

NONPROFIT MARKETING RESOURCE SERIES / GUIDE 03

# GOOGLE AD GRANTS

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

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*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 many qualifying organizations never apply, and many that do apply fail to use it effectively.*

This guide walks through: whether your organization qualifies, how to apply, how to structure your account for compliance and performance, common mistakes to avoid, and a practical way to decide whether to manage the program in-house or bring in outside help.

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## **WHY MOST NONPROFITS STRUGGLE WITH AD GRANTS**

Most nonprofits activate the grant but never use the full budget. The most common reasons are poor account structure, lack of conversion tracking, and insufficient monthly maintenance. The program is extremely valuable, but it does require ongoing management to produce results.

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## SECTION 01

# WHAT IS GOOGLE AD GRANTS?

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

The \$10,000 monthly credit is delivered as a daily budget of roughly \$329 within the Google Ads platform. Credits reset each month whether you use them or not.

## 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. Ad Grants supports text-based search ads only. It does not cover YouTube, Gmail, or display network advertising.

## WHAT YOU CAN 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. Many 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. Those are separate programs with separate applications. Ad Grants specifically covers search advertising spend only and comes with its own compliance requirements.

## A NOTE ON THE \$2.00 BID LIMIT

Earlier versions of Ad Grants limited bids to \$2.00 per click. This restriction was removed in 2017 when Google introduced automated bidding strategies. If you previously heard the program was too restrictive to be useful, that limitation no longer applies.

## SECTION 02

# ELIGIBILITY AND REQUIREMENTS

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

## WHO QUALIFIES

- Registered as a 501(c)(3) charitable organization in the United States
- Validated through TechSoup (Google's eligibility verification partner)
- 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 is a third-party nonprofit that manages eligibility verification for Google's nonprofit programs. Before applying for Google Ad Grants, your organization must register with TechSoup and receive validation. This typically takes 1–4 weeks and requires your EIN, 501(c)(3) determination letter, and basic contact information.

Once validated, you'll receive a token used 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: 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 <a href="https://techsoup.org">techsoup.org</a> and submit eligibility documentation	1–4 weeks
2	Receive TechSoup validation token via email	Included in Step 1
3	Apply at <a href="https://google.com/nonprofits">google.com/nonprofits</a> 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 is the most common reason for application delays.

## SECTION 04

# ACCOUNT STRUCTURE BASICS

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

## THE THREE-LEVEL HIERARCHY

<b>ACCOUNT</b>	Your organization's top-level Google Ads presence. One per organization.
<b>CAMPAIGN</b>	A themed grouping of ads with shared settings, budget, and goals.
<b>AD GROUP</b>	A set of related keywords and ads within a campaign.
<b>KEYWORDS + ADS</b>	Individual keywords that trigger your ads, paired with ad copy.

## KEY COMPLIANCE RULES

RULE	REQUIREMENT
<b>CTR minimum</b>	Maintain a 5% click-through rate each month. Falling below this for two consecutive months triggers a warning.
<b>Quality score</b>	Keywords should have a Quality Score of 3 or higher. Low-quality keywords must be paused or removed.
<b>Geo-targeting</b>	Each campaign must target a specific geographic area. Avoid nationwide-only campaigns.
<b>Sitelinks</b>	Ads must include sitelink extensions linking to relevant pages on your site.
<b>Conversions</b>	Set up at least one conversion action (donation, registration, contact form) and track it properly.
<b>Single-word keywords</b>	Single-word keywords (except branded terms) are not permitted. Use two or more words.

## SECTION 05

# CAMPAIGN SETUP

A well-structured account from the start is easier to maintain and more likely to stay compliant. Start with three to four focused campaigns rather than trying to cover everything at once.

## RECOMMENDED CAMPAIGN STRUCTURE

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

Responsive Search Ads let you write up to 15 headlines and 4 descriptions. Google's system tests combinations to learn what performs best.

- 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, for example "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

Choose 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 to confirm search volume before committing to a keyword list.

## CONVERSION TRACKING

Conversion tracking is required for compliance and is the only way to know whether campaigns are producing results. Set up tracking for: ticket purchase or event registration, donation form submission, contact form submission,

newsletter signup, and membership purchase or inquiry.

#### EXAMPLE IMPACT

A well-managed Ad Grants account can generate thousands of qualified website visits each month, often for organizations that previously had almost no search visibility. For many cultural organizations, this translates to increased event discovery, higher newsletter signups, and new donors finding the organization through search.

## SECTION 06

# COMMON PITFALLS

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

## 01 SETTING IT UP AND WALKING AWAY

Ad Grants is not "set and forget." Accounts that go unmonitored fall below CTR requirements, accumulate low-quality keywords, and can be suspended. Plan for 2–4 hours per month of active management.

## 02 USING OVERLY BROAD KEYWORDS

Single terms like "art" or "nonprofit" are too broad and produce poor CTR. Use two- to four-word phrases that reflect specific searches, such as "chamber music Santa Fe."

