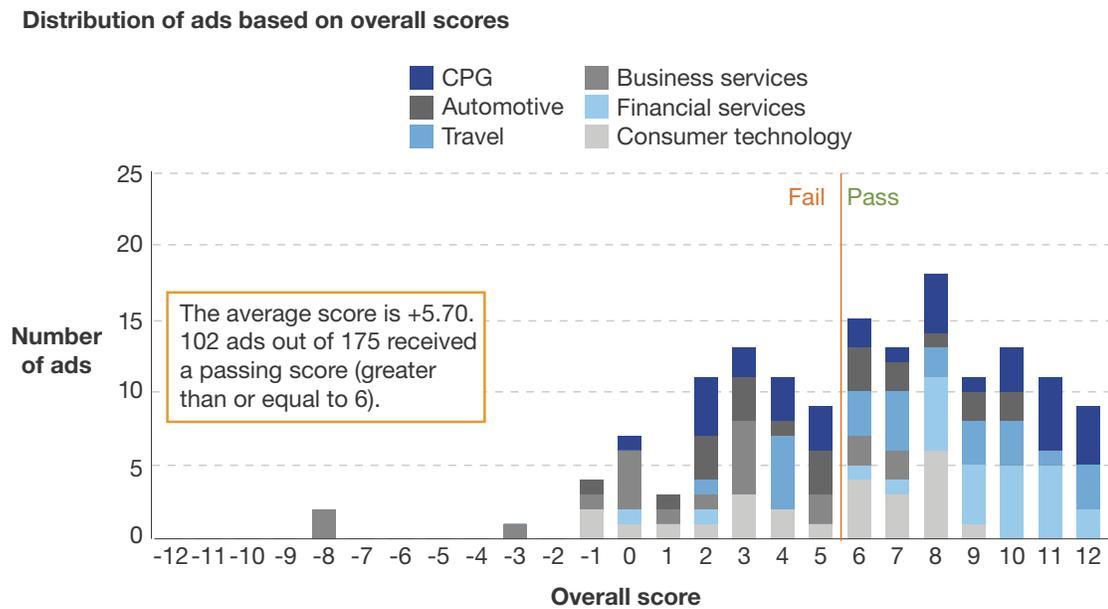
FIGURE 1 Forrester's Revised Paid Search Marketing Review Scorecard (Cont.)

5. Is the online landing page content relevant to the keyword?		Your score
-2	Does not relate to the keyword	<input type="text"/>
-1	Is relevant to the keyword but does not contain the keyword	
+1	Contains the keyword in the site content	
+2	Prominently features the keyword in site bullets and/or headlines	
6. Does the landing page employ scenario design practices to aid user experiences?		Your score
-2	The landing page is not functional.	<input type="text"/>
-1	The landing page is live but is either difficult to read, takes considerable effort to view and understand, takes more than 10 seconds to load, or is not mobile-optimized.	
+1	The landing page is designed to help searchers complete their primary task easily, and is optimized for mobile devices.	
+2	The landing page is designed to help searchers complete their primary tasks easily, plus the site employs design best practices like bread-crumbs navigation, informative hyperlinks, and clear and exclusive category names.	

Scoring:

