Deriving Meaning: Devolution of the PPC Manager

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the change in learning processes of a Pay-Per-Click (PPC) Manager, by exploring the boundaries in which they operate. Utilization of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) will provide the framework necessary to analyze the interaction between contradicting activity systems in pursuit of a common object, establish the role of identity, and derive meaning within larger communal structures.

Introduction

Confucius once said, "Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life." Our occupations account for roughly one third of our daily lives, creating a potential for this pursuit to be quite fulfilling, or downright harrowing. In this study, we employ CHAT to explore the devolution of a PPC Manager, as the privately owned company they work for, is acquired by a publicly traded entity. This approach highlights the compromises made in order to achieve specific goals as dictated by the six nodes of CHAT, and the influence that they have on the development, and thus the identity of the PPC Manager.

Background of PPC

PPC Managers are responsible for managing Google AdWords accounts. These accounts are profiles that house creatives and a collection of keywords, which interface with the search engine, in order to serve text-based ads on the Google search engine results pages (SERP). As the PPC acronym would suggest, the pricing model to generate this exposure is based on a pay-per-click marketplace. Advertisers choose keywords related to their site content, and enter into a real-time auction, where competing sites dictate price and position of ads on the first page

of the SERP. This is in fact the founding model by which Google started to monetize their search engine.

Anybody can manage a PPC account, and Google provides all of the basic information necessary to create a campaign and start displaying ads in the same day. Despite a vast collection of free information that provides insight into how to properly manage a paid search account, the Internet Marketing industry continues to thrive. Based on the learning curve associated with understanding high-level strategies, and the sheer size of some accounts (10,000+ keywords), several business owners hire companies and consultants to manage accounts on their behalf.

If you think of the internet as a literal information superhighway, PPC ads would be the billboards - only instead of paying for views along an interstate, you would incur a cost for every person who pulled off the road and walked through your virtual door. In this way, every click can be viewed as a conscious action on the end of the user. Advertisers literally pay for every click generated, so there is incentive to be relevant in your marketing strategies. Within the realm of eCommerce websites (online stores), they often depend on revenue in the form of sales in order to recoup advertising costs, and drive increased sales through repeat orders over time. Just as one would not go to to Home Depot to buy ice cream, it is ill-advised to generate traffic to a store for something that the site does not sell.

Through tracking users that enter the site, PPC Managers are able to determine when a purchase is made by a visitor who clicked on one of their ads. The exact amount of these purchases are compared to the amount of money it took in order to drive the transaction, in order to determine a return on ad spend (ROAS). In this case, ROAS will be used as the primary metric for success

with these particular accounts, as site owners use this to determine profitability, and PPC

Managers to justify increased spend, and further expansion of the account.

The Beginning of Solid Cactus

Imagine a world without Amazon, without Google, and without the iPhone. The year was 1994,

and the Internet was just starting to make its way into homes across America. At the same time,

two ferret owners found it difficult to find supplies for their furry friends. Identifying an

opportunity to break into a specific market niche, they partnered up, and in that very year,

TheFerretStore.com was born, providing one-stop shopping for all things ferret. From food, to

habitats, and everything in between, these pioneers cultivated a following and replicated their

formula for 39 additional pet-related websites based out of their hometown of Wilkes-Barre,

Pennsylvania.

The success of these properties allowed them to build off of their experience, and share their

techniques in the form of a eCommerce services provider. In 2001, Solid Cactus was formed,

specializing in website design. Leveraging their network of followers, they generated a client

base of entrepreneurs looking to take their brick and mortar establishments online. The

ever-changing digital environment allowed Solid Cactus to expand product offerings to include:

call center services, store development, and internet marketing - ultimately securing the

company's catchphrase, "Your Partner in eCommerce Success".

Based out of Northeastern, Pennsylvania (NEPA), which was built on the coal industry in the

19th century, the advent of a tech-based start-up like Solid Cactus was very unique to the area at

this time. Also known as the "Rust Belt", this region experienced a sharp decline in population and local economy, due to the shrinking of its once powerful industrial sector.

