

# Consumer Heterogeneity and Paid Search Effectiveness: A Large Scale Field Experiment\*

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## Abstract

Internet advertising has been the fastest growing advertising channel in recent years with paid search ads comprising the bulk of this revenue. We present results from a series of large-scale field experiments done at eBay that were designed to measure the causal effectiveness of paid search ads. Because search clicks and purchase intent are correlated, we show that returns from paid search are a fraction of non-experimental estimates. As an extreme case, we show that brand-keyword ads have no measurable short-term benefits. For non-brand keywords we find that new and infrequent users are positively influenced by ads but that more frequent users whose purchasing behavior is not influenced by ads account for most of the advertising expenses, resulting in average returns that are negative.

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# 1 Introduction

Advertising expenses account for a sizable portion of costs for many companies across the globe. In recent years the internet advertising industry has grown disproportionately, with revenues in the U.S. alone totaling \$36.6 billion for 2012, up 15.2 percent from 2011. Of the different forms of internet advertising, paid search advertising, also known in industry as “search engine marketing” (SEM) remains the largest advertising format by revenue, accounting for 46.3 percent of 2012 revenues, or \$16.9 billion, up 14.5 percent from \$14.8 billion in 2010. Google Inc., the leading SEM provider, registered \$46 billion in global revenues in 2012, of which \$43.7 billion, or 95 percent, were attributed to advertising.<sup>1</sup>

This paper reports the results from a series of controlled experiments conducted at eBay Inc., where large-scale SEM campaigns were randomly executed across the U.S. The experiments show that the effectiveness of SEM is small for a well-known company like eBay and that the channel has been ineffective on average. We find, however, a significant positive effect of SEM on new user acquisition and on influencing purchases by infrequent and less recent users. This supports the *informative view* of advertising and implies that targeting *uninformed* users is a critical factor for successful advertising.

The effects of advertising on business performance have always been considered hard to measure. Traditional advertising channels such as TV, radio, print and billboards have limited targeting capabilities, causing advertisers to waste valuable marketing dollars on “infra-marginal” consumers who are not affected by ads to get to those marginal consumers who are. The advent of internet marketing channels has been lauded as the answer to this long-standing dilemma for two reasons.

First, the internet lets advertisers target their ads to the activity that users are engaged in (Goldfarb, 2012). For instance, when a person reads content related to sports, like ESPN.com, advertisers can bid to have display ads appear on those pages. Similarly, if a user searches Google for information about flat-screen TVs, retailers and manufacturers of these goods can bid for paid search ads that better target the user’s intent.

Second, advertisers can track data needed to measure the efficacy of ads because they will receive detailed data on visitors who were directed to their websites by the ad, how

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<sup>1</sup>See See the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) 2012 Full Year Results, April 2013, [http://www.iab.net/media/file/IAB\\_Internet\\_Advertising\\_Revenue\\_Report\\_FY\\_2012\\_rev.pdf](http://www.iab.net/media/file/IAB_Internet_Advertising_Revenue_Report_FY_2012_rev.pdf) and Google’s webpage <http://investor.google.com/financial/tables.html>

much was paid for the ad, and whether the visitor purchased anything from their website. This should allow the advertiser to compute the returns on investment.

Despite these advantages, serious challenges persist in measuring causal relationships between internet-advertising expenditures and sales. Traditionally, economists have focused on endogeneity stemming from firm decisions to increase advertising during times of high demand.<sup>2</sup> Our concern, instead, is that the amount spent on internet marketing is a function not only of the advertiser’s campaign, but is also determined by the *behavior* and *intent* of consumers because expenditures increase with clicks. In contrast, the amount spent on an ad in the New York Times print edition is independent of consumer behavior.

Our research highlights one potential drawback inherent in this form of targeting: In many cases, the consumers who choose to click on ads are loyal customers or are otherwise already informed about the company’s product. Advertising may appear to attract these consumers, when in reality they would have found other channels to visit the company’s website. We overcome this endogeneity challenge with our controlled experiments.

To visualize SEM, Figure 1a shows Google search results for the query “used gibson les paul”, which fall into two categories: paid (or “sponsored”) search ads (two on top, five photo ads, and seven on the right), and unpaid (also called “natural” or “organic”) search results (three at the bottom). Organic results are ranked by Google’s “PageRank” algorithm, while the placement of paid search ads depends on bids made by advertisers when a particular query is typed by a user. Advertisers pay only when a user clicks on the ad, implying that ad expenses are only incurred for users who respond to the ad.

The example in Figure 1a describes what is referred to as a non-brand keyword search, despite the fact that a particular branded product (Gibson Les Paul) is part of the query, because many retailers will offer this guitar for sale. This is in contrast to a branded keyword such as “macys”. Figure 1b shows the results page from searching for “macys” on Google with only one paid ad that links to Macy’s main webpage.

To illustrate a striking example of the endogeneity problem we first tested the efficacy of brand keyword advertising, a practice used by many companies. For example, on February 16, 2013, Google searches for the keywords “AT&T”, “Macy”, “Safeway”, “Ford” and “Amazon” resulted in paid ads at the top of the search results page directly above organic unpaid links to the companies’ sites. Brand paid search links simply intercept

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<sup>2</sup>E.g., advertising during the holidays, or when advertising budgets are set as a percentage of previous-quarter revenue. See Berndt (1991), Chapter 8, for a survey of this literature.

Figure 1: Google Ad Examples



(a) Used Gibson Les Paul

(b) Macy's

Panel (a) shows Google search results for a non-brand term "used gibson les paul" and Panel (b) shows a brand term, Macy's.

consumers at the last point in their navigational process, resulting in an extreme version of the endogeneity concern because users would have found the advertisers' site anyway.

Section 2 presents experiments showing that there is no measurable short-term value in brand keyword advertising. eBay halted SEM queries for brand keywords (all queries that included the term eBay, e.g., "ebay shoes") on both Yahoo! and Microsoft (MSN), while continuing to pay for these terms on Google, which we used as a control in our estimation. The results show that almost all of the forgone click traffic and attributed sales were captured by natural search.<sup>3</sup> That is, substitution between paid and unpaid traffic was nearly complete. We further confirm this result using several brand-keyword experiments on Google's search platform.<sup>4</sup>

Section 3 presents our main analyses based on experiments for non-branded keyword advertising. eBay historically managed over 100 million keywords and keyword combinations using algorithms that are updated daily and automatically feed into Google's, Microsoft's

<sup>3</sup>Throughout, we refer to sales as the total dollar value of goods purchased by users on eBay. Revenue is close to a constant fraction of sales, so percentage changes in the two are almost equivalent.

<sup>4</sup>Rutz and Bucklin (2011) distinguish between generic and branded search terms similarly to our distinction between brand and non-brand terms. They do not measure the efficacy of brand search ads.

and Yahoo!’s search platforms.<sup>5</sup> Examples of such keyword strings are “memory”, “cell phone” and “used gibson les paul”. Unlike branded search, where a firm’s website is usually in the top organic search slot, organic placement for non-branded terms vary widely. The question is whether absent SEM ads, consumers will use other channels to navigate to eBay’s website (e.g., by directly navigating to [www.ebay.com](http://www.ebay.com)).<sup>6</sup>

To address this question, we designed a controlled experiment using Google’s geographic bid feature (see Vaver and Koehler (2011)) that can determine, with a reasonable degree of accuracy, the geographic area of the user conducting each query. We designate a random sample of 30 percent of eBay’s U.S. traffic in which we stopped all bidding for all non-brand keywords for 60 days. The test was designed to estimate the effect of paid search on sales and allowed us to explore heterogeneous responses across a wide consumer base.

The experiment showed that SEM had a very small and statistically insignificant effect on sales. We then segmented users according to the frequency and recency at which they visit eBay. We found that SEM accounted for a statistically significant increase in new registered users and purchases made by users who bought infrequently. SEM did not have a significant effect on the purchasing behavior of consumers who bought more frequently. We calculate that the short-term returns on investment for SEM were negative because frequent eBay shoppers account for most of the sales attributed to paid search.

