

A FIELD GUIDE FOR OWNERS

The Google Ads Setup *Audit.*

Ten settings quietly draining your ad budget, and the thirty day plan to plug them.

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001

If you spend \$25K a month on Google Ads, the typical account leaks *\$11,250* of it every month.

That number is not a scare tactic. It is the median waste rate I find when I audit accounts in the \$10K to \$50K monthly spend range. Six or more of the ten settings in this guide are wrong, and the algorithm is doing exactly what your tracking told it to do.

Google is not the villain. The settings are. **Most of them are on by default. Most of them can be fixed in an afternoon.**

A note on the per-flag dollar figures: each red flag shows the recovery you would expect if that one setting was the dominant leak in the account. They do not sum. Most accounts have several flags live and the leaks overlap (the same junk click can be counted under broad match and Search Partners). Total recoverable spend in a typical audit is 30 to 45 percent of monthly budget, not the sum of all ten figures.

\$11.2K

Median monthly waste across \$25K spend accounts I audit, before any optimization.

9 / 10

Accounts I audit have at least six of the ten red flags in this guide live right now.

2×

Typical lift in qualified leads within sixty days of cleaning these up. Same budget. Better signal.

Five things you will know by the time you finish reading.

01 Which of the ten common settings are wrong in your account.

A sixty second self assessment with a clear scoring model. No login required, no tools to install.

02 How much each broken setting is actually costing you.

Every red flag leads with the typical dollar bleed for a \$25K a month account, ranked by impact.

03 How to fix each one, with the exact menu path.

No vague advice. Each section gives you the literal click path inside Google Ads or GA4.

04 A worksheet that tells you your real annual waste.

Fill in the blanks. The number you get is conservative. You can also open it as a live spreadsheet.

05 A four week plan to clean it all up.

The same sequence I run with new clients. Quick wins on day one. Compounding lift by day forty five.

Your sixty second audit.

OPEN GOOGLE ADS IN ANOTHER TAB. CHECK EVERY BOX THAT IS TRUE.

-
- 01 Every phone call counts as a conversion, including ten second hang ups, wrong numbers, and existing customers calling for support.
-
- 02 "Search Partners" or "Display Network expansion" is turned on in your search campaigns. Both are on by default.
-
- 03 Conversion goals at the campaign level are set to "Account Default" instead of specific revenue actions.
-
- 04 Page views, button clicks, "engaged sessions," or other micro events are flagged as *primary* conversions.
-
- 05 You have not pulled the search terms report and added new negatives in the last thirty days.
-
- 06 GA4 is "linked" to Google Ads, but you have never confirmed conversions are actually importing.
-
- 07 You report "cost per conversion," but could not tell me your real cost per *qualified* lead if asked today.
-
- 08 You have no organized negative keyword lists, or just one giant catch all list, in your Shared Library.
-
- 09 Performance Max is your only campaign type. No standard search campaign is running alongside it.
-
- 10 Auto apply recommendations are turned on. Google is making changes for you without approval.
-

Tally your checked boxes. Score on the next page.

/ 10

What your number means.

There is no failing grade here. Almost every account I audit lands in the third bucket. The number just tells you how aggressively to act.

0-2

ISSUES

You are in good shape.

Your tracking foundation is mostly clean. A few targeted tweaks will tighten things up. Use the cheat sheet on the last page as a periodic gut check.

Est. monthly waste: under 5% of spend

3-5

ISSUES

You are leaking budget.

Fixable, but it requires immediate action. Each unresolved flag is teaching Google to optimize for the wrong people. Block four hours this week and work the impact ranked list on page 18.

Est. monthly waste: 15-30% of spend

6+

ISSUES

You are burning money.

The most common bucket, and the most expensive. Every month you wait is another month of compounding bad data. Knock out the top three fixes today. They take twenty five minutes total.

Est. monthly waste: 30-60% of spend

The math is brutal. If you spend \$20,000 a month and sit in the third bucket, you are likely wasting \$6,000 to \$12,000 a month, every month, until you act. *That is not a marketing problem. It is cash flow.*

Every phone call counts as a *conversion*.

SYMPTOM

Google counts every call the same way. A five second wrong number registers identical value to a twenty minute consultation that books a \$50K case.