Go Big or Go Home

Housed in the Jewelcor Building, occupying several floors, and rapidly approaching building capacity, Solid Cactus' executive management team was forced to make a decision. Nearing the end of the lease in April of 2008, they would have to choose to remain at the current location and hinder potential growth over the next year, or seek a new base of operations that would adequately facilitate projected expansion. With the numbers to back the move, the company relocated to the abandoned Westmoreland Elementary School building in Shavertown, Pennsylvania in April of 2008. Still located in "The Valley", Solid Cactus was able to retain valued employees, and adequately house the next generation of Cacti.

Fast Forward to a Fast Fall in 2009

After a series of unanticipated logistical setbacks, the original cost of the move quickly multiplied, placing the company in a previously unseen state of debt. Coupled with several competitors emerging with service offerings that utilized open source platforms, and technological advancements of automated PPC management, Solid Cactus found itself on the ropes. Rival agencies would poach high profile clients that were used for in-house case studies and testimonials, forcing Solid Cactus to reduce management fees, rather than lose business entirely. Such tactics resulted in two rounds of layoffs that nearly cut the company in half. The a staff of 125 was reduced to 70, leaving a severely depleted workforce to carry on.

Web.Come On

In April of 2009, just one year after the ill-fated move, Solid Cactus announced that it would be acquired by the Jacksonville, Florida-based company Web.com. The southern entity acquired the floundering NEPA tech agency for reported $3.5 million, as it was continuing on a downward spiral leading to bankruptcy.

Run by former Wall Street execs, Web.com had a very different way of operating when compared to Solid Cactus, and it can be argued that these differences in fact underpin the original decline of the NEPA firm. While Cactus was built on providing high end/boutique service offerings, Web.com was built on applying a universal formula for making money. With a cookie cutter approach and selling customers a la carte service offerings, they effectively accounted for every minute of every work day, by assigning a dollar amount to all tasks performed by their workforce. Solid Cactus was now a Web.com brand, and with it came the adoption of several policies and systematic changes to the learning processes at Solid Cactus, ultimately resulting in the unintended devolution of the PPC Manager role.

Identifying the Problem

As a publicly traded entity, Web.com's top priority was to its shareholders. As a parent company, it was their top priority to turn a profit off of their purchase. Based on the agency approach of Solid Cactus, it would seem logical to draw upon that experience, and increase the collective potential through integrating Web.com's ability to increase profitability. This was done through the implementation of Kimai time tracking software.

Functioning much like a chess clock, this program tracked down to the second, how long a particular task took to complete. Once a task was finished, a new one began, effectively determining how long a PPC Manager should spend working on any one account. This microcosmic activity triangle however, failed to identify the intricacies of the processes. Over time, processes became more clearly defined with more tasks added, allowing for more granular data to be collected and provide insights into how PPC Managers were spending their day. Executive management at Web.com identified tasks that were found to me the most time consuming, and at the top of the list was client communication.

One Mind, Two Bodies

To address the communication outlier, Web.com decided to employ a divide and conquer approach, by creating designated roles for PPC Managers. This single position was broken up into two separate categories: Account Management and Fulfillment Team members.

Account Managers handled all client-facing tasks, including generating and sending out reports, fielding phone calls, dictating strategy, and acting as a buffer between site owners and those who completed work on the back end. The behind-the-scenes tasks that included keyword research, ad creation, and working in the accounts, were carried out by the Fulfillment Team.

"The learning actions inherent in scientific and artistic activity are those of learning to imagine, learning to "go beyond the given", not in the privacy of the individual mind but in public, material objectifications" (Engeström 122-123).

Engeström provides insight into a connection between self-directed learning and identity, and highlights a contradiction between Account Managers and Fulfillment. Each individual previously handled both duties, however, questions asked by an Account Manager may not adequately provide information necessary for Fulfillment to do their job. Account Management on the other hand, had their name tied to account work that they did not perform first hand, despite being able to dictate strategy. This hindered the ability to expand in a way that would allow for enhanced understanding to be displayed through action, by attempting to make two minds function as one.