Our results support the *informative view* of advertising, which posits that advertising informs consumers of the characteristics, location and prices of products and services that they may otherwise be ignorant about.<sup>7</sup> In particular, consumers who have completed several eBay transactions in the year before our experiment are likely to be familiar with eBay and are unaffected by SEM. In contrast, more new users sign up when they are exposed to SEM ads, and users who only purchased one or two items in the previous year increase their purchases when exposed to SEM.

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<sup>5</sup>See “Inside eBay’s business intelligence” by Jon Tullett, news analysis editor for ITWeb at [http://www.itweb.co.za/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=60448:Inside-eBay-s-business-intelligence&catid=218](http://www.itweb.co.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=60448:Inside-eBay-s-business-intelligence&catid=218)

<sup>6</sup> Yang and Ghose (2010) investigate whether organic and paid search links are substitutes or complements. They do not measure sales related to other channels or the total effect of SEM on sales.

<sup>7</sup>Bagwell (2007) gives an excellent review of the economics literature on advertising. The *persuasive view* of advertising suggests that consumers who are exposed to persuasive advertising will develop a preference for the advertised product. Intuitively, SEM is an advertising medium that affects the information that people have, and is unlikely to play a persuasive role. It is possible that display ads, which appear on pages without direct consumer queries, may play more of a persuasive role. A few papers have explored the effects of display ads on offline and online sales. See Manchanda et al. (2006), Goldfarb and Tucker (2011) and Lewis and Reiley (2014b).

These results echo findings in Akerberg (2001) who shows, using a reduced form model, that consumers who were not experienced with a product were more responsive to ads than consumers who had experienced the product. To the best of our knowledge, we analyze the first large scale field experiment that documents the causal response of consumers to changes in advertising differentiated by how informed these consumers were.<sup>8</sup>

We contribute to a growing literature that exploits rich internet marketing data to explore how consumers respond to advertising.<sup>9</sup> Lewis and Reiley (2014b) examine a related endogeneity problem to the one we stress, which they call “activity bias”, where people who are more active online will both see more display-ads and click on more links.<sup>10</sup> To illustrate the severity of the endogeneity problem in our data, we calculated the Return on Investment (ROI) using typical OLS methods, which result in a ROI of over 4,100% without time and geographic controls, and a ROI of over 1,400% with such controls. We then used our experimental methods to control for endogeneity and found a ROI of  $-63\%$ , with a 95% confidence interval of  $[-124\%, -3\%]$ , rejecting the hypothesis that the channel yields any short run positive returns. This result further emphasizes the importance of using controlled experiments in measuring the effectiveness of advertising, a tradition going back to at least Lodish et al. (1995).<sup>11</sup>

If, as we suspect, our results generalize to other well known brands that are in most consumers’ consideration sets, then our study suggests that much of what is spent on internet advertising may be beyond the peak of its efficacy. We conclude by discussing the challenges that companies face in choosing optimal levels of advertising.

## 2 Brand Search Experiments

In March of 2012, eBay conducted a test to study the returns of brand keyword search advertising. Brand terms are any queries that *include* the term eBay such as “eBay shoes.”

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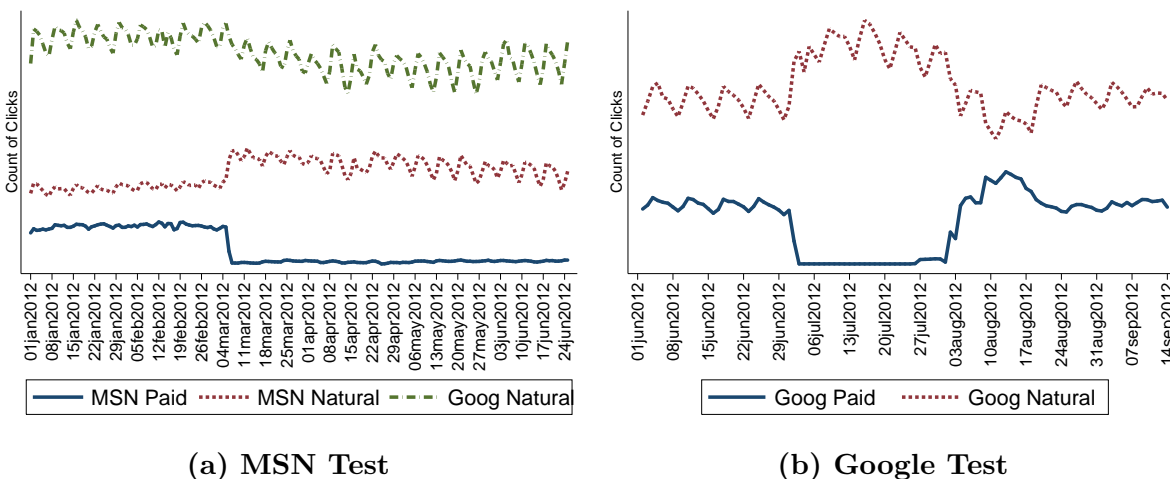
<sup>8</sup>Other recent papers have shown heterogeneous responses of consumers along demographic dimensions such as age, gender and location. See Lewis and Reiley (2014a) and Johnson et al. (2014).

<sup>9</sup>See Yao and Mela (2011), Chan et al. (2011b), Reiley et al. (2010), and Narayanan and Kalyanam (2011) for recent papers that study SEM using other methods.

<sup>10</sup>Edelman (2013) raises the concern that industry measurement methods, often referred to as “attribution models”, may indeed overestimate the efficacy of such ads. Lewis and Rao (2013) expose another problem with measurement showing that there are significant problems with the power of many experimental advertising campaigns, leading to wide confidence intervals.

<sup>11</sup>Other recent papers that use controlled experiments to investigate related issues include Sahni (2011), Lewis and Reiley (2014b), and Lambrecht and Tucker (2013).

**Figure 2: Brand Keyword Click Substitution**



MSN and Google click-traffic counts to eBay on searches for ‘ebay’ terms is shown for two experiments where paid search was suspended (Panel a) and suspended and resumed (Panel b).

Our hypothesis was that users who type “eBay” are using search as navigation with the intent to go to ebay.com. If so, brand ads “intercept” those searches because the natural search results will serve as an almost perfect substitute. To test this hypothesis, eBay halted advertising for its brand related terms on Yahoo! and MSN. The experiment revealed that almost all (99.5 percent) of the forgone click traffic from turning off brand keyword paid search was immediately captured by natural search traffic from the platform, in this case Bing. That is, substitution between paid and unpaid traffic was nearly complete.<sup>12</sup>

Figure 2a plots the paid and natural clicks originating from the search platform. Paid clicks were driven to zero when advertising was suspended, while there was a noticeable uptake in natural clicks. Since users intend to find eBay, it is not surprising that shutting down the paid search path to their desired destination simply diverts traffic to the next easiest path, natural search, which is free to the advertiser.

To quantify this substitution, we first regressed the log of total daily clicks from MSN to eBay on an indicator for whether days were in the period with ads turned off. Click volume was 5.6 percent lower in the period after advertising was suspended. We then used

<sup>12</sup>The 0.5 percent of all clicks lost represents about 1.5 percent of all paid clicks. In a recent paper, Yang and Ghose (2010) similarly switched off and back on paid search advertising for a random set of 90 keywords. We find much smaller differences in total traffic, most likely because we experimented with a brand term where the substitution effect is much larger.

data on eBay’s clicks from Google as a control for seasonal factors because during the test period on MSN, eBay continued to purchase brand keyword advertising on Google. We performed a difference-in-differences analysis using Google as a control.<sup>13</sup> Once the seasonality is accounted for, only 0.529 percent of the click traffic is lost so 99.5 percent is retained. Note that this is a lower bound of retention because some of the 0.5 percent of lost traffic may have switched to typing “ebay.com” into the browser.