WHY IT BLEEDS

If half your "conversions" are junk, you are paying Google to find more junk. The algorithm thinks short calls are valuable because that is what your conversion data says.

FIVE MINUTE CHECK

Goals → Conversions → Phone calls
If "Call length" is under 60 seconds, this red flag is live in your account.

THE FIX

Filter for qualified calls only.

- 01 Add a call tracking platform: WhatConverts, CallRail, or CallTrackingMetrics.
- 02 Exclude calls under sixty seconds from conversion tracking.
- 03 Record every call. Review weekly. Tag as Qualified or Not Qualified.
- 04 Import only qualified calls back into Google Ads as the conversion event.

EXAMPLE FROM A REAL AUDIT

Home services company reported 200 calls a month. *I pulled recordings: 60 hang ups, 40 spam, 50 existing customers, 50 real leads.* Their actual cost per lead was four times what they thought.

Search Partners and Display are *turned on*.

SYMPTOM

By default, Google extends your search campaigns to "Search Partners" (random partner sites) and the Display Network (banners on third party blogs and apps).

WHY IT BLEEDS

This traffic is notoriously low intent. Search Partners sends you to sketchy clones. Display shows banners to people reading articles. You get clicks, not conversions.

FIVE MINUTE CHECK

Campaign → Settings → Networks

If either "Include Google search partners" or "Display Network" is checked, this red flag is live.

THE FIX

Uncheck two boxes per campaign.

- 01 Open each search campaign's settings.
- 02 Find the "Networks" section near the top.
- 03 Uncheck "Include Google search partners."
- 04 Uncheck "Include Google Display Network."

EXAMPLE FROM A REAL AUDIT

Legal services firm spending \$15K a month. *Search Partners ate 40% of spend but produced 8% of consultations. Display ate another 15% with zero conversions.* Turning both off freed \$8.25K to redeploy into actual Google search.

Conversion goals are set to "*Account Default*."

SYMPTOM

"Account Default" tells Google to optimize toward every conversion in your account. Page views, map clicks, ten second calls, add to carts. Everything counts equally.

WHY IT BLEEDS

Tell Google a page view equals a booked consultation, and it will deliver page views all day. Smart Bidding becomes brilliant at the wrong thing.

FIVE MINUTE CHECK

Campaign → Settings → Conversions
If the dropdown reads "Account Default," this red flag is live.

THE FIX

Pick goals at the campaign level.

- 01 Open each campaign. Settings tab. Conversions section.
- 02 Switch from "Account Default" to "Choose conversion goals for this campaign."
- 03 Select only revenue driving actions: purchases, qualified leads, booked calls.
- 04 Move every soft action to "Secondary" so it tracks but does not optimize.

EXAMPLE FROM A REAL AUDIT

E-commerce brand celebrating 400 "conversions" a month. *I checked: 240 add to cart, 80 page views, 80 actual purchases.* Real cost per sale was five times what the dashboard showed.

Micro conversions are your *primary* goal.

SYMPTOM

Button clicks, scroll depth, "engaged sessions," and time on site are flagged as primary conversions. Your dashboard looks busy. Sales does not feel it.

WHY IT BLEEDS

Micro events make the chart look great but do not pay your bills. Google optimizes for the easy actions, not for revenue, and you get a campaign that produces scrolls.

FIVE MINUTE CHECK

Goals → Conversions → Summary

If anything other than a sale or qualified lead is set to "Primary," this red flag is live.

THE FIX

Demote everything except revenue.

- 01 Open each non revenue conversion action.
- 02 Change "Action optimization" from Primary to Secondary.
- 03 Keep only purchases, qualified leads, and booked calls as Primary.
- 04 Hit 25 plus primaries a month? Remove micros entirely.

EXAMPLE FROM A REAL AUDIT

B2B service business with under 25 sales a month genuinely needed micros to feed the bid algorithm. *We kept "demo requested" as Primary, demoted "video watched" and "engaged session" to Secondary, and watched cost per demo drop 22% in six weeks.*

No search terms review in *thirty plus* days.

SYMPTOM

You bid on keywords. Google matches your ads to actual searches that resemble those keywords, sometimes loosely. The search terms report shows what people really typed.

