

NONPROFIT MARKETING RESOURCE GUIDE

Google Ad Grants for Nonprofits

A plain-language guide to activating and managing Google's \$10,000/month advertising program -- one of the most underutilized resources available to the nonprofit sector.

Google offers eligible nonprofits up to \$10,000 per month in free search advertising through the Google Ad Grants program. That's \$120,000 of annual advertising value -- at no cost. Yet the majority of qualifying organizations never apply, and many that do apply fail to use it effectively.

This guide walks through everything you need to know: whether your organization qualifies, how to apply, how to structure your account for compliance and performance, the most common mistakes to avoid, and an honest framework for deciding whether to manage the program in-house or bring in outside help.

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SECTION 01

What Is Google Ad Grants?

Google Ad Grants is a program that provides eligible nonprofit organizations with up to \$10,000 per month in free Google Search advertising credits. It functions identically to a standard Google Ads account -- the only difference is that the budget comes from Google rather than your organization.

How It Works

When someone searches Google for terms related to your programs, services, or cause, your ads can appear at the top of the results page -- at no cost to your organization. You pay nothing per click. The \$10,000 monthly credit simply resets each month whether you use it or not.

The ads are text-based search ads only -- the same format you've seen at the top of Google search results. They don't appear on YouTube, Gmail, or display networks. They appear when someone is actively searching for something related to your work.

What Can You Use It For?

- Drive ticket sales and event registrations
- Increase donations and expand your donor base
- Build awareness of programs and exhibitions
- Recruit volunteers, board members, or staff
- Promote membership and subscription programs
- Drive traffic to specific landing pages or campaigns

KEY FACT

Google Ad Grants is available in over 50 countries and has been used by more than 20,000 nonprofit organizations worldwide. Most cultural institutions and small nonprofits in New Mexico have never activated it.

What It Is Not

Google Ad Grants is not Google Analytics, Google Workspace for Nonprofits, or YouTube Giving. These are separate programs with separate applications. Ad Grants specifically covers search advertising spend only, and comes with its own compliance requirements that differ from a standard paid account.

SECTION 02

Eligibility & Requirements

Google Ad Grants is not available to every nonprofit. Before beginning the application process, confirm that your organization meets all of the following requirements.

Who Qualifies

- Registered as a 501(c)(3) charitable organization in the United States
- Validated through TechSoup -- a nonprofit technology donation platform that Google uses to verify eligibility
- Has an active, functioning website with a clear mission statement
- Website is secure (HTTPS) and loads properly
- Agrees to Google's non-discrimination and donation receipt policies

Who Does Not Qualify

- Government entities and government-affiliated organizations
- Hospitals and healthcare organizations (even if nonprofit)
- Schools, academic institutions, and universities (though their foundations may qualify separately)
- 501(c)(4), 501(c)(6), and other non-charitable designations
- Organizations primarily engaged in political or lobbying activity

IMPORTANT NOTE FOR ARTS ORGANIZATIONS

Museums, performing arts organizations, galleries, cultural centers, and arts nonprofits almost universally qualify -- provided they hold 501(c)(3) status. If your organization has been hesitant to apply because you weren't sure you'd qualify, the answer is almost certainly yes.

TechSoup Verification

TechSoup (techsoup.org) is a third-party nonprofit that manages eligibility verification for Google's nonprofit programs. Before applying for Google Ad Grants, your organization must first register with TechSoup and receive validation. This process typically takes 1–4 weeks and requires your organization's EIN, 501(c)(3) determination letter, and basic contact information.

Once TechSoup validates your eligibility, you'll receive a token that you use to apply for Google for Nonprofits -- the umbrella program that includes Ad Grants, Google Workspace, and YouTube Giving.

SECTION 03

How to Apply

The application process has two stages: first registering with TechSoup, then applying for Google for Nonprofits. The full process typically takes 2–6 weeks from start to active account.

STEP	ACTION	TIMELINE
1	Register at techsoup.org and submit eligibility documentation	1–4 weeks
2	Receive TechSoup validation token via email	Included in Step 1
3	Apply at google.com/nonprofits using your TechSoup token	1–2 days
4	Receive Google for Nonprofits approval email	2–14 days
5	Enroll in Ad Grants from your Google for Nonprofits dashboard	Immediate
6	Set up your Google Ads account and submit for review	1–2 weeks
7	Account approved -- campaigns go live	Immediate upon approval

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Make sure your website is ready before applying. Google reviews your site as part of the approval process. A site that loads slowly, lacks an HTTPS certificate, or doesn't clearly communicate your mission can delay or prevent approval. Website readiness is the most common reason for application delays.