These results inspired a follow-up test on Google’s platform that was executed in July of 2012 which yielded similar results. Figure 2b shows both the substitution to natural traffic when search advertising was suspended and the substitution back to paid traffic when advertising resumed. In total, traffic referred by Google dropped by 3.2 percent. It is likely that a well constructed control group would reduce this estimate as was evident in the MSN test. During this test, there was no viable control group because there was no other contemporaneous paid search brand advertising campaign. In an online Appendix we describe a test in Germany that preserved a control group, which confirms the results.

In summary, the evidence strongly supports the intuitive notion that for brand keywords, natural search is close to a perfect substitute for paid search, making brand keyword SEM ineffective for short-term sales. After all, the users who type the brand keyword in the search query intend to reach the company’s website, and most likely will execute on their intent regardless of the appearance of a paid search ad.

### **3 Non-Brand Terms Controlled Experiment**

When typing queries for non-brand terms, users may be searching for information on goods or wish to purchase them. If ads appear for users who do not know that these products are available at the advertiser’s website, then there is potential to bring these users to the site, which in turn might generate sales that would not have occurred without the ads.

Because eBay bids on a universe of over 100 million keywords, it provides an ideal environment to test the effectiveness of paid search ads for non-brand keywords. The broad set of keywords place ads in front of a wide set of users who search for queries related to millions of products. Measuring the effects of the full keyword set more directly addresses the value of informative advertising because we can examine how consumers with different levels of familiarity with the site respond to advertising. In particular, we

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<sup>13</sup>Detailed results are shown in Table A1 of the online Appendix.



can use measures of past activity on eBay to segment users into groups that would be more or less familiar with eBay’s offerings. Non-brand ads can attract users that are not directly searching for eBay but the endogeneity problem persists because the ads may attract informed users who may have visited eBay even if the ad were not present.

### 3.1 Experimental Design and Basic Results

To measure the effect of advertising on non-brand queries we implemented a large scale field experiment that exposed a random group of users to ads, while a control group did not see ads.<sup>14</sup> We used Google’s geographic bid feature that determines, with a reasonable degree of accuracy, the Nielsen Designated Market Area (DMA) of the user conducting each query. There are 210 DMAs in the United States, which typically correspond to large metropolitan areas. For example, San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose, CA, comprise a large DMA while Butte and Bozeman, MT, comprise a smaller DMA.

For the test, ads were suspended in roughly 30 percent of DMAs. This was done to reduce the scope of the test and minimize the potential cost and impact to the business (in the event that the ads created considerable profits). A purely random subsample of DMAs were chosen as candidates for the test. Next, candidate DMAs were divided into test and control DMAs using an algorithm that matched historical serial correlation in sales between the two regions. This was done to create a control group that mirrored the test group in seasonality. This procedure implies that the test group is not a purely random sample, but it is certainly an arbitrary sample that does not exhibit any historical (or, ex post) difference in sales trends. The test design therefore lends itself neatly to a standard difference-in-differences estimation of the effect of paid search on sales. For robustness, we explored alternative estimation strategies using the purely random assignment in the online Appendix.

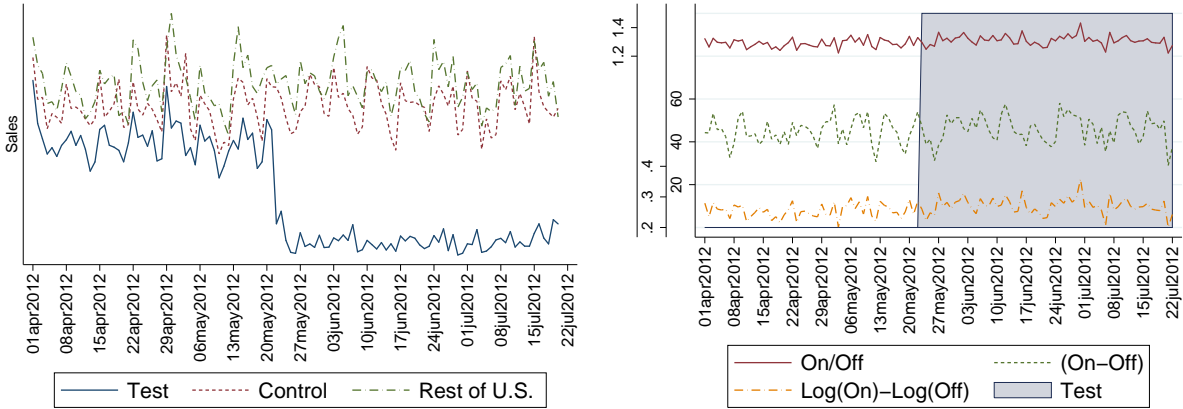
Figure 3a plots total *attributed* sales for the three regions of the U.S.: the 68 test DMAs where advertising ceased, 65 matched control DMAs, and the remaining 77 control DMAs (yielding a total of 142 control DMAs). Attributed sales are total sales of all purchases by users within 24 hours of that user clicking on a Google paid search link.<sup>15</sup> Note that attributed sales do not completely zero out in the test DMAs during the experiment (they

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<sup>14</sup>Whereas the previous section referred to a test of advertising for branded keywords and their variants, this test specifically excluded brand terms. That is, eBay continued to purchase brand ads nationally until roughly 6 weeks into the geographic test when the brand ads were halted nationwide.

<sup>15</sup>The y-axis is suppressed to protect proprietary sales data. It is in units of dollars per DMA, per day.

**Figure 3: Non-Brand Keyword Region Test**



**(a) Attributed Sales by Region**

**(b) Differences in Total Sales**

Panel (a) plots total purchases by users who clicked on an ad prior to purchase, which drops when the test commences in the test areas. Panel (b) plots three different measures of the difference between test and control regions before and after the test. The Y-axis is shown for the ratio, the log difference, and in differences in thousands of dollars per day, per DMA.

fell by over 72 percent). The remaining ad sales from test DMAs are an artifact of the error both in Google’s ability to determine a user’s location and our determination of the user’s location. We use the user’s shipping zip code registered with eBay to determine the user’s DMA and whether or not the user was exposed to ads. If a user makes a purchase while traveling to a region exposed to ads but still has the product shipped to her home, we would assign the associated sales to the off region.<sup>16</sup>

Figure 3b plots the simple difference, ratio, and log difference between daily average sales in the designated control regions where search remained on and the test regions where search was off. The regions where search remained on are larger (about 30 percent) than the regions switched off as a result of the selection algorithm that optimized for historical trends. There is no noticeable difference between the pre and post experimental period demonstrating the muted overall effect of paid search. The online appendix contains details of a difference-in-differences estimation that mimics Figure 3b using daily data from the full national set of DMAs in a regression of sales on indicators for whether or not paid search was turned on. Column (5) of Table 1 reports the results showing that the

<sup>16</sup>This classification error will attenuate the estimated effect towards zero. However, the Instrumental Variables estimates in Columns (3) and (4) of Table 1 measure an effect on the intensive margin of spending variation, which overcomes the classification error problem.