WHY IT BLEEDS

Bid on "personal injury lawyer" and you may pay for "personal injury lawyer jobs," "how to become one," and "free consultation." All cost money. None bring clients.

FIVE MINUTE CHECK

Insights & reports → Search terms
If your last visit was over thirty days ago, this red flag is live.

THE FIX

Make this a weekly habit.

- 01 Pull the search terms report every Monday.
- 02 Add anything irrelevant to your negative lists immediately.
- 03 Flag any term with clicks but zero conversions over thirty days.
- 04 Promote winning terms to their own exact match keywords.

EXAMPLE FROM A REAL AUDIT

Luxury crib retailer spending \$25K a month. *40% of spend went to "doll cribs" and "dog cribs." Zero conversions from either.* Blocking those terms freed \$10K a month for searches that actually converted.

GA4 is "linked," but not *importing*.

SYMPTOM

You connected GA4 to Google Ads. Both accounts say "Linked." But the import switch was never flipped, or the GA4 events were never marked as conversions.

WHY IT BLEEDS

Smart Bidding is making decisions on whatever lives in Google Ads natively, usually thinner, weaker signal. You paid for the setup and got none of the optimization benefit.

FIVE MINUTE CHECK

Goals → Conversions → Summary

If you do not see GA4 events listed as conversion actions, this red flag is live.

THE FIX

Mark, import, verify.

- 01 In GA4, mark important events as "Key Events" (formerly conversions).
- 02 In Google Ads, go to Goals, Conversions, New action, Import, Google Analytics 4.
- 03 Select the events you want: purchases, demos, qualified leads.
- 04 Wait 48 hours. Verify data is flowing in the "Recent conversions" column.

EXAMPLE FROM A REAL AUDIT

B2B SaaS had GA4 perfectly set up. Tracking was clean. *But nothing flowed into Google Ads. The import switch was off for eight months.* Once we imported, cost per demo dropped 35% in 60 days.

No *cost per qualified* lead, just CPA.

SYMPTOM

Your dashboard shows "cost per conversion." But you cannot tell me how many of those conversions actually became opportunities. Marketing celebrates. Sales hates the leads.

WHY IT BLEEDS

You make budget decisions on fantasy numbers. You think CPA is \$100. It is actually \$350 because 70% of "conversions" are junk. You scale a campaign that looks profitable and is not.

FIVE MINUTE CHECK

Ask sales: "How many of last month's leads were real?"

If the answer is "no idea" or wildly different from your CPA dashboard, this red flag is live.

THE FIX

Define qualified, then track that.

- 01 Sit with sales. Define "qualified" by budget, timeline, fit, and need.
- 02 Export the last 90 days of conversions. Have sales tag each: Qualified, Not, Closed Won.
- 03 Calculate your real cost per qualified lead.
- 04 Pipe only qualified leads back into Google Ads as the conversion event.

EXAMPLE FROM A REAL AUDIT

Senior living facility reported 80 "tour requests" a month. Sales said only 20 were real prospects. *Once we tightened the definition and tracked only qualified tours, real cost per prospect dropped 60%.*

No themed *negative* keyword lists.

SYMPTOM

You have no negative keyword lists in your Shared Library, or one giant catch all that blocks too much. Negatives sit at the campaign level, never reused, never themed.

WHY IT BLEEDS

Without themed lists, you keep paying for "lawyer jobs," "lawyer salary," and "free lawyer consultation" across every campaign you launch. Themed lists block whole categories before they hit your account.

FIVE MINUTE CHECK

Tools → Shared Library → Negative keyword lists

If you see fewer than three lists, this red flag is live.

THE FIX

Build five themed lists.

- 01 Jobs & Careers: jobs, hiring, salary, careers, employment.
- 02 DIY & How To: how to, DIY, tutorial, guide, course, training.
- 03 Free & Cheap: free, cheap, discount, coupon, deal, promo.
- 04 Informational: definition, meaning, what is, examples, vs.
- 05 Competitors: any brand you do not want to trigger on.

EXAMPLE FROM A REAL AUDIT

Promotional products company spending \$12K a month. *35% of spend went to "free custom t shirts," "promo company jobs," and "how to start a promo company."* Five themed lists cut wasted spend 28% without losing any qualified traffic.

