In Targeting Online Ads, Campaigns Ask: Who's Searching for What?

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A day after Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin winked playfully during the recent vice presidential debate, the number of people typing "palin wink" into the Google search engine surged, rising to No. 3 on the service's list of newly popular queries.

There, the phrase caught the attention of Eric Frenchman, an expert hired by the McCain-Palin campaign to develop online advertising.

"I might use it," said Frenchman, who describes himself as a "voracious" reader of Google search statistics.

Discovering how people search for candidate information -- exactly what words they type into a search box -- is a budding science that is paying big dividends in the presidential race between Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.).

As never before, the campaigns are buying ads to run along with the results of specific search queries on Google, Yahoo and Microsoft's Live. Because the ads catch people just as they are searching for information and because they can be tailored to the users' immediate interest -- the phrases they type in -- both campaigns are spending millions on the method, which is relatively new in politics.

There is an art to choosing the keyword phrases for which to buy advertising -- among them are "water conserving faucets," "inheritance tax" and "fuel calculator." And it requires avid monitoring to keep up with evolving popular interests and campaign messages.

Many of the hundreds of keywords chosen by the campaigns for advertising are obvious -- simple variations of the candidates' names.

Others reveal what kinds of issues the campaigns are trying to engage voters on: "gas prices," "chavez" and "global warming" have been used, according to AdGooroo and SpyFu, firms that track search-term advertising.

But others stray far from policies: "Lipstick," "hanoi hilton," "obama muslim" and "hot wife" also have been purchased, according to the ad trackers.

Federal election records show that the Obama campaign has spent $5 million on Google, although some of that went for traditional display ads. The McCain campaign's ad expenditures are harder to track, but based on the volume of its online advertising, its tally reaches into the millions as well.
"The beautiful thing about search advertising is that it's people looking for information about you," Frenchman, of Connell Donatelli in Alexandria, said last week. "Right now I'm seeing 'palin wink' on Google Trends. I might use it. But first I would see what type of traffic is on it and what kind of discussion is around it. If I think it's positive, I would just dump it in with the rest of the words we're buying."

Anticipating the public's curiosity is a tricky business, however. To judge by the top political search terms, popular interests more often dwell on matters of personality, celebrity and gossip than on policy.

The Web research firm Hitwise, which samples data from 10 million U.S. Internet users, has ranked, for each candidate, the top 25 search phrases that include the candidate's last name.

For example, ranking among the top 25 search terms that include the word "palin" are "bristol palin," "sarah palin pictures," "sarah palin photos," "sarah palin hot photos" "sarah palin hot" "sarah palin affair" "snl video of palin clinton" "sarah palin swimsuit" "sarah palin pics" "palin affair" "sarah palin scandal" "sarah palin bikini" and "sarah palin beauty pageant."

Among the top 25 search phrases that include "mccain" are "how old is cindy mccain," "cindy mccain age" and a handful about the candidate's first wife and their children.

Among those for Obama are "obama jokes" "obama antichrist" "obama muslim" and "obama birth certificate."

"You have to go pretty far down these lists to find issues," said Bill Tancer, general manager of global research at Hitwise and author of "Click," a book about what people search for online.

The superficiality of the inquiries regarding Palin is striking, Tancer said, and reflects the newness of her celebrity.

"Sarah Palin is the new Paris Hilton," he said.

The McCain campaign has purchased thousands of keyword phrases. The Obama campaign appears to have bought fewer, but the search terms it is known to have purchased reach at least into the hundreds.

According to AdGooroo and SpyFu, among the thousands of terms purchased to send people to McCain Web sites are:

· "Hot wife," which linked to a biography of Cindy McCain.

· "Sarah palin pictures," which directed users to official campaign pictures.

· "Chavez" and "castro," which linked to a page advertising McCain's foreign policy.

· "Katrina" "against abortion," "global warming," "environmental pollution" and "gas prices," all tied to policy issues.

Among the search phrases that have been purchased to direct people to Obama Web sites are:

· "Barack muslim," which linked to a page informing viewers that he is not a Muslim.
"Diane von furstenberg," which linked to a site selling Obama clothing.

"Clinton" and "edwards," an effort to reach voters for his Democratic rivals in the primaries.

"Our search advertising accounts for a large portion of our new media strategy," said Nick Shapiro, an Obama spokesman.

Search ads also allow highly targeted negative advertising, and it can be done without inviting the level of scrutiny that accompanies print or television advertising.

For example, a voter searching for online information about Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) last month, and who entered "hillary" in the search box, might have seen this ad pop up.

Is Obama The One?

Barack Obama

A Worldwide Sensation

But Is He Ready to Lead?

Learn More. JohnMcCain.com/TheOne

The ad, discovered by AdGooroo, directed viewers to a video stream on the McCain site that mocks Obama's lofty rhetoric and suggests that he sees himself as a religious figure -- there is even a clip of Charlton Heston as Moses parting the waters.

"It shall be known that in 2008 the world will be blessed," the announcer says, as clips of Obama float by. "They will call him 'The One.' He has anointed himself. . . . He can do no wrong. . . . Barack Obama may be the one, but is he ready to lead?"

"Our job as marketers is give them relevant advertising," Frenchman said.

Likewise, the Obama campaign ran an array of attack ads last month, targeting McCain's assertion of being a maverick ("Is McCain a Maverick? Nope.") and his links to lobbyists "McCain's Trip to Bermuda/Learn About the Lobbyists That Gave/McCain $50,000," among other issues.

The Obama campaign recently bought the term "diabetes" and other related phrases. A person seeking information about the disease would have found this blurb from the campaign, according to AdGooroo:

Do You Have Diabetes?


BarackObama.com/Diabetes

"Everyone Googles now," said Richard Stokes, president of AdGooroo. "It's an unprecedented method to reach out to an audience with information at the exact instant that they're looking for information."
Or, as Sara Holoubek, a consultant who recently moderated a panel in New York on search advertising and the campaigns, said: "This is the year the campaigns finally got search."

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