This assembly line approach worked in Jacksonville, where software helped Fulfillment Teams manage several accounts at a time, with a single point-person filtering all client communications, in order to reduce limit the number of interruptions. However, there were key differences to the type of clients that each entity handled. Web.com focused primarily on lead generation clients with traditional brick and mortar locations, while Solid Cactus clients were eCommerce stores that resided entirely online.

Physical establishments have a specific radius that they target. Focusing on franchises, restaurants, lawyers, contractors, mechanics, and other service industries - people searching for these entities are expecting to receive results in their immediate area. From a PPC management perspective, there is a lot of crossover in keywords, as people searching for a garage to get an oil change, were likely to search using the a similar set of keywords. Because of locality, Web.com might manage PPC for several dozen mechanics, but they are all bidding on the same list of words. This template-based approach however, does not work with eCommerce sites.

Tools of the Trade

With businesses residing entirely online, there are additional variables to consider. Marketing to different countries, compensating for seasonal trends, and positioning a site in a competitive marketplace is much more complicated than driving search volume to a web page. PPC Managers at Solid Cactus specialize in tactics aimed at generating increased ROAS over time, interacting directly with the Google AdWords interface, and all of its features. Intimate understanding of the business and brand differentiation does not allow for a keyword list to simply be reused in a similarly positioned account, as potential reach is not limited to location. Web.com succeeded in mass producing PPC account management by limiting employee interaction with the AdWords interface, and the number of available features.

In-house software stores and generates pre-fabricated reports that focused client attention on clicks, rather than sales-driven strategies. Once an industry was mapped, they would market to other competing providers, much like what one would find with the Yellow Pages. These different goals cater to two different types of clients, meaning that the tools and structures necessary to attain these goals, should cater to two different types of PPC Managers.

Engeström states, "A hammer is typically used as a recognition device: It helps you to recognize what may be hammered, such as nails. But a hammer may also serve as a symbol of workers' power" (Engeström 34-35).

The software solution, like the hammer, serves two functions according to Engeström. As a recognition device, Solid Cactus realized limitations while Web.com understood the potential. In the same way, this highlights the symbol of the "workers' power" in Jacksonville, where the

software originated, and the associated control that is afforded. Though limited in application in NEPA, the abilities of the tools themselves each have a range in which they operate, extending these limitations to capabilities.

While Solid Cactus managers focus time and efforts on 10-20 high end clients, Web.com managers could handle 50-100 through assigning accounts based on the crossover of common industries, and the use of bid management software. This program automatically calculated a monthly budget, and would adjust keyword bids in order to prevent going over or under the allotted amount.

The move toward increasing client capacity was a preferred strategy at Web, when looking at the risk associated with turnover. The loss of one client from a roster of 10, could only be replicated through losing 5 or more from a roster of 50, decreasing the likelihood of major fluctuations in performance that could hinder monthly revenue goals, and cause stock prices to shift.

PPC Accounts as the Subject

If you think of PPC as an art, it is much easier to see how these two very two schools of management differ. While Web.com Managers may possess the expertise to make an account function through the use of software, Solid Cactus leveraged the ability to incorporate and customize tactics that would embody a holistic being. Using Actor Network Theory (ANT) as an approach to allow the PPC accounts to have capacity as a non-human subject, we find very different paths in order to reach the motive object. This experience, and the limitations of the sites themselves, are both afforded different opportunities that are specific to them, thus giving

the AdWords account its own identity. The keywords, ads, and techniques employed is essentially an extension of the identity of the creator, but allowed agency of its own.

Michel Callon (1986) developed the concept of generalized symmetry, which assigns this equality to all actors. In the case of the accounts themselves, we find that their existence allowed for the existence of Solid Cactus management styles to exist, even under the Account Manager/Fulfillment (AM/F) structure. If the accounts were not central players, then Web.com software would be implemented, and new local-based accounts would be pursued.

