



PAID MEDIA GUIDE

The CMO's Guide to Google Ads for Healthcare Brands in 2025

INTRODUCTION

At OpenMoves, we manage significant paid media budgets for healthcare brands across multiple verticals. Our clients include large hospitals, medical aesthetics providers, dentists, addiction treatment providers, medical equipment providers, and more.

Our team has developed substantial expertise on how to win with Google Ads for healthcare brands in the modern landscape. Succeeding with SEM is a challenge in any industry, but in the 2025 regulatory and competitive landscape, healthcare businesses have particularly difficult challenges to overcome.

What are the challenges healthcare CMOs are facing with Google Ads? Here are a few:

- Navigating HIPAA and privacy concerns while still tracking key outcomes
- Issues with ad approval and serving, inconsistent ad rejections
- Attributing ROI across complex and multi-platform patient journeys
- Leveraging AI and adopting new features while remaining compliant
- Retargeting, a pillar of performance marketing strategies, is heavily limited in healthcare
- Broadly increasing cost of media and competition
- Rapid changes to SERP landscape and Google Ads features destabilize efforts

In this guide, we'll cover these challenges and more, to create an effective modern guide to Google Ads implementation and optimization for healthcare brands.



Challenge #1

What Exactly is Happening with Google Search and AI?

The Issue:

It's a cliché by now to begin a report with a discussion of AI, but for **healthcare marketers** trying to understand the **Google Ads landscape**, we have to start with understanding **Google Search** and **Google Ads** in 2025. Right now there are several main elements driving **rapid change** in **search engine marketing**:

- **Google's AI Overviews**

OpenMoves has previously published guidance on optimizing for [AI Overviews here](#). AIOs are not new, but they continue to be **highly impactful in search results in 2025**. The AI Overview is basically an **AI summary** of a topic or question that appears **at the top of the search results** for many informational queries. The quick takeaway here is: if an AIO is ranking for a query your brand targets, most likely the **AIO captures a significant share of clicks and even impressions**.

- **Google's AI Mode**

This is a **genuinely new feature**, which we also explored in more detail in our post on [understanding Google's AI Mode](#). Google's AI Mode is effectively a **hybrid search - LLM product** that allows users to query Google in a way that generates answers. As with AI Overviews, this changes the relationship between brands and search traffic - brands are now forced into optimizing for **citations and AI visibility** rather than direct SERP traffic. While both AI Mode and AI Overview have **outsized impact on organic search strategies**, the **rapid changes** in what Google actually does and looks like will obviously impact **Google Ads** as well.

Google AI Max

- AI Max is [Google's newest significant Ads product change](#). AI Max continues in Google's general direction of **broadening keyword targeting, automating ad creatives**, and generally handing more control to Google's **machine learning systems** to run **black-box style** campaigns. Presently many of the exact details on AI Max performance and optimization are unknown, but it's clear there will be tie-ins **between AI Max and Google's user-facing AI features** like AIOs and AI Mode. Healthcare brands have to balance being on the cutting edge of testing new features and **remaining performant and compliant**. Many brands struggle with allowing any **AI control on creative assets** for **compliance reasons**.

The OpenMoves Approach:

Our team is **rapidly adapting** across multiple key product areas to deliver results **healthcare brands** that **maximize effectiveness** across new surface areas while remaining **performant and compliant**. **Overall search measurement is changing** - we need to review **SEM + SEO performance together**, and we need to consider **impressions and citations** rather than click volume in some cases.



Challenge #2

Tracking and Measuring the Patient Journey

The Issue:

Healthcare businesses have some of the most complex customer journeys in SEM. For example, a patient considering a complex medical treatment may spend **extensive time researching options**, may submit **multiple forms** and have **multiple phone calls**, and the timespan between **contact and conversion** could be **many months**. Furthermore, there may be **wild variations in customer LTV** depending on the nature of the healthcare brand. **Tracking and optimizing** against this **lengthy, complex and multivariate path to conversion** represents a **major challenge for healthcare marketers**. Specific elements to consider:

- **Call Tracking Integration**

Many healthcare conversions happen **over the phone**. Depending on the nature of the service provided, **over 50% of patient interactions may begin with phone calls**. **Effective call tracking**, including **integrating call tracking directly with Google Ads**, is **key to SEM optimization**. Furthermore, there are many **nuances to call tracking in healthcare**, such as **automated transcription, disqualification of non-marketing calls**, and the **operational processes** around **training an effective call center team**.

- **CRM Integration**

An effective healthcare SEM strategy must include **clear visibility into patient inquiry quality** and conversion from lead to patient. One of the most obvious initial stumbling blocks of Google Ads success in healthcare is **running campaigns which generate many leads but few true new patients**. A basic **Google Ads to CRM integration** is **table stakes**, but there are many layers of complexity to add to reach an ideal implementation. For example, a **sophisticated CRM integration** in Google Ads includes **comprehensive views into patient value**, allowing Google Ads campaigns to optimize towards **ROAS rather than CPA**.

- **Attribution**

Attribution is challenging in any business, but the **long sales cycles** and **privacy challenges** make attribution in healthcare marketing especially challenging. There's **no silver bullet** here, marketers may rely on a blend of methodologies including mixing **direct platform measurement, CRM data, MMM tools**, or **visitor-scoring based platforms**, to make **marginal dollar allocation decisions**.

The OpenMoves Approach:

Every client is different. The challenge for the whole industry, brands and agencies alike, is that **every marketing technology implementation is unique**: different CRMs, live chats, call tracking tools, website platforms, and so on. There's no **quick fix** here - our team **digs into each martech ecosystem** to understand **what's being tracked, what's missing**, and **how to improve the integrations** to pass the **best data possible to Google Ads**.