SECTION 04

Account Structure Basics

Google Ad Grants accounts have a specific structure -- and specific compliance requirements that differ from standard paid Google Ads accounts. Understanding this structure before you begin will save significant time and prevent account suspension.

The Three-Level Hierarchy

Every Google Ads account -- including Ad Grants accounts -- is organized across three levels: the Account, Campaigns, and Ad Groups.

LEVEL	WHAT IT IS	YOUR ROLE
Account	Your organization's top-level Google Ads presence. One per organization.	Set billing (linked to grant), time zones, currency.
Campaign	A themed grouping of ads with shared settings, budget, and goals.	Create one per major program, audience, or objective.
Ad Group	A set of related keywords and ads within a Campaign.	Tightly themed -- each group covers one specific topic.

Ad Grants Compliance Rules

Google Ad Grants accounts must comply with specific ongoing requirements or risk suspension. These are stricter than standard paid accounts:

RULE	REQUIREMENT
CTR Minimum	Account must maintain a 5% click-through rate (CTR) each month. Falling below this for two consecutive months triggers a warning.
Quality Score	Keywords must have a Quality Score of 3 or higher. Low-quality keywords must be paused or removed.
Geo-targeting	Each campaign must be targeted to a specific geographic area -- you cannot run nationwide or worldwide-only campaigns.
Sitelinks	Every ad must include at least two sitelink extensions linking to relevant pages on your website.
Conversions	You must set up at least one conversion action (donation, registration, contact form) and track it properly.

Single Keywords

Single-word keywords (except branded terms) are not permitted. All keywords must be two or more words.

SECTION 05

Campaign Setup

A well-structured account from the start is far easier to maintain and far more likely to stay compliant. The following framework is recommended for most cultural institutions and small nonprofits.

Recommended Campaign Structure

Most organizations should start with three to four focused campaigns rather than trying to cover everything at once. More campaigns are not better -- tightly themed campaigns with relevant keywords consistently outperform sprawling accounts.

CAMPAIGN	PURPOSE	EXAMPLE KEYWORDS
Brand / Awareness	Capture searches for your organization by name or mission area.	[org name] tickets, [org name] events, contemporary art Santa Fe
Program / Events	Drive attendance to specific exhibitions, concerts, or programs.	chamber music festival Santa Fe, summer concert series New Mexico
Donations	Reach people searching to support arts, culture, or your cause.	donate to arts nonprofit, support local museum, arts charity gift
Volunteer / Membership	Recruit volunteers, members, or community supporters.	museum volunteer opportunities, arts nonprofit membership, support local arts

Writing Effective Ad Copy

Google Responsive Search Ads allow you to write up to 15 headlines and 4 descriptions. Google's system automatically tests combinations to find what performs best. A few principles for nonprofits:

- Lead with the benefit to the visitor, not a description of your organization
- Include your location in at least one headline for local relevance
- Use specific, concrete language -- "Free admission Sundays" beats "Visit us today"
- Include a clear call to action in every description ("Get tickets," "Learn more," "Give today")
- Write at least 8–10 headlines to give Google enough variation to optimize

KEYWORD STRATEGY

Focus on keywords that reflect what your audience is actively searching for -- not internal terminology. "Contemporary art museum Albuquerque" performs better than "cutting-edge visual arts institution." Use Google's Keyword Planner (free within your Ads account) to research actual search volume before committing to a keyword list.

Setting Up Conversion Tracking

Conversion tracking is required by Ad Grants compliance rules and is also the only way to know whether your campaigns are actually producing results. Conversions to set up for most organizations:

- Ticket purchase or event registration completion
- Donation form submission
- Contact form submission
- Newsletter signup
- Membership purchase or inquiry

Conversion tracking is set up in Google Ads and confirmed through Google Analytics (which your website should already have installed). If your organization doesn't have Google Analytics installed, that's a prerequisite to tackle before launching Ad Grants campaigns.