**Table 1: Return on Investment**

	OLS		IV		DnD	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	
Estimated Coefficient (Std Err)	0.88500 (0.0143)	0.12600 (0.0404)	0.00401 (0.0410)	0.00188 (0.0016)	0.00659 (0.0056)	A
DMA Fixed Effects		Yes		Yes	Yes	
Date Fixed Effects		Yes		Yes	Yes	
N	10500	10500	23730	23730	23730	
$\Delta \ln(\text{Spend})$ Adjustment	3.51	3.51	3.51	3.51	1	B
$\Delta \ln(\text{Rev})$ ( $\beta$ )	3.10635	0.44226	0.01408	0.00660	0.00659	C=A*B
Spend (Millions of \$)	\$ 51.00	\$ 51.00	\$ 51.00	\$ 51.00	\$ 51.00	D
Gross Revenue (R')	2,880.64	2,880.64	2,880.64	2,880.64	2,880.64	E
ROI	4173%	1632%	-22%	-63%	-63%	F=A/(1+A)*(E/D)-1
ROI Lower Bound	4139%	697%	-2168%	-124%	-124%	
ROI Upper Bound	4205%	2265%	1191%	-3%	-3%	

The upper panel presents regression estimates of SEM's effect on sales. Columns (1) and (2) naively regress sales on spending in the pre-experiment period. Columns (3) and (4) show estimates of spending's effect on revenue using the difference-in-differences indicators as excluded instruments. Column (5) shows the reduced form difference-in-differences interaction coefficient. The lower panel translates these estimates into a return on investment (ROI) as discussed in Section 4 and shows its 95% confidence interval.

entire regime of paid search adds only 0.66 percent to sales with a 95 percent confidence interval of [-0.42%,1.74%].<sup>17</sup>

We now examine the magnitude of the endogeneity problem. Absent endogeneity problems we could estimate the effect of ad spending on sales with a simple regression:

$$\ln(\text{Sales}_{it}) = \alpha_1 \times \ln(\text{Spend}_{it}) + \epsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

where  $i$  indexes the DMA and  $t$  indexes the day. Columns (1) and (2) of Table 1 show the estimates of such a regression during the period prior to our test. As is evident, the simple OLS in Column (1) yields unrealistic returns suggesting that every 10 percent increase in spending raises revenues by 9 percent. The inclusion of DMA and day controls in Column (2) lowered this estimate to 1.3 percent, which is still very high. The amount spent on ads, however, depends on the search behavior of users, which is correlated with their intent to purchase. Our experiment overcomes this endogeneity problem.

<sup>17</sup>Alternate specifications are presented in Table A2 of the online Appendix.

Columns (3) and (4) of Table 1 instrument for spending with dummies for the experiment regions, experiment period and interaction. We used a two stage least squares estimation with the following first stage:

$$\ln(\text{Spend}_{it}) = \tilde{\alpha}_1 \times \text{AdsOn}_{it} + \tilde{\alpha}_2 \times \text{Post}_t + \tilde{\alpha}_3 \times \text{Group}_i + \epsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

where  $\text{Post}_t$  is an indicator for whether the test was running,  $\text{Group}_i$  is an indicator equal to one if region  $i$  kept search spending on and  $\text{AdsOn}_{it}$  is the interaction of the two indicators. The instruments isolate the exogenous experimental variation in spending to estimate the causal effect of spending on changes in revenue. True returns are almost two orders of magnitude smaller and are no longer statistically different from zero.

### 3.2 Consumer Response Heterogeneity

The scale of our experiment allows us to separate outcomes by observable user characteristics. Econometrically, this can be accomplished by interacting the treatment dummy with dummies for each subgroup which produces a set of coefficients representing the total average effect from the advertising regime on that subgroup. We examine user characteristics that are common in the literature: the recency and frequency of a user’s prior purchases. First, we interact the treatment dummy with indicators for the number of purchases by that user in the year before April 2012. We estimate the following specification:

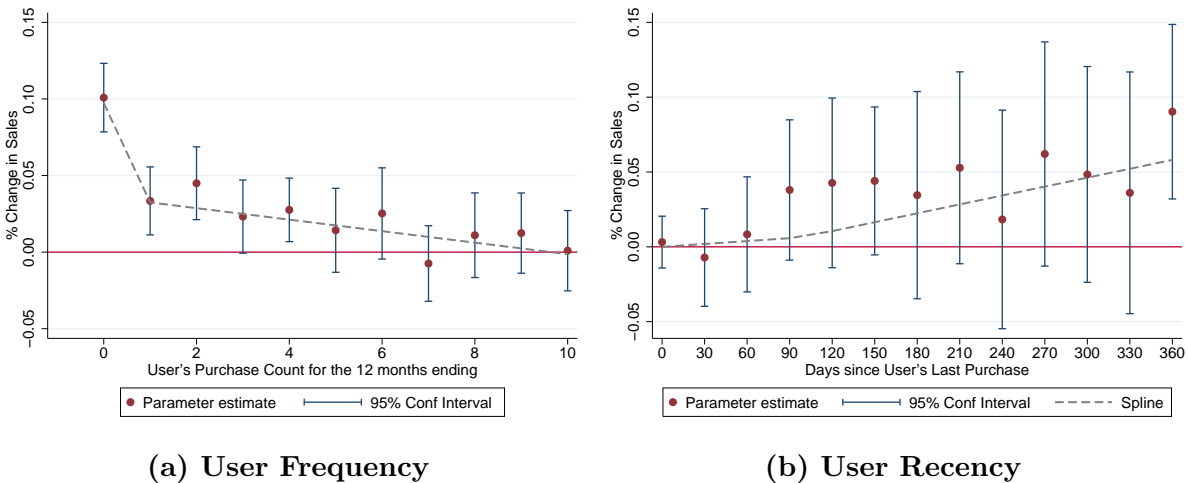
$$\ln(\text{Sales}_{imt}) = \beta_m \times \text{AdsOn}_{imt} \times \theta_m + \delta_t + \gamma_i + \theta_m + \epsilon_{it} \quad (3)$$

where  $m \in \{0, 1, \dots, 10\}$  indexes user segments. Users with no purchases in the prior year are indexed by  $m = 0$ , those who purchased once in the prior year by  $m = 1$ , and so on, while  $\text{Sales}_{imt}$  is the total sales to all users in segment  $m$  in period  $t$  and DMA  $i$ . This produces 11 estimates, one for each user segment.<sup>18</sup> Figure 4a plots the point estimates of the treatment interactions. The largest effect on sales was for users who had not purchased before on eBay. Interestingly, the treatment effect diminishes quickly with purchase frequency as estimates are near zero for users who buy more regularly.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup>This is similar to running 11 separate regressions, which produces qualitatively similar results.

<sup>19</sup>Only the zero purchases effect is statistically distinguishable from other segments, even when pooled into larger buckets. The slope of the relationship between effect and frequency is statistically negative,

Figure 4: Paid Search Effect by User Segment



Panel (a) shows difference-in-differences estimates and 95% confidence bands of paid search effects on sales for different user segments as defined by how many purchases were made in the previous 12 months. Panel (b) shows similar estimates where users were segmented by the time since last purchase.

Second, Figure 4b plots the interactions by time since last purchase. Estimates become noisier as we look at longer periods of inactivity because there are fewer buyers that return after longer absences. The estimates are tightly estimated zeros for zero days and consistently centered on zero for 30 and 60 day absences, suggesting that advertising has little effect on active and moderately active customers. However, the effect then steadily rises with absence and is once again large and statistically significant for customers who have not purchased in over a year.<sup>20</sup> We estimate a spline with a break at the arbitrarily chosen 90 day mark and estimate the treatment effect to be 0.02 percentage points larger per month of absence.<sup>21</sup>

Figure 4 implies that search advertising works only on a firm's least active customers. These are traditionally considered a firm's "worst" customers, and advertising is often

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however, even excluding the zero purchase users. We illustrate this with a simple spline beginning at one purchase, shown as the dashed line. The slope of the right segment of this line, derived by replacing  $\theta_m$  in Equation (3) with a continuous purchase count, is estimated to be -0.0038 with a standard error of 0.0014.

<sup>20</sup>Gönül and Shi (1998) study a direct mail campaign and find that recent individuals are not influenced by mailing because they are likely to buy anyway.

<sup>21</sup>This estimate is derived in similar fashion to the spline in Panel (a): with interactions of the treatment dummy and the number of days since purchase. This is statistically distinguishable from zero, with a standard error of .00004577 so that pooling across user segments provides better evidence of the trend than the noisier separate coefficients.

aimed at high value repeat consumers (Fader et al., 2005). This evidence supports the informative view where ads affect consumption only when they update a consumer’s information set. Bluntly, search advertising only works if the consumer has no idea that the company has the desired product. Large firms like eBay with powerful brands will see little benefit from paid search advertising because most consumers already know that they exist, as well as what they have to offer. The modest returns on infrequent users likely come from informing them that eBay has offerings they did not think were available.