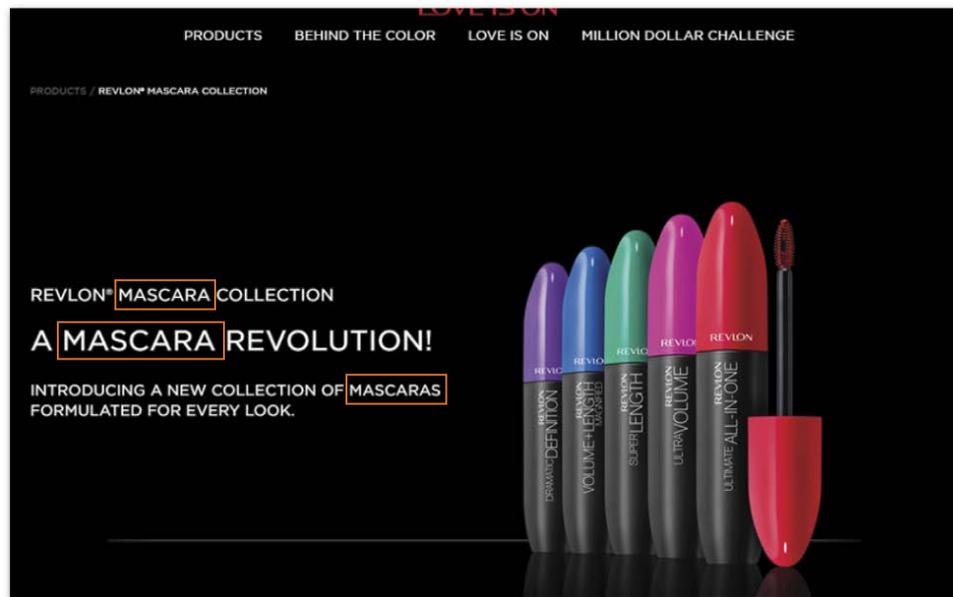
The top score possible is +12, the worst possible is -12, and a score of +6 or higher is considered an overall passing grade.

FIGURE 2 Fifty-Eight Percent Of Ads Reviewed Passed The Test



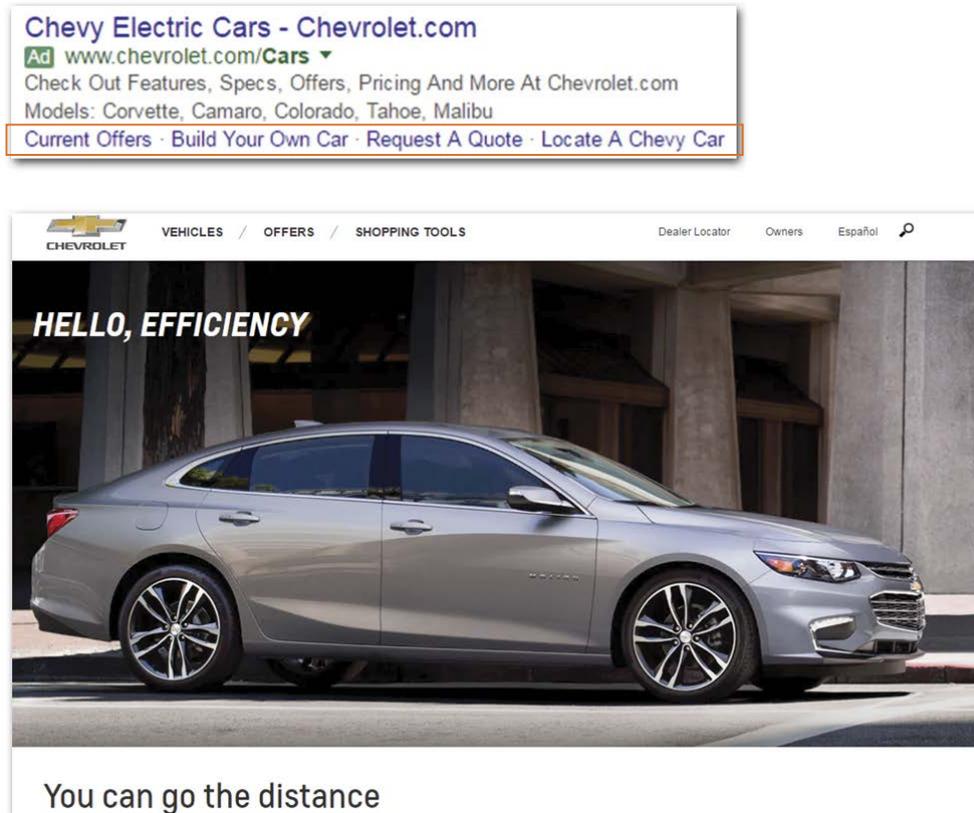
Base: 175 paid search ads

FIGURE 3 Revlon's Mascara Ad Demonstrates Keyword Best Practice



Source: Google and Revlon websites

FIGURE 4 Chevrolet Includes Multiple Calls To Action In Its Site Links



Source: Google and Chevrolet websites

But Search Marketers Still Have Room To Improve

Although the majority of the paid search ads we reviewed passed, 42% failed and the average score of all ads still fell below a passing score. And this review did shed light on a few chronic challenges for marketers:

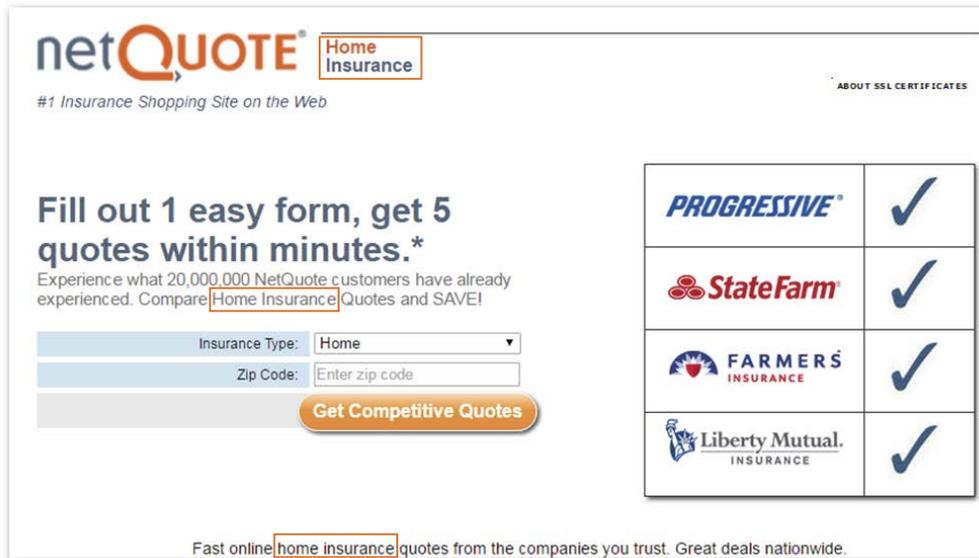
- › **Poor visibility.** We explained earlier that Google displays fewer paid search ads for each query. This means that competition is stiffer than ever before to show up in the first few paid search ads. In fact, 37% of the ads reviewed either appeared at the bottom of the first page of search results or didn't appear at all on the first page for desktop and mobile.
- › **Landing page experience.** The worst thing a marketer can do is attract clicks with good paid search ads and then throw a tomato in their customer's face with a poorly designed landing page. Yet 22% of landing pages from ads that we reviewed were not mobile optimized or did not relate to the keyword.³

Avoid Common Industry Pitfalls To Improve Your Ad Score

Financial services ads scored the best overall, for the second time in a row. But each of the six industries can improve with a few best practices. Use the guidance below to help make your own ads more effective.