SECTION 06

Common Pitfalls

Most organizations that struggle with Google Ad Grants run into the same recurring problems. These are preventable -- but they're far less painful to prevent than to fix after an account has been suspended.

- 01 Setting It Up and Walking Away**

Google Ad Grants is not a "set and forget" program. Accounts that go unmonitored quickly fall below the 5% CTR requirement, accumulate low-quality keywords, and eventually get suspended. Plan for at least 2–4 hours per month of active account management -- reviewing performance, pausing underperforming keywords, and testing new ad copy.
- 02 Using Overly Broad or Generic Keywords**

Keywords like "art," "music," or "nonprofit" are too broad, too competitive, and too expensive in the paid ecosystem -- and they produce poor CTR in Ad Grants accounts. Stick to two- to four-word phrases that reflect specific searches your ideal audience is actually making. "Chamber music Santa Fe" will always outperform "music concerts."
- 03 Sending All Traffic to Your Homepage**

Ads that send visitors to your homepage rather than a specific, relevant landing page consistently underperform. A visitor who clicked on an ad for "summer music festival tickets" should land on the ticket purchase page -- not the homepage where they have to find it themselves. Every campaign should have a dedicated destination page.
- 04 Ignoring the Quality Score**

Quality Score is Google's measure of how relevant your keyword, ad, and landing page are to each other. A keyword with a Quality Score below 3 must be paused or removed under Ad Grants rules. More importantly, low Quality Scores mean your ads rarely show -- even with \$10,000/month available. Relevance is everything.
- 05 Not Setting Up Conversion Tracking**

Without conversion tracking, you can't demonstrate compliance, can't optimize performance, and can't report to your board on what the program is producing. Setting up even one conversion action (a donation or ticket purchase completion) dramatically improves both compliance and your ability to evaluate the program's impact.
- 06 Letting the Account Go Dark**

If you don't log into your Ad Grants account for 90 consecutive days, Google may automatically pause it. Regular activity -- even just reviewing performance -- keeps the account in good standing. Build a recurring monthly calendar reminder.

SECTION 07

In-House vs. Hiring a Specialist

One of the most practical questions for any nonprofit considering Ad Grants is whether to manage the account internally or bring in outside help. There is no universal answer -- it depends on your organization's capacity, technical comfort, and the complexity of what you're trying to accomplish.

When In-House Management Makes Sense

- Your organization has staff with time to learn and monitor the platform
- Your campaign goals are relatively simple (one or two programs, local audience)
- You have Google Analytics already installed and someone who understands it
- Your website has clear, functional landing pages for your key programs
- You're comfortable with a 2–3 month learning curve before seeing strong results

When a Specialist Adds Value

- You've tried managing it internally and the account got suspended
- Staff capacity is too limited for consistent monthly management
- Your organization has complex goals across multiple programs or audiences
- You've activated the grant but aren't spending more than 20–30% of the monthly budget
- Your board expects formal ROI reporting and you don't have the framework to produce it
- You want to combine Ad Grants with paid Google Ads for a comprehensive search strategy

FACTOR	IN-HOUSE	SPECIALIST
Monthly time required	2–4 hours/month minimum	Handled externally
Setup time	10–20 hours initial	Faster, with experience
Learning curve	2–3 months to proficiency	Minimal for organization
Cost	Staff time only	\$300–\$800/month typical
Compliance risk	Higher without experience	Lower with good specialist
Reporting capability	Basic, unless skilled	More comprehensive

A PRACTICAL MIDDLE PATH

Many organizations benefit from hiring a specialist for the initial setup and first three months -- then transitioning to in-house management with quarterly specialist check-ins. This approach builds internal capacity while avoiding the compliance pitfalls that typically occur in the learning phase.

SECTION 09

Quick-Start Checklist

Use this checklist to track your progress from eligibility verification through first campaign launch.