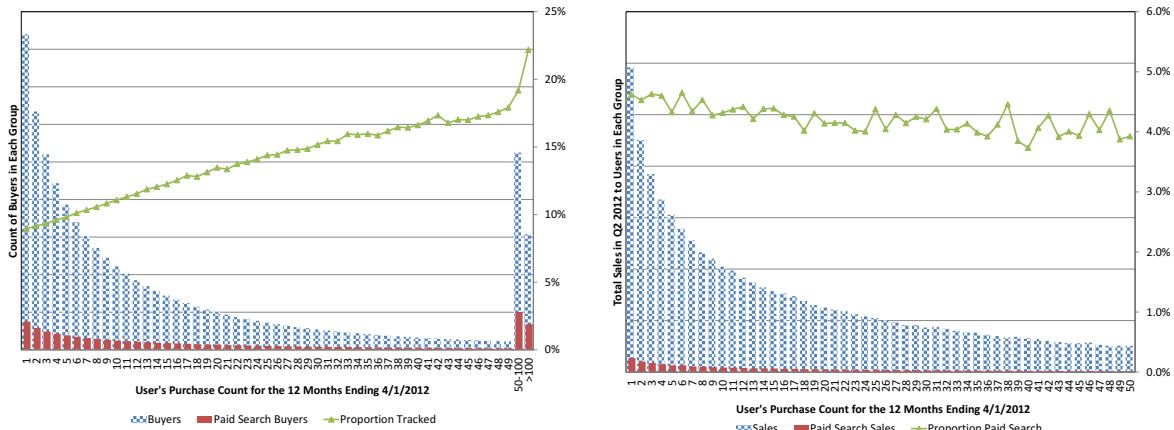
While the least active customers are the best targets for search advertising, we find that most paid search traffic and attributed sales are from high volume, frequent purchasers. Figure 5a plots the count of buyers by how many purchases they made in a year. The counts are shown separately for all buyers and for those that buy, at any point in the year prior to the experiment, *after* clicking on a paid search ad. The ratio of the two rises with purchase frequency because frequent purchasers are more likely to use paid search at some point. Figure 5b shows the same plot for shares of transaction counts. Even users who buy more than 50 times in a year still use paid search clicks for 4 percent of their purchases. The large share of heavy users suggests that most of paid search spending is wasted because the majority of spending on Google is related to clicks by those users that would purchase anyway. This explains the large negative ROI computed in Section 4.

We have searched for other indicators of consumer’s propensity to respond in localized demographic data. We interacted zip code demographic data with our treatment indicator and found no response that is statistically different across several demographic measures: income, population size, unemployment rates, household size, and eBay user penetration. Finally, we looked for differential effects across product types and find no systematic difference across multiple layers of categorization. See the online appendix for more details.

### **3.3 Where did the Non-Brand Traffic Go?**

The brand query tests demonstrated that causal (incremental) returns were small because users easily substituted paid search clicks for natural search clicks. Metaphorically, we closed one door and users simply switched to the next easiest door. This substitution was expected because users were using brand queries as simple navigational tools. Unbranded queries are not simply navigational because users are trying to find *any* destination that has the desired product. Only experimental variation can quantify the number of users who are actually directed by the presence of search advertising.

Figure 5: Paid Search Attribution by User Segment



(a) Buyer Count Mix

(b) Transaction Count Mix

Panel (a) shows the histogram of buyers by how many purchases were made in the previous 12 months compared to the those buyers with paid search clicks preceding purchases. The proportion tracked is the ratio of the two counts in each bucket. Panel (b) shows the same for the distribution of transaction counts.

Experimentation can also quantify the substitution between SEM and other channels. For example, in Figure 1a we showed Google’s search results page for the query “used gibson les paul”. Notice that the second ad from the top, as well as the center image of the guitar below it, are both paid ads that link to eBay, while the two bottom results of the natural search part of the page also link to eBay. Hence, some substitution from paid to natural search may occur for non-brand keywords as well. Also, users who intend to visit eBay and do not see ads may choose to directly navigate to [www.ebay.com](http://www.ebay.com).

Clicks to eBay decline measurably in the absence of non-brand ads.<sup>22</sup> Advertising clicks dropped 41 percent, and total clicks fell 2 percent as a result of the non-brand experiment.<sup>23</sup> The total loss in clicks is roughly 58 percent of the number of lost paid search clicks, suggesting that 42 percent of paid search clicks are newly acquired. Advertising does increase clicks above and beyond what is taken from natural search. This mirrors studies from Google that find that the majority of lost paid search clicks would not have been recouped by natural search (Chan et al., 2011a).

<sup>22</sup>Recall that 99.5 percent of clicks were retained in the absence of brand paid ads.

<sup>23</sup>Natural clicks are a much larger denominator and therefore the total percentage drop is smaller.

But clicks are just part of what generates sales. To make meaningful statements about internet traffic, we need to make an important distinction in the nature of visits. eBay servers are able to distinguish between referring *clicks* (clicks from other sites that lead to an eBay page) and total *visits* (clusters of page visits by the same user). In the course of a single shopping session users will have many clicks referring from other websites because their search takes them on and off eBay pages. Put simply, users will travel to eBay from Google multiple times in one sitting.

We defined a paid search visit as a session that begins with a paid search click and compare the substitution to comparably defined natural search visits. We measured the potential traffic substitution by regressing the log of eBay visit counts from either organic search or from direct navigation on the log of eBay visit counts from paid search, using the experiment as an instrument. We find that a 1 percent drop in paid search visits leads to a 0.5 percent increase in natural search visits and to a 0.23 percent increase in direct navigation visits. These substitution results suggest that most, if not all, of the ‘lost’ traffic finds its way back through natural search and direct navigation. This helps explain why we found that clicks are lost but revenue is not.

## 4 Deriving Returns on Investment

To demonstrate the economic significance of our results we computed the implied short-term return on investment (ROI) associated with spending on paid search. Imagine that the amount spent on paid search was  $S_0$  associated with revenues equal to  $R_0$ . Let  $\Delta R = R_1 - R_0$  be the difference in revenues as a consequence of an increase in spending,  $\Delta S = S_1 - S_0$ , and by definition,  $ROI \equiv \frac{\Delta R}{\Delta S} - 1$ .

Let  $\beta_1 = \Delta \ln(R)$  be our estimated coefficient on paid search effectiveness, which is the effect of an increase in spend on log-revenues. (See the Appendix for details on the estimation of  $\beta_1$ .) Using the definition of ROI and setting  $S_0 = 0$  (no spending on paid search) some algebraic manipulation (detailed in the online appendix) yields,

$$ROI \approx \frac{\beta_1}{(1 + \beta_1)} \frac{R_1}{S_1} - 1 \quad (4)$$

For the OLS and IV estimates where spending is the independent variable, we translate the coefficient  $\alpha_1 = \frac{\Delta \ln(Sales)}{\Delta \ln(Spend)}$  from Equation (1) to a measure comparable to  $\beta_1$  by multiplying



by the coefficient  $\tilde{\alpha}_1 = \Delta \ln(\text{Spend})$  estimated from Equation (2), the first stage in the IV. This converts the IV estimates to reduced form estimates and approximates estimates derived from direct estimation of the difference-in-differences procedure. Both the derived and directly estimated  $\beta_1$ 's can be used to compute a ROI with Equation (4).