The PPC Manager in this instance, becomes the tool by which the account reaches a goal. The identities of the account types, prove the existence in limitations of a universal school of thought as it pertains to the management. Ideally, this scenario prescribes an open source approach, which could be modified to accommodate the abilities and rules of the site, as it is situated within the larger activity system. In other words, what works for one will not work for another, as not only the limitations in the abilities of the PPC Manager, but the account-specific goals that come into play. One account will never aspire to generate online revenue, and the other will never strive to increase the number of appointments booked. These differences underline the key components that motivate the actions of the account, and extend into the motivations behind the actions of the PPC Managers themselves.

Square Peg, Round Hole

While Jacksonville thrived with the AM/F structure, Solid Cactus struggled. Two-person teams at Web.com were organized by industry, with simplified metrics for success uniform across all accounts (clicks, calls, leads, etc.). Their software included report templates, that quickly created

graphic representations to convey the effectiveness of the account. Without ever having to log into AdWords to understand why an account performed the way it did, these assembly line processes prevented Web.com PPC Managers from traversing Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky argued that, "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky 86).

In other words, determining intelligence should be done through examination of one's ability to solve problems independently, without assistance. The simplified goals and template approach used to achieve them, create a situation in which conflicts are greatly reduced. This decreases the opportunities for independent problem-solving, while increasing the reliance on tools that inhibit the construction of new knowledge.

The effective implementation of time tracking should help justify changes in policy. Much as it was used to implement the AM/F dynamic, Solid Cactus would now be able to point out deficiencies through accurate time tracking of the new processes, and reverse practices that limited the ability to reach the center of the ZPD. Since Kimai was the mediating instrument that Web.com used to see their world, Solid Cactus had the ability to shape the lens by which they viewed it.

Since the specific methods of PPC account management and the differences in account types were not taken into consideration, internal workloads became lopsided for both newly designed roles. Account Managers, were still expected to understand the inner workings of each account

and produce the same, detailed reports that they always have. These reports read more like a story, providing detailed explanations of fluctuations in performance, and ended with the new strategies that would be implemented as a result.

This was previously accomplished in less time, because PPC Managers working in the account each day, were able to construct report findings as they optimized campaigns. Now forbidden to make changes in AdWords, Account Managers had to determine the underlying factors that drove performance changes by sorting through convoluted change history logs, and often with innaccurate insights. Client capacity of Fulfillment Team members rose as well. By mass producing specific tasks, and not having to deal with client communications, efficiency was expected to rise and reduce the amount of time needed to complete necessary job requirements. The separation of of these duties, produced an interesting byproduct, in which new communication tasks needed to be created with the Account Managers in order to convey and address client concerns, as well as further the reach of successful initiatives.

The additional time dedicated to internal communication was frowned upon by Web.com, as it falls under the category of overhead time, which does not result in the potential for increasing revenue for the company. When compared to the baseline findings in the original way that Solid Cactus managed accounts, it was discovered that it actually took more time for two people to do the same job, with the same level of efficacy, under the new AM/F structure.

The Spread of Web

Much like a master craftsman building a house from the foundation to the shingles, PPC Managers at Solid Cactus were able to obtain first-hand knowledge through experiencing the

construction process, as well as how to maintain it over the years to ensure it does not collapse. Over the years, such techniques were refined and experience from other accounts could be applied to increase performance over an entire client roster.

As Richardson states, "Technology is a dynamic entity that is constantly in flux. As time presses on, new technologies will continue to break paradigms that will reshape human thinking regarding technological innovation" (Richardson 155).

The importance of this first-hand knowledge is especially important within the technology driven roles of PPC Managers. Not only in how they work, but how users interact with them. Web.com managers could have had two weeks experience or two years experience, and they would still generate the same results. Prefabrication of campaign builds meant that fulfillment teams could simply register an account, upload a list of 50 keywords, choose ads from a pre-existing database of creatives and change the destination URL, getting an account up and running in as little as a day.