Challenge #3

Privacy, Compliance, and Approvals

The Issue:

Multiple **complex regulatory challenges** underpin success in **Google Ads** efforts for **healthcare brands**. Our team has worked with many different clients facing different challenges, and the reality is that **being compliant** does impose real drag on team time and media performance. However, with good understanding and execution against the key **privacy issues**, Google Ads can operate most platform features effectively. The challenges brands need to tackle include:

- **HIPAA Compliance**

Most marketing platforms—including **Google Ads**, **Google Analytics**, and **Meta Ads**—are **not HIPAA compliant** and likely never will be. They won't sign Business Associate Agreements (BAAs), so advertisers must take full responsibility for managing PII and PHI in their tracking systems. **OpenMoves has previously issued detailed guidelines** on [HIPAA compliance for Meta Ads](#), some of which also applies to Google Ads.

- **Ad Rejections**

Getting healthcare ads approved in Google Ads can be inconsistent and frustrating. [LegitScript](#) certification has helped our clients overcome approval issues and is worth pursuing. **We suggest that healthcare brands check the certification status of their competitors.** If your competitors have the LegitScript certification, most likely your brand should as well.

- **Retargeting Compliance**

Retargeting is a key digital marketing strategy, but [Google's Health in Personalized Ads policies](#) significantly limit its use in healthcare. However healthcare brands may have little to no ability to run retargeting campaigns given Google's Health in Personalized Ads policies. That said, we've had some success by experimenting with **audience types** and **message vagueness**, but it typically involves trial and error.

- **Google Ads Pharmaceutical Copy**

Above and beyond Google's already **complex healthcare advertising policies**, Google has [specific customizations applied to ads for prescription medication](#). This includes replacing display URLs with generic terms like "**Prescription treatment website**," and restricting use of both **drug names** and **treated conditions** without **ISI (important safety information)**. These limitations require pharma advertisers to **creatively adapt messaging** within Google's rules.

- **Excluding Existing Customers**

A common optimization approach to performance media buying is to exclude existing customers from acquisition campaigns. **This is much harder for healthcare advertisers—Google has recently restricted use of the target client acquisition bidding option.** Some creative tactics may still work, like excluding users who've visited pages such as /login/ or /portal/, but even these can face limitations and require experimentation.

The OpenMoves Approach:

The overall challenge of **driving performance** while **remaining compliant** requires client-specific, nuanced understanding. There are some tactics that are basically evergreen such as getting LegitScript **certified**, implementing **cookie consent**, and understanding **allowable messaging** in each category. There are then further more bespoke approaches to consider for each case, for example some OM clients adopt "**middleman**" platforms like [FreshPaint](#) to enable features like **Google Ads Enhanced Conversions** while remaining **HIPAA compliant**.



Challenge #4

Driving Performance in a Competitive Landscape

The Issue:

Even brands doing everything right from a **compliance, tracking, and AI** perspective, are not guaranteed good **performance** in Google Ads. Total **ad spend** in the healthcare industry continues to rise - in 2024, there was around \$30 billion in total healthcare ads spend, an increase of ~5% year over year. Rising total industry **spend, inflation, and Google's own platform pressure** results in rising media costs for healthcare advertisers. How do healthcare brands create a **performance edge** with Google Ads? Some of our successes include:

- **Focusing on Data Integrity and Bidding Strategy**

We've already covered some of the important topics here, including **CRM integration, call tracking, and compliance**. Our experience is that brands go through a gradual **maturing** of **tracking setup and data integration**. This is especially true for **middle-market advertisers** with **smaller in-house teams**. Putting **marketing technology** together part by part, so that over time every **conversion point** is tracked correctly, passed into **Google Ads**, and ultimately integrated into a **sophisticated bidding strategy**, is one critical point of leverage to drive **competitive results** in SEM.

- **Optimizing Geotargeting Strategies**

Many healthcare businesses are **location-based** businesses in which patients visit a **physical location**. Many OpenMoves clients in fact operate **multiple physical sites**, further compounding healthcare marketing complexities by also introducing the challenges inherent in **multi-location marketing**. Any business targeting **local users** must have an awareness of **geotargeting optimization** - this includes testing how large an area to target, strategically adding and removing high and low performing zips, tracking the behavior of **"near me" searches** (which are on the rise), and more.

- **Optimizing for Trust, Reviews, and Authenticity**

OpenMoves has seen very clear relationships between **SEM performance** and **review sentiment**, even when **Google Ads creatives** do not feature reviews. Patients increasingly look for validation from online reviews, health influencers, and AI tools to gather information about healthcare providers and procedures. Healthcare brands need to cultivate trust across all aspects of SEM - this includes in **ad messaging** and use of **extensions, on landing pages, and in their overall online presence**. Issues around **reviews** and **trust** also raise the important project of aligning **SEM** and **SEO** and optimizing **Google Business profiles**.

- **Advanced Technical Google Ads Implementations**

Google Ads remains a **highly complex platform** with opportunities for marketers to generate an edge from **sophisticated tactics**. Examples include **AI search query analysis, API-based analysis** of Google **Performance Max data**, advanced processes for **quality score tracking, optimization, and more**.

The OpenMoves Approach:

Our agency specializes in managing **Google Ads** accounts for **healthcare brands** that need to tackle challenges with **performance, compliance, scale, localization, and more**, all at once. These are some of the **most complex media buying challenges** in the world. The guide above outlines some of our **thinking, experience, and tactics** in optimizing **Google Ads** for **healthcare brands**. If you represent a healthcare business with significant Google Ads spend, contact our team today to speak with an expert.