Performance Max is your *only* campaign.

SYMPTOM

You handed your full budget to Performance Max and expected it to handle everything. No standard search campaigns. No control group. Google chooses where, who, and how.

WHY IT BLEEDS

PMAX is fine alongside good fundamentals. Dangerous on its own. With dirty conversion data it scales the wrong signals across YouTube, Display, and Discovery faster than any other campaign type.

FIVE MINUTE CHECK

Campaigns view → Filter by type
If you have only PMAX campaigns and no Search campaigns, this red flag is live.

THE FIX

Pair PMAX with a search control.

- 01 Do not kill PMAX outright. Pair it with standard search campaigns.
- 02 Run search on your highest intent keywords as a control group.
- 03 Review PMAX search terms and asset group reports weekly.
- 04 Add campaign level negatives to PMAX. This is now supported.

EXAMPLE FROM A REAL AUDIT

E-commerce brand 100% in PMAX with broken tracking, counting add to cart as primary. *PMAX dutifully found the cheapest add to carts on the planet across YouTube and Display. Revenue tanked.* Once we fixed tracking and added standard search as a control, ROAS improved 3 times.

Auto apply *recommendations* are turned on.

SYMPTOM

Google quietly implements its own "recommendations" without approval. Adding broad match keywords, adjusting bids, removing your negatives, expanding budgets. You wake up to changes you never made.

WHY IT BLEEDS

Google's recommendations are designed to grow Google's revenue, not yours. Auto applied broad match adds junk traffic. Auto removed negatives let waste back in. Auto expanded budgets drain accounts overnight.

FIVE MINUTE CHECK

Recommendations tab → Settings (gear)
If any "Auto apply" toggle is on, this red flag is live.

THE FIX

Take back the keys.

- 01 Open the Recommendations tab.
- 02 Click the settings gear in the top right.
- 03 Open "Auto apply" settings.
- 04 Turn off every auto apply option. Then schedule 30 minutes weekly to review manually.

EXAMPLE FROM A REAL AUDIT

E-commerce brand had auto apply on. *In one week Google added 47 broad match keywords, including "cheap alternatives to (brand)" and "used (product)." Cost the account \$3,200 in wasted spend before anyone noticed.*

Now put a *real* *number* on the leak.

The next two pages turn the diagnosis into a defensible dollar figure. Plug in your numbers. The result will be conservative.

The wasted spend worksheet.

Three minutes. Type into the fields below, or open the live spreadsheet via the QR code. The number you get is conservative.

Your inputs

STEP 01 · TELL ME ABOUT YOUR ACCOUNT

Monthly Google Ads spend

Red flags from page 4

% of conversions sales calls "junk"

STEP 02 · APPLY THE WASTE RATE

Waste rate (use the table to the right)

Estimated waste
PER MONTH / PER YEAR \$

Annualized
TWELVE MONTH PROJECTION \$

WORKED EXAMPLE

A \$25K a month account scoring seven red flags applies the realistic 45% rate.

$\$25,000 \times 45\% = \$11,250$ per month

$\$11,250 \times 12 = \$135,000$ per year

Your waste rate

SCORE	CONSERVATIVE	REALISTIC
0-2 issues	3%	5%
3-5 issues	15%	25%
6-7 issues	30%	45%
8-10 issues	45%	60%



Prefer a live spreadsheet?

Scan to open the same worksheet as a Google Sheet you can save and share.

connercrowe.com/calculator

The output is direct media waste only. It does not count the lift Smart Bidding produces once it has clean signal, which compounds for months after you fix things.

Where to start, ranked by impact and effort.

If you only have an afternoon, work top down. The first three fixes take 25 minutes total and typically eliminate 35 to 85 percent of total waste.