## 03 SENDING ALL TRAFFIC TO YOUR HOMEPAGE

Ads that send visitors to the homepage underperform. Send each campaign to a relevant landing page that matches the search intent.

## 04 IGNORING QUALITY SCORE

Keywords with Quality Score below 3 must be paused or removed. Low quality scores also reduce impressions even with available budget.

## 05 NOT SETTING UP CONVERSION TRACKING

Without conversions, you cannot report impact or optimize performance. Even one well-defined conversion improves compliance and decision-making.

## 06 LETTING THE ACCOUNT GO DARK

If you do not log in for 90 days, Google may pause the account. Regular monthly reviews keep it in good standing.

## SECTION 07

# IN-HOUSE VS. SPECIALIST

Whether to manage Ad Grants internally or bring in outside help depends on staff capacity, technical comfort, and the complexity of your goals. There is no universal answer.

## WHEN IN-HOUSE MAKES SENSE

- Staff have time to learn and monitor the platform
- Goals are relatively simple (one or two programs, local audience)
- Google Analytics is installed and someone understands it
- Website has clear landing pages for key programs
- You can tolerate a 2–3 month learning curve

## WHEN A SPECIALIST ADDS VALUE

- You tried internally and the account was suspended
- Staff capacity is too limited for consistent monthly management
- Complex goals across multiple programs or audiences
- Spending less than 20–30% of the monthly grant budget
- Board expects formal ROI reporting
- You want to combine Ad Grants with paid Google Ads

## COMPARISON

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 initial setup and the first three months, then transitioning to in-house management with quarterly specialist check-ins. This builds internal capacity while avoiding the compliance pitfalls that typically occur in the learning phase.

## SECTION 08

# QUICK-START CHECKLIST

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

**BEFORE YOU APPLY**

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

**REGISTRATION AND APPLICATION**

- Register at [techsoup.org](https://techsoup.org) and submit eligibility documentation
- Receive and save TechSoup validation token
- Apply at [google.com/nonprofits](https://google.com/nonprofits) using the token
- Receive Google for Nonprofits approval
- Enroll in Google Ad Grants from the nonprofits dashboard

**ACCOUNT SETUP**

- Create 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 ad
- Add at least two sitelink extensions per campaign
- Verify ads link to specific landing pages (not homepage)
- Set geographic targeting for each campaign

**ONGOING MANAGEMENT**

- Review account performance at least once per month

- Monitor CTR and maintain above 5%
- Pause or remove keywords with Quality Score below 3
- Test new ad copy every 1–2 months
- Log in at least once every 30 days
- Run a quarterly review against conversion goals

## SECTION 09

# A NOTE FOR NEW MEXICO

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New Mexico nonprofits and cultural institutions operate in a context that shapes how Ad Grants should be configured. Several factors specific to this state create opportunities that are worth building into your account strategy from the start.

## A BILINGUAL AUDIENCE IS AN ADVANTAGE

Spanish-language search keywords face lower competition than English equivalents, which means your grant budget reaches proportionally further in Spanish than in English. Consider building a dedicated Spanish-language campaign for your most important program areas. Keywords like "museo arte Santa Fe" 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 landing pages should include at least a Spanish welcome or program description.

## GEOGRAPHIC TARGETING IN A DISPERSED STATE

New Mexico's population is heavily concentrated in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Las Cruces, and Rio Rancho, but a significant portion of the arts and cultural audience lives in smaller communities. Consider separate campaigns for Santa Fe and Taos visitors, Albuquerque metro residents, and 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 before and during trips. Build campaigns around intent-based terms with art, culture, or music modifiers, and seasonal terms tied to peak tourism periods: Indian Market, summer, holidays.

## THE REGIONAL NONPROFIT ECOSYSTEM

Local funders and state arts programs sometimes support capacity building, including the infrastructure needed to run Ad Grants effectively. If internal capacity is the blocker, treat it as a legitimate, fundable need through New Mexico Arts, local community foundations, or other regional funders.

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#### WHAT SUCCESS OFTEN LOOKS LIKE

For many cultural organizations, a well-managed Ad Grants account produces consistent, measurable results across the programs that matter most.

- Increased event ticket discovery from visitors searching before they arrive
- Higher newsletter signups from people actively researching local arts
- Consistent visibility for seasonal programs and exhibition openings
- New donors finding the organization through cause-related searches

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## HOW SANTA FE MARKETING HELPS

Santa Fe Marketing works with cultural institutions and nonprofits across New Mexico to activate and manage Google Ad Grants programs, often alongside broader marketing strategy and communications infrastructure.

Services include:

- Ad Grants account activation and initial setup
- Campaign architecture and keyword research
- Conversion tracking setup and verification
- Monthly performance monitoring and reporting
- Integration with broader marketing strategy

Organizations that prefer to manage the program internally often begin with a short setup engagement and training session.

## START A CONVERSATION

[SANTAFEMARKETING.COM](https://santafemarketing.com)

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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.