This cookie cutter approach started with the sales process, where representatives had scripted dialogues for onboarding prospective clients. With a focus on generating targeted traffic, issues with site quality, design platforms, or competitiveness in the marketplace - were never brought into question. Solid Cactus however, sold services to sites that had a higher probability of success in an attempt to reduce turnover. Analysis of user experience, site navigability, pricing in the marketplace, and the ability to spend enough to obtain the necessary exposure through PPC, were all researched before the prospect was even contacted. PPC Managers would routinely

participate in conference calls with the sales team, providing account-specific insights, and interpreting complex strategies based on our unique approach to management.

The investment in time to bring in a new client was scrutinized, especially if it did not result in a new contract. Separating PPC Managers from the sales process, Web.com revised package offerings to outline not only what Cactus would do, but what they wouldn't do - based on the agreement. In theory, solving the problems Solid Cactus was experiencing in reaching time targets each month. Though it did actually succeed in properly outlining client expectations from the date of signing, Solid Cactus was servicing a large number of clients who joined under older agreements. These "legacy" clients were offered special incentives to switch, and many of them did. Behind the scenes however, packages and the associated fees were based on specific time allotments, which were established through how much they paid monthly.

This restriction placed a limitation on self-directed learning, often witnessed in the form of troubleshooting for struggling accounts. Knowles states that this is the, "process by which individuals take the initiative, with our without the assistance of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identify human and material resources for learning, choosing and implement appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (Knowles 18).

Before Web.com, there was never an established cap on the time that could be spent working on an account. Though this was sometimes problematic with needy clients, it afforded managers the ability to better understand how to effectively navigate challenges within an account, and convey knowledge and develop resolutions that ultimately established healthy client relationships that

flourished over time. Once Account Managers were no longer able to identify deficiencies in their ability to properly service an account - or risk reprisal from senior staff for not meeting monthly time targets, quality began to deteriorate.

Shrinking Slices, Shrinking Returns

Monthly meetings were held with team members to adjust time targets based on anticipated workloads for for the upcoming month. These projections were then used in compiling stock evaluations and make adjustments that reduced the likelihood of a less profitable quarter. Reducing targets were encouraged, as this meant they had the ability to manage additional clients.

One Fulfillment Manager summed up the predicament best with a food analogy. Using a pie as a representation of time, each team member was required to divide slices appropriately between clients every month. If more clients signed on, and targets were to be reduced, then the slices would get smaller, as each manager was striving to reach maximum workload capacity. Once a lowered target was reached, this was a signal that they were able to take on a new client. The same pie would now have to be cut in order to produce another slice, based on a newly created time target.

This comparison presents a regression analysis that identifies the finite nature of time as its relationship to nature of the work performed. As new accounts were distributed, quality of work was the first to go. AdWords Change History provided full insight into all work performed in an account. Clients who were aware of this, prompted by declines in performance, began checking this feature and used the data provided to justify refund requests. In response, bulk changes were

made, for no reason other than to simulate active management of an account. Even if all keyword bids were raised by $0.05, and then lowered by $0.05 a couple minutes later, it created the illusion of work being performed. This responsive form of learning led to account performance across the board suffering, in Web.com's pursuit of increasing the profitability of each team member.

Pointing Fingers Within the Division of Labor

PPC was not the only team to experience the heat that came from aggressive goals, as the Sales Team adopted an auto dialer to limit potential downtime. Though not using Kimai, all outgoing calls were logged, and conversations recorded, in order to assure compliance. As a result, PPC received a grab bag of contracts from prospect lists that had already been culled through by Web.com. Their systems acquired many of the template-based industries that they specialized in, while Solid Cactus was still expected to bring the custom care to less than ideal candidates.

Foreign platforms and miniscule budgets, prompted finger-pointing at the sales team with regard to client quality, while they relied on bringing in a higher number of low quality agreements. Outside platforms that signed also led to finger pointing at the Store Development Team, because they were responsible for installing tracking codes that were able to provide insight into ROAS metrics for AdWords accounts. This task formerly resided within the role of the dedicated PPC Manager, but creation of the AM/F structure excluded this task. Store Development understood proprietary platforms, but were not allowed to spend excessive amounts of time troubleshooting errors in tracking, as they generated no revenue from completing this task. PPC relied on the successful installation of this script in order to determine effectiveness of a

campaign, but goals on the end of Store Development took priority, leading to several delays in account launch dates. Even if a code was installed, it was often placed in the wrong area, rendering it useless. The ensuing back and forth (mis)communications would often last several business days, with the client-facing PPC Manager left to explain the delay to the customer.