RANK	FIX	WASTE CUT	EFFORT	TIME
01	Turn off Search Partners and Display expansion (#02)	20-45%	Low	5 min
02	Turn off auto apply recommendations (#10)	5-15%	Low	5 min
03	Switch conversion goals off "Account Default" (#03)	10-25%	Low	15 min
04	Build five themed negative keyword lists (#08)	15-30%	Medium	1 hr
05	Demote micro conversions to secondary (#04)	10-20%	Low	15 min
06	Verify GA4 import is actually flowing (#06)	20-40%	Medium	30 min
07	Pull search terms report and add negatives (#05)	15-35%	Medium	1 hr/wk
08	Add a standard search campaign next to PMAX (#09)	2-3x ROAS	Medium	2 hr
09	Set up call tracking with 60 second filter (#01)	15-30%	High	1 day
10	Define qualified lead with sales, import only those (#07)	Biggest unlock	High	1 wk

Read top to bottom. The first three rows take twenty five minutes and stop most of the bleeding. *Do them today, before you finish reading this guide.*

A \$40K a month law firm, and the half they were burning.

\$40K→\$20K **20→40**

Monthly ad spend

Qualified leads /
month

-75%

Cost per qualified
lead

2×

Annual sign ups

BEFORE · WHAT I FOUND

- Every call counted as a conversion, even 12 second hang ups
- Search Partners and Display Expansion both on (45% of spend, 5% of consults)
- Conversion goals set to "Account Default"
- "Get Directions" clicks counted as conversions
- No themed negative lists, paying for "lawyer jobs" and "lawyer salary"
- Auto apply on, Google had quietly added dozens of broad match keywords
- Sales team furious, marketing had no visibility into why

AFTER · WHAT WE DID

- Call tracking installed. 60 second filter on. Recordings reviewed weekly.
- Sales tagged 90 days of leads as Qualified, Not, or Closed Won
- Search Partners and Display turned off. Auto apply turned off.
- Conversion goals switched to "Qualified consultation only"
- Five themed negative lists built and applied at the campaign level
- Only qualified leads flow back into Google Ads as the conversion event
- Real cost per qualified lead now visible and trended monthly

Same market. Same offer. Same product.
Half the spend, twice the qualified pipeline.

Your thirty day plan.

The same four week schedule I run with new clients. Quick wins on day one, compounding lift by day forty five.

WEEK 01

Audit and document.

- Run the ten question audit on page 4. Screenshot every red flag you find. 3 hr
- Meet with sales and define what "qualified" means: budget, timeline, fit, need.
- Export 90 days of conversions. Have sales tag each as Qualified, Not, or Closed Won.

WEEK 02

Quick wins. The twenty five minute miracle.

- Turn off Search Partners and Display Expansion in every search campaign. 2 hr
- Turn off auto apply recommendations.
- Switch conversion goals from "Account Default" to specific qualified actions.
- Pull the search terms report. Build the first three themed negative lists.

WEEK 03

Deep fixes. Where the leverage is.

- Set up call tracking with the 60 second filter. 4 hr
- Verify GA4 conversions are actually importing, not just "linked." Fix if not.
- Demote all micro conversions to secondary. Promote only revenue actions.
- Add two more themed negative lists (Competitors, Informational).
- If you are PMAX only, launch one standard search campaign as a control.

WEEK 04

Lock it in. Build the rhythm.

- Review last week's call recordings. Tag each one. Import only qualified calls back. 2 hr
- Calculate your real cost per qualified lead. Report on that, not "cost per conversion."
- Set a recurring 30 minute weekly block: search terms review and negatives update.

My recommended tool stack.

I get asked this on every intro call. Here is the short list, with my one line "why this one" so you do not have to guess.

CALL TRACKING

WhatConverts

Tracks calls, forms, chats, and texts in one place. Built in lead qualification UI. Easy two way sync with Google Ads. Pricing scales gently with volume.

WHY
Best qualification
UX

ANALYTICS

GA4 + Looker Studio

GA4 for event tracking and conversion import into Google Ads. Looker Studio for the human readable monthly reporting that does not make clients glaze over.

WHY
Free and native

TAG MANAGEMENT

Google Tag Manager

Server side or web. Stops you from begging your developer every time you need a new event. Required if you are doing enhanced conversions properly.

WHY
The standard

LEAD ROUTING

Zapier or Make

Pipes form fills and qualified call data into your CRM, then back into Google Ads as enhanced conversions. The "qualified leads only" workflow lives here.

WHY
Glue layer

LANDING PAGES

Unbounce or Instapage

Do not send paid traffic to your homepage. Build dedicated landing pages with one offer, one form, one CTA. Cheaper than redesigning your site.