Before You Apply

- Confirm 501(c)(3) status and locate your determination letter
- Verify your website has a valid HTTPS certificate
- Ensure your website clearly states your organization's mission
- Confirm Google Analytics is installed on your website
- Identify 2–3 specific goals you want Ad Grants to support

Registration & Application

- Register at techsoup.org and submit eligibility documentation
- Receive and save your TechSoup validation token
- Apply at google.com/nonprofits using your TechSoup token
- Receive Google for Nonprofits approval
- Enroll in Google Ad Grants from your nonprofits dashboard

Account Setup

- Create your Google Ads account and link to Ad Grants
- Set up at least one conversion action in Google Ads
- Link Google Ads to Google Analytics
- Configure billing (Ad Grants credit -- no payment method needed)
- Set account time zone and currency

First Campaign

- Create 3–4 focused campaigns based on key programs or goals
- Build tightly themed ad groups with 10–20 related keywords each
- Ensure all keywords are two or more words
- Write at least 8 headlines and 3 descriptions per Responsive Search Ad
- Add at least two sitelink extensions per campaign
- Verify all ads link to specific, relevant landing pages (not homepage)
- Set geographic targeting for each campaign

Ongoing Management

- Review account performance at least once per month
- Monitor CTR -- maintain above 5% to stay compliant
- Pause or remove any keywords with Quality Score below 3
- Test new ad copy every 1–2 months
- Log in to the account at least once every 30 days
- Run a quarterly review against your conversion goals

A NOTE FOR NEW MEXICO

Google Ad Grants in a New Mexico Context

Most guides to Google Ad Grants are written for a generic national audience. New Mexico nonprofits and cultural institutions operate in a context that shapes how Ad Grants should be configured -- and where the program offers some specific, underutilized advantages.

A Bilingual Audience Is an Advantage

New Mexico has one of the highest proportions of Spanish-speaking residents of any U.S. state, with a deep-rooted bilingual culture that spans generations. For most national organizations, Spanish-language Google search advertising is an afterthought. In New Mexico, it is an opportunity.

Spanish-language search keywords face significantly lower competition than their English equivalents -- which in a paid advertising context translates to lower cost per click and more efficient budget use. Since Ad Grants provides a fixed monthly budget, this means your grant can reach proportionally further in Spanish than in English.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATION

Consider building a dedicated Spanish-language campaign for your most important program areas. Keywords like "museo arte Santa Fe," "conciertos en Nuevo Mexico," or "eventos culturales Albuquerque" will face a fraction of the competition of their English counterparts. You do not need a fully bilingual website to run Spanish ads -- but your landing page should at minimum include a Spanish welcome or program description.

Geographic Targeting in a Dispersed State

New Mexico's population is heavily concentrated in four urban centers -- Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Las Cruces, and Rio Rancho -- but a significant portion of the state arts and cultural audience lives in smaller communities and rural areas with strong ties to regional identity.

Ad Grants geographic targeting (each campaign must be targeted to a specific area) is often treated as a technicality. In New Mexico, it is an opportunity for strategic thinking. Consider separate campaigns for Santa Fe and Taos visitors versus Albuquerque metro residents versus statewide reach -- each with messaging tailored to how those audiences relate to your work.

Tourism as a Year-Round Keyword Opportunity

New Mexico draws significant arts and cultural tourism, particularly in Santa Fe. Visitors actively search for arts experiences, gallery openings, museum hours, and cultural events before and during their trips. This search behavior is highly relevant to Ad Grants campaigns and represents an audience that many local nonprofits underserve digitally.

- "things to do Santa Fe" + art, culture, or music modifiers
- "Santa Fe museums" / "Santa Fe art galleries"

- "New Mexico arts festivals" or specific event types
- "Taos art scene" / "Albuquerque cultural events"
- Seasonal terms tied to peak tourism periods (summer, Indian Market, etc.)

The Regional Nonprofit Ecosystem

New Mexico has a well-developed nonprofit support infrastructure. The Santa Fe Community Foundation Learning Hub offers education programs for nonprofit staff. New Mexico Arts administers annual grants that can sometimes fund marketing and communications capacity -- including the infrastructure needed to support a Google Ad Grants program.

If your organization is considering applying for Ad Grants but lacks the internal capacity to manage it effectively, framing that capacity as a grantable need -- through New Mexico Arts, local community foundations, or other regional funders -- is a legitimate and often overlooked path.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian Bixby is a Fractional Director of Marketing & Communications serving nonprofit and cultural institutions in Santa Fe and New Mexico. This guide is part of a free resource series for organizations navigating marketing strategy without a full-time marketing department.

If your organization needs help activating Google Ad Grants, building a marketing strategy, or establishing the infrastructure to manage communications effectively, visit brian-bixby-fdmc.netlify.app or use the assessment form to start a conversation.