In order to calculate the ROI from paid search we need to use actual revenues and costs from the DMAs used for the experiment, but these are proprietary information that we cannot reveal. Instead, we use revenues and costs from public sources regarding eBay's operations. Revenue in the U.S. is derived from eBay's financial disclosures of Marketplaces' net revenue prorated to U.S. levels using the ratio of sales in the U.S. to global levels, which results in U.S. gross revenues of \$2,880.64 million.<sup>24</sup> We next obtain paid search spending data from the release of information about the expenditures of several top advertisers on Google. We calculate eBay's yearly paid search spending for the U.S. to be \$51 million.<sup>25</sup>

Table 1 presents the ROI estimates. As is evident, simple OLS estimation of  $\alpha_1$  yields unrealistic returns of over 4000 percent in Column (1) and even accounting for daily and geographic effects implies returns that are greater than 1500 percent, as shown in Column (2). The IV estimation reduces the ROI estimate significantly below zero and our best estimate of average ROI using the experimental variation is negative 63 percent as shown in Columns (4) and (5). This ROI is statistically different from zero at the 95 percent confidence level emphasizing the economic significance of the endogeneity problem.

## 5 Discussion

The efficacy of SEM seems limited at best for a well-known brand like eBay because expenditures are concentrated on consumers who would shop on eBay regardless of whether ads are shown. Of the \$31.7 billion that was spent in the U.S. in 2011 on internet advertising, estimates project that the top 10 spenders in this channel account for about \$2.36 billion.<sup>26</sup> These companies generally use the same methods and rely on the same

<sup>24</sup>Total revenues for 2012 were \$7,398 and the share of eBay's activity in the U.S. was \$26,424/\$67,763 (in millions). See [http://files.shareholder.com/downloads/ebay/2352190750x0x628825/e8f7de32-e10a-4442-addb-3fad813d0e58/EBAY\\_News\\_2013\\_1\\_16\\_Earnings.pdf](http://files.shareholder.com/downloads/ebay/2352190750x0x628825/e8f7de32-e10a-4442-addb-3fad813d0e58/EBAY_News_2013_1_16_Earnings.pdf)

<sup>25</sup>Data from Google reports a monthly spend of \$4.25 million, which we impute to be \$51 million. See <http://mashable.com/2010/09/06/brand-spending-google/>.

<sup>26</sup>These include, in order of dollars spent, IAC/Interactive Group; Experian Group; GM; AT&T; Progressive; Verizon; Comcast; Capital One; Amazon; and eBay. See the press release by Kantar Me-

external support to design their ad campaigns, suggesting many reasons to believe that the results we presented above would generalize to these large and well known corporations. This may not be true for small and new entities that have no brand recognition.<sup>27</sup>

This begs the question: why do well-known companies spend large amounts of money on what seems to be a rather ineffective marketing channel? One argument is that there are long term benefits that we are unable to capture in our analysis. This does not seem to apply for brand-keyword advertising because it is obvious that the user searched for the brand name and hence is aware of it. Arguments have been made that brand-keyword advertising acts as a defense against a competitor bidding for a company's brand name. This implies that brand-keyword advertising allows competing companies to play a version of the Prisoner's Dilemma. A company and its competitor would both be better off not buying any brand-keywords, but each cannot resist the temptation to pinch away some of their competitor's traffic, and in the process, the ad platforms benefit from this rent-seeking game. It should be noted, however, that since eBay stopped bidding on its brand-keywords, such behavior by potential competitors was not observed.<sup>28</sup>

Our experience suggests that one reason companies spend vast amounts on SEM stems from the challenges they face in generating causal measures of the returns to advertising. As the results in Table 1 demonstrate, typical regressions of sales on advertising spend result in astronomical ROI estimates that vastly overestimate the true ROI, which can only be estimated using controlled experiments. This is in line with results obtained by Lewis et al. (2011) regarding the effectiveness of display ads.

In the absence of causal measures, the industry relies on 'attribution' measures which correlate clicks and purchases. By this measure, eBay performed very well as shown in Figure 3a and Table 1. eBay's ads were very effective at earning clicks and associated purchases. Our findings suggest, however, that even incremental clicks do not translate into incremental sales. This is an important way in which our methodology differs from

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dia on 3/12/2012, [http://kantarmediana.com/sites/default/files/kantareditor/Kantar\\_Media\\_2011\\_Full\\_Year\\_US\\_Ad\\_Spend.pdf](http://kantarmediana.com/sites/default/files/kantareditor/Kantar_Media_2011_Full_Year_US_Ad_Spend.pdf)

<sup>27</sup>If you were to start a new online presence selling a high quality and low-priced widget, someone querying the word "widget" would still most likely not see your site. This is a consequence of the PageRank algorithm that relies on established links to webpages. Only after many websites link to your site, related to the word widget, will you stand a chance of rising to the top of the organic search results.

<sup>28</sup>Some retailers have been bidding, both before and after ebay's response, to "broad" brand phrases such as "ebay shoes". It is also interesting to note that several advertisers pushed unsuccessfully for litigation to prevent their competitors from bidding on their trademark keywords, suggesting that some companies understand the Prisoner's Dilemma nature of this activity.

the one used in studies released by Google. Chan et al. (2011a) report that experimental studies performed at Google proved that about 89% of paid search clicks were deemed to be incremental, that is, would not have happened if companies would not pay for search. As Section 3.3 shows, our results confirm that a majority of ebay's paid search clicks are not recovered when ebay stops paying for them. Nonetheless, the majority of these clicks did not result in incremental sales, which in turn is the reason that paid search was ineffective as clicks alone are not a source of revenues. It is interesting to note that the incentives faced by advertising firms, publishers, analytics consulting firms, and even marketing executives within companies, are all aligned with increasing advertising budgets.

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# Appendix

## Brand Keyword Click Magnitude Estimation

To quantify the substitution between natural and organic search for brand terms, we first regress the log of total daily clicks from MSN to eBay on an indicator for whether days were in the period with ads turned off. Results are shown in Table A1. Click volume was 5.6 percent lower in the period after advertising was suspended. We then use data on eBay’s clicks from Google as a control for seasonal factors because during the test period on MSN, eBay continued to purchase brand keyword advertising on Google. With this data, we calculate the change in total click traffic in the presence of brand keyword advertising. In the difference-in-differences approach, we add observations of daily traffic from Google and Yahoo! and include in the specification search engine dummies and trends.<sup>29</sup> The variable of interest is thus the interaction between a dummy for the MSN platform and a dummy for treatment (ad off) period. Column (2) of Table A1 show a much smaller effect once the seasonality is accounted for. In fact, only 0.529 percent of the click traffic is lost so 99.5 percent is retained. Notice that this is a lower bound of retention because some of the 0.5 percent of traffic that no longer comes through Google may be switching to non-Google traffic (e.g. typing “ebay.com” into the browser).

## Non Brand Keyword Sales Magnitude Estimation

To determine the size of the effect of paid search on sales, we estimate a difference-in-differences and generalized fixed effects as follows:

$$\ln(Sales_{it}) = \beta_1 \times AdsOn_{it} + \beta_2 \times Post_t + \beta_3 \times Group_i + \epsilon_{it} \quad (A1)$$

$$\ln(Sales_{it}) = \beta_1 \times AdsOn_{it} + \delta_t + \gamma_i + \epsilon_{it} \quad (A2)$$

In this specification,  $i$  indexes the DMA,  $t$  indexes the day,  $Post_t$  is an indicator for whether the test was running,  $Group_i$  is an indicator equal to one if region  $i$  kept search spending on and  $AdsOn_{it}$  is the interaction of the two indicators. In the second specification, the base indicators are subsumed by day and DMA fixed effects. The  $\beta_1$  coefficient on the interaction term is then the percentage effect on sales because the  $Sales_{it}$

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<sup>29</sup>The estimates presented include date fixed effects and platform specific trends but the results are very similar without these controls.