WHY
Speed to launch

BID MANAGEMENT

Google Smart Bidding

Once your conversion data is clean, native Smart Bidding (tCPA, tROAS, Maximize Conversions) outperforms most third party bid tools. Save your money.

WHY
Native data wins

Honest answers to the questions I get most.

Q. Is this still relevant in 2026 with Smart Bidding, PMAX, and Demand Gen?

More than ever. Smart Bidding, PMAX, and Demand Gen all rely entirely on your conversion data to decide where to spend. They are amplifiers. Clean signal in equals great results. Junk signal in equals junk results, faster than ever. The fundamentals matter more as Google takes more control, not less.

Q. Does not Google know what works better than I do?

Google knows what gets **more conversions according to your tracking**. If your tracking says wrong number calls and add to carts are conversions, Google will get you a lot of those. The algorithm has no idea what your sales team thinks of the leads. You have to teach it.

Q. What if my budget is under \$5K a month? Does this still apply?

Most of it does. Skip the call tracking platform if recording from your VoIP works. Skip Optmyzr tier audit tools. But the conversion goals fix, the negatives lists, the auto apply toggle, and the Search Partners / Display fix all matter the same. They take an afternoon and probably double the efficiency of whatever you are spending.

Q. How fast will I see results after fixing this?

The "turn off Display Network" type fixes show up in your data within 48 hours. Wasted spend just stops. The Smart Bidding compounding effect, where Google relearns on cleaner signal, takes 2 to 6 weeks depending on conversion volume. Most of my clients see a 20 to 40 percent improvement in cost per qualified lead inside 60 days.

Q. My agency manages this. Should I trust them to fix it?

Send them this PDF and ask them to walk you through how many of the ten they have correctly set up, with screenshots. A good agency will appreciate the prompt. A bad one will get defensive. That answer alone tells you what you need to know.

Q. What did you leave out on purpose?

Three settings worth checking after the ten in this guide. Ad strength and RSA quality (two to three RSAs per ad group, no over-pinning). Location targeting set to "Presence" instead of the default "Presence or interest" (the default leaks 10 to 30 percent of local-business spend). Brand and non-brand keywords mixed in the same campaign (inflates ROAS and corrupts Smart Bidding). The ten in this guide move the most money the fastest. The next three are where I look once those are clean.

If you would rather not fix this *alone*.

I personally audit a small number of accounts each month. No pitch deck, no obligation, no contract. Just a conversation, a screen share, and an honest read on what is broken and what to do about it.

- A ranked, screenshotted list of every red flag in your account.
- The exact conversions to track, and which to kill.
- A 30 day action plan with task owners and rough ETAs.
- An honest take on whether you should DIY or hire, even if it is not me.

Book a free thirty minute
audit call.

FIRST COME, FIRST SERVED.
LIMITED SLOTS EACH MONTH.

[CONNERCROWE.COM/CONTACT](https://connercrowe.com/contact) →

The setup audit cheat sheet.

Save this page. Send it to your team or agency. Use it as your monthly gut check.

SAVE
AND SHARE

01 Every call counts as a conversion

Fix: Call tracking + 60 sec filter + import only qualified.

02 Search Partners and Display on

Fix: Settings → Networks → uncheck both.

03 Conversion goals at "Account Default"

Fix: Switch to "Choose campaign goals" → revenue actions only.

04 Micro conversions are primary

Fix: Demote to "Secondary." Keep only revenue events as primary.

05 No search terms review in 30+ days

Fix: Weekly review. Add negatives. Promote winners.

06 GA4 linked but not importing

Fix: Goals → Conversions → Import → GA4 → verify in 48 hr.

07 No cost per qualified lead number

Fix: Define qualified with sales. Tag back. Track that, not CPA.

08 No themed negative keyword lists

Fix: Build five: Jobs, DIY, Free, Informational, Competitors.

09 PMAX is your only campaign

Fix: Add a standard search campaign as control group.

10 Auto apply recommendations on

Fix: Recommendations → Settings → turn ALL auto apply OFF.

— IN CLOSING

Bad tracking makes every dollar weaker. *Clean data is the equalizer.*

More spend does not fix bad data. It just makes the leak louder. Stop paying for fake conversions. Let Google optimize for buyer signals, not noise. Outpace the competitors who are still flying blind.