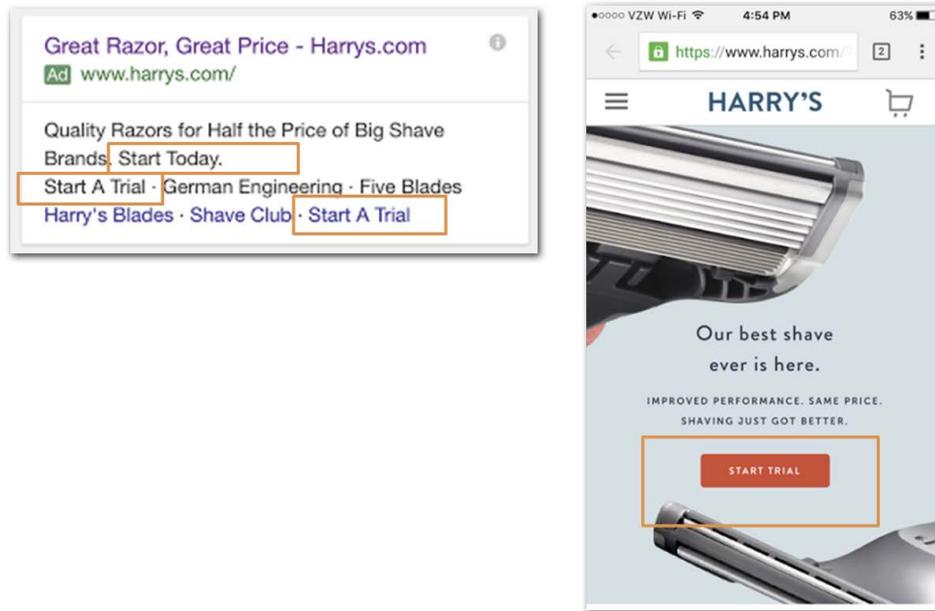
- › **Financial services: Increase keyword presence in ad copy.** Financial services ads scored the highest of all industries, with an average score of +7.7.⁴ More financial services search ads appeared above the fold for either desktop or mobile than any other industry. But fin serv firms could improve by using relevant keywords in both the ad title and description. NetQuote performs a best practice here by featuring the keywords “home insurance” prominently in not only the title and description but also one of its site links (see Figure 5).
- › **Retail and consumer goods: Give customers a reason to click.** With an average score of +7.6, the retail and CPG industry showed its maturity in direct response. In fact, 68% of all ads in this category passed our review, and it had four perfect ad scores — the most of any industry. But retail and CPG marketers can easily improve the user experience of their paid search ads by using calls to action that entice searchers to click through the ads. Harry’s, a retailer for shaving equipment, demonstrates this best practice by using multiple calls to action in its ads (see Figure 6).
- › **Travel: Optimize landing pages for mobile.** The travel industry also had comparatively good scores for its paid search ads. But 27% of travel landing pages were either not mobile optimized or very difficult to use on mobile devices. Trivago’s mobile-friendly landing page allows a customer to search easily and uses the keyword from a searcher’s query to display hotel results, as you can see from our search for rooms in New York City (see Figure 7).
- › **Automotive: Maintain relevant keywords throughout.** Automotive ads scored in the middle of the pack and had top scores in landing page design. But, like our previous evaluation, auto landing pages consistently lacked relevant keywords.⁵ For example, Nissan’s landing page about its Nissan Leaf never mentions “electric car” in its content or headlines.
- › **Consumer electronics: Target clickers.** Ads in the consumer technology sector had an average score of +4.3 — below the review’s total average. Only 12 of 27 ads reviewed in this industry “prequalified” clickers with relevant keywords and content. For instance, a search for “laptop” showed a Staples ad for back-to-school paper notebooks.
- › **Business services: Improve in all areas.** Once again, only a few business services ads — seven, to be precise — passed our review. The majority of ads in this industry did not showcase keywords in ad title, copy, or landing pages, and less than half of the landing pages reviewed were mobile optimized. 247 Legal scored the best in this category by prequalifying clickers, having a mobile-friendly page, and showcasing its phone number prominently for users to call for more information (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 5 NetQuote Displays Keyword Prominently For Paid Search Results