**Table A1: Quantifying Brand Keyword Substitution**

	MSN		Google
	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Log Clicks	Log Clicks	Log Clicks
Period	-0.0560*** (0.00861)		-0.0321* (0.0124)
Interaction		-0.00529 (0.0177)	
Google		5.088 (10.06)	
Yahoo		1.375 (5.660)	
Constant	12.82*** (0.00583)	11.33* (5.664)	14.34*** (0.00630)
Date FE		Yes	
Platform Trends		Yes	
N	118	180	120

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

This table shows regression analyses of the data in Figure 2. Column (1) shows estimates of a regression of the log of daily click counts on an indicator for whether the day is after the brand keyword suspension. Column (2) adds daily data from Google and Yahoo! and shows the estimates of a difference-in-differences regression. Column (3) mimics Column (1) for the Google suspension and resumption of brand keyword advertising.

is the log of total sales in region  $i$  on day  $t$ . We restrict attention to sales from fixed-price transactions because auctions may pool users from both test and control DMAs, which in turn would attenuate the effect of ads on sales.<sup>30</sup> We control for inter-DMA variation with DMA clustered standard errors and DMA fixed effects.

Columns (1) and (2) in Table A2 correspond to Equations (A1) and (A2) respectively where an observation is at the daily DMA level, resulting in 23,730 observations. Columns (3) and (4) correspond to Equations (A1) and (A2) respectively where an observation is aggregated over days at the DMA level for the pre and post periods separately, resulting in 420 observations. All regression results confirm the very small and statistically insignificant effect of paid search ads.

<sup>30</sup>The results throughout are quantitatively similar even if we include auction transactions.

**Table A2: Diff-in-Diff Regression Estimates**

	Daily		Totaled	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Log Sales	Log Sales	Log Sales	Log Sales
Interaction	0.00659 (0.00553)	0.00659 (0.00555)	0.00578 (0.00572)	0.00578 (0.00572)
Experiment Period	-0.0460*** (0.00453)		0.150*** (0.00459)	0.150*** (0.00459)
Search Group	-0.0141 (0.168)		-0.0119 (0.168)	
DMA Fixed Effects		Yes		Yes
Date Fixed Effects		Yes		
N	23730	23730	420	420

Standard errors, clustered on the DMA, in parentheses

\*  $p < .1$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\*  $p < .01$

This table shows regression analyses of the data in Figure 3b. Columns (1) and (2) present DMA by day level regressions where Columns (3) and (4) aggregate to the DMA by pre-post level. The interaction term is the effect of the total spending on sales.

## Product Response Heterogeneity

A consumer’s susceptibility to internet search ads depends on how well informed they are about where such products are available. Given that the availability of products varies widely, the effectiveness of paid search may vary by product type. As a large e-commerce platform, eBay’s paid search advertising campaigns present an opportunity to test the returns to advertising across product categories which vary in competitiveness, market thickness and general desirability. To our surprise, different product attributes did not offer any significant variation in paid search effectiveness.

As in Section 3.2, we decompose the response by interacting the treatment indicator with dummies for sub-groupings of revenue using the category of sales. We found no systematic relationship between returns and category. The estimates center around zero and are generally not statistically significant. At the highest level, only one category is significant, but with 38 coefficients, at least one will be significant by chance.

We explored multiple layers of categorization, ranging from the broadest groupings of hundreds of categories. The extensive inventory eBay offers suggests that some categories would generate returns because customers would be unaware of their availability on eBay. However, we have looked for differential responses in a total of 378 granular product categories and found no consistent pattern of response. Less than 5 percent of categories



are statistically significant at the 5 percent confidence level. Moreover, in an examination of the estimates at finer levels of categorization, we found no connection between ordinal ranking of treatment effect product features like sales volume or availability. It is thus evident that for a well known company like eBay, product attributes are less important in search advertising than user intent and, more importantly, user information.

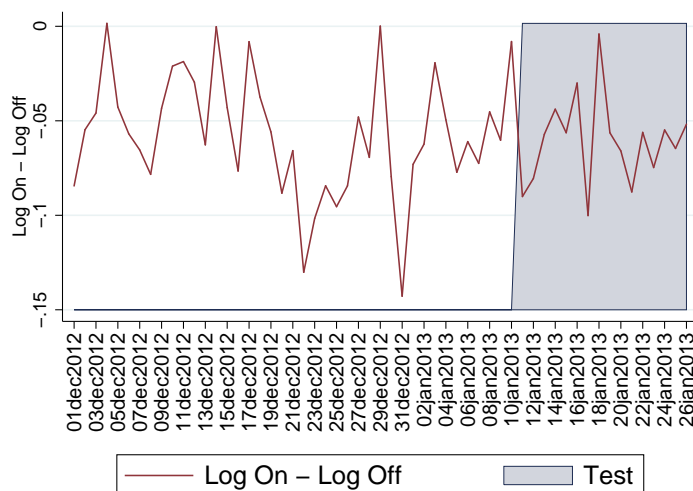
## Controlled Brand-Keyword Experiments

In January 2013, we conducted a follow-up test of the brand term paid search, specifically keyword eBay, using geographic variation. Google offers geographic specific advertising across Germany's 16 states. So we selected a random half of the country, 8 states, where brand keyword ads were suspended. This test design preserves a randomly selected control group which is absent from the simple pre-post analysis shown in Section 3.

As was predicted by the earlier tests, there was no measurable effect on revenues. The sample size for this analysis is smaller because there are fewer separable geographical areas and the experiment window is shorter. Figure A1 shows the log difference between means sales per day in the on and off states. The treatment group is 5 percent smaller, on average, than the control because there are few states so any random division of states generates a baseline difference. The plot shows that there is no change in the difference once the experiment begins. The plot also shows the large variation in daily differences of the means which suggests that detecting a signal in the noise would be very difficult.

We perform a difference-in-differences estimation of the effect of brand advertising on sales and find no positive effect. Table A3 presents the results from three specifications: the baseline model from Section 4.1 in Column (1), the same specification with the (less noisy) subset of data beginning January 1, 2013 in Column (2), and the smaller subset with state specific linear time trends in Column (3). All results are small, statistically insignificant, and negative. Narrowing the window and controlling for state trends reduces the magnitude of the estimate, which is consistent with a zero result. This test is noisier than the U.S. test because there are substantially fewer (16) geographic regions available for targeting. This makes the confidence intervals larger. We also lack public estimates of spending for Germany and are therefore unable to derive a confidence interval around the ROI which is likely to be large anyway due to the smaller total spending levels for branded advertising. The negative point estimates support the findings of the U.S. brand

**Figure A1: Brand Test Europe: Difference in Total Sales**



This figure plots the difference between on and off regions in Germany before and after the experimental shut off of brand advertising.

spending changes and lead us to conclude that there is no measurable or meaningful short run return to brand spending.

**Table A3: Brand Test Europe: Difference-in-Differences Estimates**

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Log Sales	Log Sales	Log Sales
Interaction	-0.00143 (0.0104)	-0.00422 (0.0132)	-0.000937 (0.0140)
State Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Date Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Post Jan 1		Yes	Yes
State Trends			Yes
N	912	416	416

Standard errors, clustered on the state, in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

This table present the regression analysis of Figure A1. Column (1) is a difference-in-differences estimation with region (state) and date fixed effects. Columns (2) and (3) add additional time controls and trends.

## Randomization Procedure Detail

The treatment assignment used a stratification procedure to ensure common historical trends between treatment and control. This means that the treatment dummy is not a

simple random variable but instead lends itself to a difference-in-differences estimation. The test regions, or DMAs, were chosen in two steps. First, 133 of the 210 U.S. regions were selected to be candidates for treatment purely at random. Of these, only about half were allotted to be treated (advertising turned off). To minimize historical variation between test and control, groups of 68 were drawn at random and then the historical weekly serial correlation was computed. Several draws with very low historical correlation were discarded before the current draw of 68 in one group and 65 in another. Which group was actually turned off was decided by a coin flip. The 68 regions were then turned off at an arbitrary date (based largely on engineering availability). This procedure lends itself perfectly to a difference-in-differences estimation where the core underlying assumption is common trends.