With time constraints rolling out across the board, reaching elevated account performance goals that once motivated PPC team members to perform were invariable changed. Replaced by overarching goals to bring in additional revenue through effective time tracking, and the influx of accounts that were not representative of the department's capabilities, many managers resisted by declining to take on additional responsibilities in favor of the competency-based approach that effectively kept them off the radar. This disidentification is in response to the never ending power cycle and thus, representative of the ever present ability to create resistance. As Edwards and Usher put it, "there is always scope for learners, education and training practitioners to create a space where the closure of competence can be challenged and made more open" (Edwards and Usher 1994).

This approach actually points toward an awakening of the subconscious, in that PPC Managers have heightened awareness of their surroundings, and are able to obtain forms of self-knowledge through understanding the processes by which Web.com has changed the roles and responsibilities of the job.

Time for a Change

At Solid Cactus, many managers would jokingly refer to a time when they used to manage PPC accounts. With time tracking fueling a fragmented system, PPC Managers did indeed learn how

to navigate changing activity systems. While new informal learning did in fact occur, it did not align with the learning outcomes that were originally intended. This manifested itself in the voluntary exit of the activity system by several senior-level managers. Most of whom, had been around long enough to experience the original ways that Solid Cactus managed accounts, and bear witness to the new ways of Web.com.

The capacity-driven approach led to crippling consequences for those that remained, as they were forced to absorb the workload of a full-time team member. Because managing PPC accounts at Solid Cactus did not rely on the assistance of software, the amount of time needed to learn the intricacies of Google AdWords was substantial. In some cases, a new hire was not deemed necessary, as the client churn rate rose due to a lack of consistency in their point of contacts. This of course, was all verified through the careful analysis of time targets.

Identity Theft and the Beginning of the End

This situation is not unlike many, in that all comes back to time. Time drives activity, and allows CHAT to identify how subjects interact with the various elements around them. These interactions ultimately regulate individual ability to fail or succeed within a specific system. The motive object in this case, shifted from one that was essentially self-defined under the Cactus regime, to one that made less substantial, the potential contributions of the PPC Manager and their related skillsets. Through an interpretation of time as it relates to profitability, Web.com effectively changed the objective of the previous role, and made unavailable the tools that allowed for self-directed learning to occur.

While many believe the construction of identity to be an internal process, the confines of an activity system identify the outside factors that pull and shape the subject in pursuit of the object. Creating an alternate identity that may or may not be known to the subject, interacting bodies assign these traits to the subject based on abilities and limitations.

Engeström identifies tensions between nodes as an opportunity for subjects to transplant knowledge from one context to another, stating "Springboards do not come about smoothly and automatically. They appear in times of distress, almost as lifebuoys. Little is known about the psychological mechanism of their appearance, but intense mental struggle seems to be a necessary precondition. Moreover, experience is supposed to provide solutions on the basis of earlier similar occasions. Springboards are not solutions. They are starters or hints toward a path leading to an expansive solution." (Engeström 230).

The emergence of the AM/F structure and time tracking goals, provided a double bind, allowing PPC Managers to realize the boundaries of their current roles, and effectively springboard into positions outside of the Web.com umbrella. In search of a system that would allow them to function in a role that was representative of their abilities, and in turn, allow them to better align with the roles associated with their former selves.

Conclusion

According to Heraclitus, "Change is the only constant." Though time marches on, CHAT analysis provides a formula by which we establish a beginning and an end, in order to break down the interactions by which activity systems thrive. By following the progression of a Solid Cactus PPC Manager, it is possible to understand the processes by which new learning occurs,

and the factors that inhibit this process. By allowing for the application of experience, transformational shifts in meaning, and the recognition of power dynamics within situated realities, we are not only able to observe expansion, but better understand the interactions that brought it about in the first place.

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