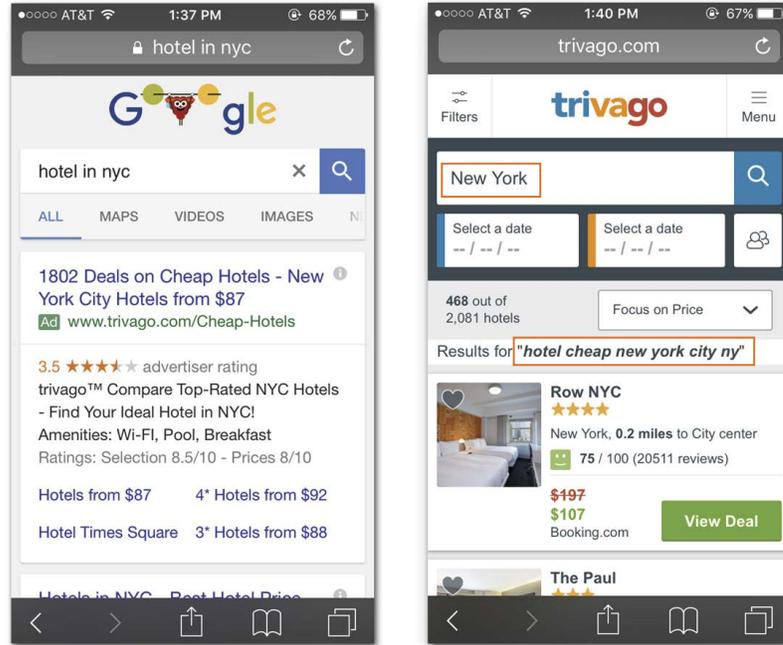
Source: Google and NetQuote websites

FIGURE 6 Harry's Uses Multiple Calls-To-Action In Its Ads To Entice Clicks



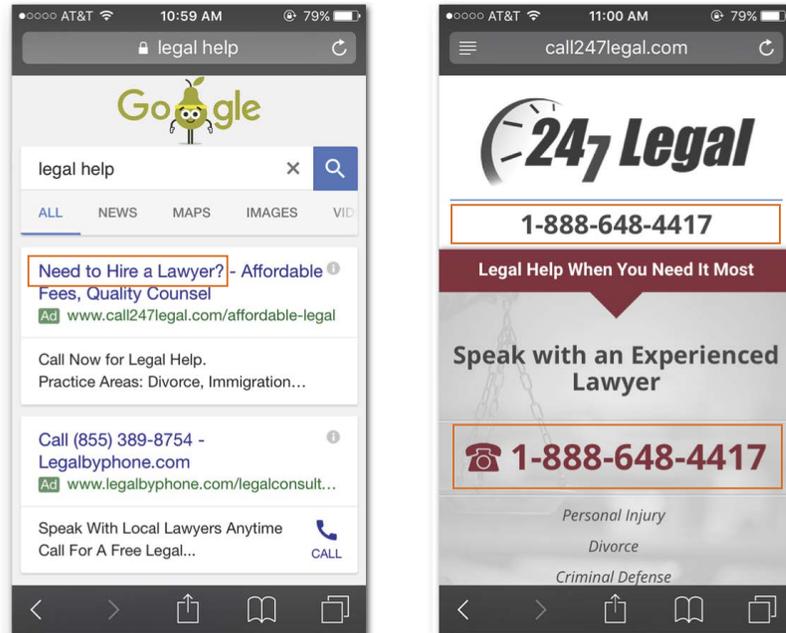
Source: Google website and Harry's mobile website

FIGURE 7 Trivago's Mobile Landing Page Incorporates Search Engine Keywords For A Smooth User Experience



Source: Google and Trivago mobile websites

FIGURE 8 247 Legal Optimizes Call-To-Action For Mobile



Source: Google and Call247Legal mobile websites

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Endnotes

- ¹ For Forrester's methodology for evaluating the user experience of your desktop and mobile search marketing campaigns, see the "[Brief: Evaluate Your Search Marketing Programs](#)" Forrester report.
- ² For more information on previous versions of Forrester's paid search review methodology, see the "[The Best And Worst Of Paid Search In 2014](#)" Forrester report and see the "[The Best And Worst Of Paid Search In 2012](#)" Forrester report.
- ³ We found it interesting that Google allows this for paid search listings — but not for organic. But that shouldn't mean you can just not optimize your landing pages for mobile. With more than 50% of searches conducted on mobile devices today, all search experiences must be made with mobile in mind.
- ⁴ The top score possible is +12, the worst possible is -12, and a score of +6 or higher would be considered an overall passing grade.
- ⁵ In our 2014 review, we also found that automotive landing pages lacked relevant keywords. See the "[The Best And Worst Of Paid Search In 2014](#)" Forrester report.

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