## Candidacy IV estimation

The assignment of DMAs into treatment cells for the non-brand keyword experiment was stratified on historical trends. This stratification lacks the clarity of a total random assignment but the methodology admits an alternative approach that leverages the completely random assignment to the set of DMAs eligible for testing. We use the assignment to the *candidate* group as an instrument for whether or not a DMA was assigned to the treatment group. We collapse the data to the DMA level and use two stage least squares to estimate the effect of treatment assignment and advertising spending on revenue. We include pre-period sales in both stages to control for variations in DMA size. The first and second stages are as follows:

$$\ln(\text{Sales}_i) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times \text{AdsOn}_i + \beta_2 \times \ln(\text{PreSales})_i + \epsilon_i \quad (\text{A3})$$

$$\text{AdsOn}_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 \times \text{Candidate}_i + \mu_i \quad (\text{A4})$$

The estimates are shown in Table A4. The coefficients on both extensive (*AdsOn*) and intensive (spending level) are smaller than those in Tables A2 and 1, respectively. If the stratification assignment introduce a bias into the treatment effect, it is a positive bias which makes our primary estimates an upper bound on the true effect of advertising on paid search. The standard errors in this IV approach are larger than primary specifications making this method less precise. The loss of precision in the IV stems from the reduction

**Table A4: Candidate DMA Instrument**

	(1)	(2)
	ln(Test Period Sales)	ln(Test Period Revenue)
Ads On	0.00207 (0.0108)	
ln(Test Period Spend)		0.000795 (0.00350)
ln(Pre Period Sales)	1.007*** (0.00226)	
ln(Pre Period Revenue)		0.997*** (0.0113)
ln(Pre Period Spend)		0.00877 (0.0109)
Constant	0.0436 (0.0354)	0.102** (0.0520)
Observations	210	210

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < .1$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\*  $p < .01$

This table presents estimates from a two stage least squares estimation where an indicator for whether the DMA was a ‘candidate’ for ad suspension is used as an excluded instrument for whether ads were left on (in Column 1) and test period spending (Column 2)

in observations from 420 in Table A2 to 210 because the difference-in-differences approach uses the exogenous timing of the treatment. Moreover, the stratification was in fact designed to reduce inter-temporal variance across treatment cells.

## Candidacy Difference-in-Differences

To further check the randomization procedure we estimated the difference-in-differences using the candidacy indicator as the treatment dummy. This would estimate the diluted effect on all DMAs that were considered candidates for testing. Column (1) of Table A5 shows the results. The negative coefficient here is expected since ‘candidate’ DMAs were

**Table A5: Candidate DMA Diff-in-Diff**

	(1)	(2)
	Log Sales	Log Sales
Interaction	-0.00247 (0.00526)	0.00124 (0.00653)
Candidate for Off DMA	0.167*** (0.00288)	1.194*** (0.00358)
Experiment Period	-0.199*** (0.0117)	-0.195*** (0.0150)
Constant	11.87*** (0.00738)	11.87*** (0.00924)
Date Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
DMA Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
Ads On Only DMAs		Yes
N	23730	16046

Standard errors, clustered on the DMA, in parentheses

\*  $p < .1$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\*  $p < .01$

This table presents estimates from a difference-in-differences analysis just as in Table A2 where the indicator for whether spending was suspended is replaced by an indicator for whether the region was a ‘candidate’ for suspension.

candidates for turning ads off. Thus, the 0.25 percent is just under half the magnitude of the main estimates we present.

To check the randomization, we repeated this estimation on the sub-sample of DMAs that were not selected into treatment. These DMAs were all controls in the main estimation and ad spending was on throughout the experiment. The coefficient therefore represents the change in the candidate control regions over the non-candidate control regions during the test. Column (2) of Table A5 presents the results, a small positive coefficient which is statistically zero. We conclude that the stratification procedure did not create any

evidence of a biased treatment assignment.

## ROI Results in Levels

The preferred specification reports regressions in logged dependent variable because the dependent variable is very right skewed (some DMAs are very large and some days have large positive shocks). Given the large variance across days and DMAs, the average is not particularly meaningful. The IV approach of Equations 1 and 2 permits a more straightforward estimation of ROI using level regressions. Table A6 presents the result of an estimation of Equations 1 and 2 where  $\ln(\text{Spend})$  and  $\ln(\text{Rev})$  is replaced with spend and revenue, respectively, in dollars. The coefficient can be interpreted as the dollar increase in revenue for every dollar spent. A coefficient of 0.199 implies an ROI of -80 percent, comparable but slightly more negative than the primary results of -63 percent. The confidence interval of this estimate excludes the break-even point of 1. The levels estimate is qualitatively similar to the log results and so we present the more conservative estimation as our preferred specification.

**Table A6: ROI in Levels**

	(1)
	Revenue (\$)
Cost (\$)	0.199 (0.161)
DMA Fixed Effects	Yes
Date Fixed Effects	Yes
N	23730

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < .1$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\*  $p < .01$

This table presents estimates similar to Table 1, Column (4) where revenue and spending levels are used in place of logged values.

## ROI Calculations

Recall that  $ROI$  is defined as

$$ROI = \frac{R_1 - R_0}{S_1 - S_0} - 1 \equiv \frac{\Delta R}{\Delta S} - 1. \quad (\text{A5})$$

Let  $R_i$  be the revenue in DMA  $i$  and let  $D_i = 1$  if DMA  $i$  was treated (paid search off) and  $D_i = 0$  if it was not (paid search on). The basic difference-in-difference regression we ran is

$$\ln(R_{it}) = \beta_1 D_i + \delta_t + \gamma_i + \epsilon_{it}$$

where  $\delta_t$  and  $\gamma_i$  are time and DMA fixed effects. Using the natural logarithm  $\ln R_{it}$  implies that for small differences in  $R_1 - R_0$  the coefficient  $\beta_1$  in the regression is approximately the percent change in revenue for the change in the spend level that results from the experimental treatment. This means that for two revenue levels  $R_1$  and  $R_0$  we can write

$$\beta_1 \approx \frac{R_1 - R_0}{R_0},$$

or,

$$R_0 \approx \frac{R_1}{1 + \beta_1} \tag{A6}$$

Because the spend in the “off” DMAs is  $S_0 = 0$  (or close to it) and in the “on” DMAs is some  $S_1$ , then using (A6) and (A5) we can derive the approximate ROI as,

$$ROI = \frac{R_1 - R_0}{S_1 - S_0} - 1 \approx \frac{R_1 - \frac{R_1}{1+\beta_1}}{S_1} - 1 = \frac{\beta_1}{(1 + \beta_1)} \frac{R_1}{S_1} - 1. \tag{A7}$$

Thus, Equation (A7) gives a well defined and financially correct estimate of the ROI based on the difference-in-difference estimate of the experimental results when  $S_0 = 0$ .

Unlike the difference-in-difference estimates, the OLS and IV estimates were derived from the regression

$$\ln(R_{it}) = \alpha_1 \ln(S_{it}) + \epsilon_{it}$$

where the first stage of the IV estimation used the regression

$$\ln(S_{it}) = \tilde{\alpha}_1 [AdsOn_{it}] + \tilde{\alpha}_2 [Post_t] + \tilde{\alpha}_3 [Group_i] + \epsilon_{it}$$

From these, we find  $\alpha_1 = \frac{\Delta \ln(Sales)}{\Delta \ln(Spend)}$  and  $\tilde{\alpha}_1 = \Delta \ln(Spend)$  for which the approximation to a percentage change is poor since the change in spend was large. Therefore, to make use

of the log-log regression coefficients, it is possible to translate them into a reduced form effect because,

$$\alpha_1 * \tilde{\alpha}_1 = \frac{\Delta \ln(Sales)}{\Delta \ln(Spend)} * \Delta \ln(Spend) = \Delta \ln(Sales) = \beta_1$$

which we can substitute into (A7). Thus, for the estimated  $\alpha_1$  of the OLS estimates, we can use  $\tilde{\alpha}_1$  to derive a comparable  $\beta_1$  which can be used to compute an ROI that is comparable across all specifications.