Non-profit education institution leverages mobile strategy to drive awareness at lower cost-per-conversion

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

About Liberty University

- www.liberty.edu
- Founded in 1971 in Lynchburg , Virginia, Liberty University is a nonprofit Christian university also known as the world's largest Evangelical university

Goals

- Reach students beyond the campus limits
- Be at the forefront of advertising trends

Approach

- Created new mobile-only campaigns, seperate from exisiting desktop/tablet targeted campaigns
- Paid close attention and optimized keywords as they gained more history
- Focused on bidding to keep ads in the top two positions

Results

- 48.9% increase in conversions
- 50% decrease in cost-per-conversion

Liberty began 40 years ago as a small residential college with just 185 students; today, Liberty enrolls over 12,000 at its Lynchburg campus. The school has seen the biggest growth in its online school, with over 62,000 students enrolled in Liberty University Online in the 2010-11 academic school year.

Liberty went online, both with education and advertising, in order to reach students beyond the campus limits. Liberty strives to be at the forefront of advertising trends, so has adapted to new strategies as the online space has evolved. Most recently, they decided to fully invest in mobile.

Steve Peterson is the Executive Director of Admissions at Liberty University Online, and says that mobile made sense as a strategic next step for Liberty.

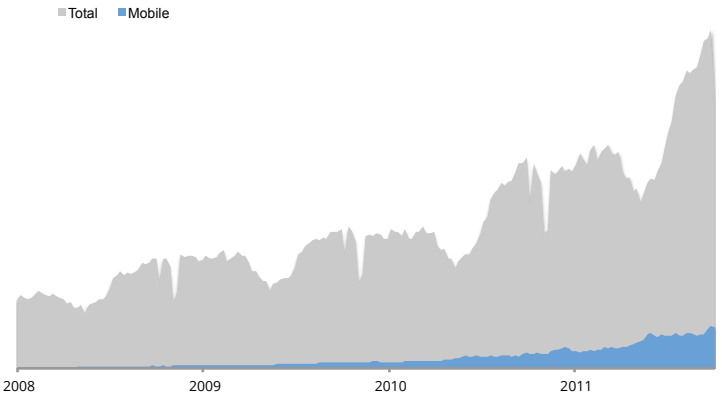
> "Over the last year, the growth in mobile traffic was just an upward line. So, in the fall of last year [2010], we started to explore how we could leverage mobile advertising. Then in January of this year, we started to really sink some resources into it and started to see a response that's measurable."
>
> — Steve Peterson, Executive Director of Admissions, Liberty University Online



Liberty was concerned about losing performance history as they moved mobile from one campaign to another, but they never questioned that students were actually looking for them on mobile. They used the data segmenting available in AdWords to track how their campaigns performed on different devices and saw a consistent increase in the traffic coming from high-end mobile devices. Since the volume and the students were already there, they decided to move forward with a more defined mobile strategy.

Education on Mobile

This is a question that many universities are asking: are students actually using their mobile devices to research their education options? Based on Google.com search volume, students are increasingly searching from their mobile devices. The graph below shows the increase in education-related searches over the past three years.



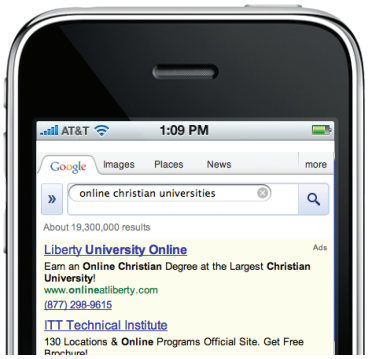
Year	Type	Avg Mobile %
2008	Actual	2.97%
2009	Actual	6.03%
2010	Actual	10.79%
2011	*Projected*	17.34%

Mobile will represent 17.3% of total traffic by end of 2011

Liberty also saw this trend with their own AdWords traffic, saying that their mobile campaigns gave them more perspective on where students are looking for information about the university.

Google AdWords driving mobile traffic

Liberty started with a test on their branded terms, creating a new campaign for mobile traffic, and targeting desktop and tablets with the existing campaign. After seeing immediate returns on their branded campaign, they broke out another campaign to target mobile separately.



At first, Steve Peterson said that Liberty expected mobile to take some time to catch up to their desktop advertising. They were excited and surprised to see mobile surpass their expectations.

> "Now, whenever we're thinking about marketing something, mobile is as much in the conversation as any other avenue."
>
> — Steve Peterson, Executive Director of Admissions, Liberty University Online

"Sometimes when you're trying new things, your tolerance is a little higher for what you're willing to accept," Steve said. "But we were surprised how quickly there was a return, and how quickly it was profitable. So, at this point, mobile fits in with everything else we're doing, and I would go as far to say, is standing on its own."

Despite their immediate success with mobile-only campaigns, they also paid close attention to the performance, optimizing as they gained more performance history. They adjusted the match type for some of their keywords, but focused the most on optimizing their mobile bids. They saw the mobile ads start in a high average position right away and saw a return from that, so continued to bid for those top two positions.

Liberty continues to make minor tweaks to their mobile campaigns, and has been consistently impressed with the performance they've seen on this newer platform.

"The thing that was surprising was how well it performed in a short period of time compared to stuff we've been doing for years. So when you have that out of the gate, we just want to keep scaling until we see some kind of diminishing returns."

Liberty hasn't seen diminishing returns yet. In the first six months of running mobile-only campaigns, the number of conversions on mobile devices increased by 48.9%, and they were able to reduce their cost-per-conversion by 50%.

Next steps in the mobile strategy

After seeing this level of success in their first two campaigns, Liberty plans to break out mobile traffic from all their campaigns. They're also pursuing a full-fledged mobile landing page strategy. They realize that mobile and desktop users are completely separate populations, and are shaping their strategy to address the differences between them.

Overall, mobile represents both an immediate and long-term opportunity for Liberty. They have proven the success of mobile for driving direct results, and also understand that a mobile strategy means thinking a little bit differently about today's students.

"Mobile traffic and the mobile adaptation show where the consumers reside. I think businesses need to accommodate that demand."

Google

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