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Maximizing Effectiveness When Placing Online Ads

FOR SEXUAL HEALTH & WELLNESS

BHOC

BHOCPARTNERS.ORG

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Introduction

Building Healthy Online Communities (BHOC) convened a series of three meetings in April and May 2022 with public health stakeholders to develop recommendations for maximizing effectiveness when producing and purchasing ads online to promote sexual health and wellness. Attendees included representatives from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), City University of New York, Emory University, FHI360, Gilead, Kaiser Family Foundation, Los Angeles DPH, New York City DOH, San Francisco AIDS Foundation, Treatment Action Group (TAG), University of Southern California, & Water and Stone Marketing.

Based on their input, we have developed the following recommendations. Since mechanisms for purchasing advertisements online often change even more rapidly than the platforms on which they are purchased, we anticipate that these recommendations will need to be revised over time. **In fact, the only consistent experience has been the wide variation in outcomes, even with seemingly similar ad buys.** As a result, the following recommendations should be read as directional suggestions, not 100% guaranteed guidance.

The public health sector lacks good mechanisms for sharing examples of ad buying successes, and there remains an opportunity to support sharing of best practices and benchmarks. These recommendations are meant to:

1. Increase ad buying success by encouraging the sharing of ad buy strategies and outcomes,
2. Coordinate purchasing efforts among public health buyers, and
3. Improve sector-wide access to advertising tools.

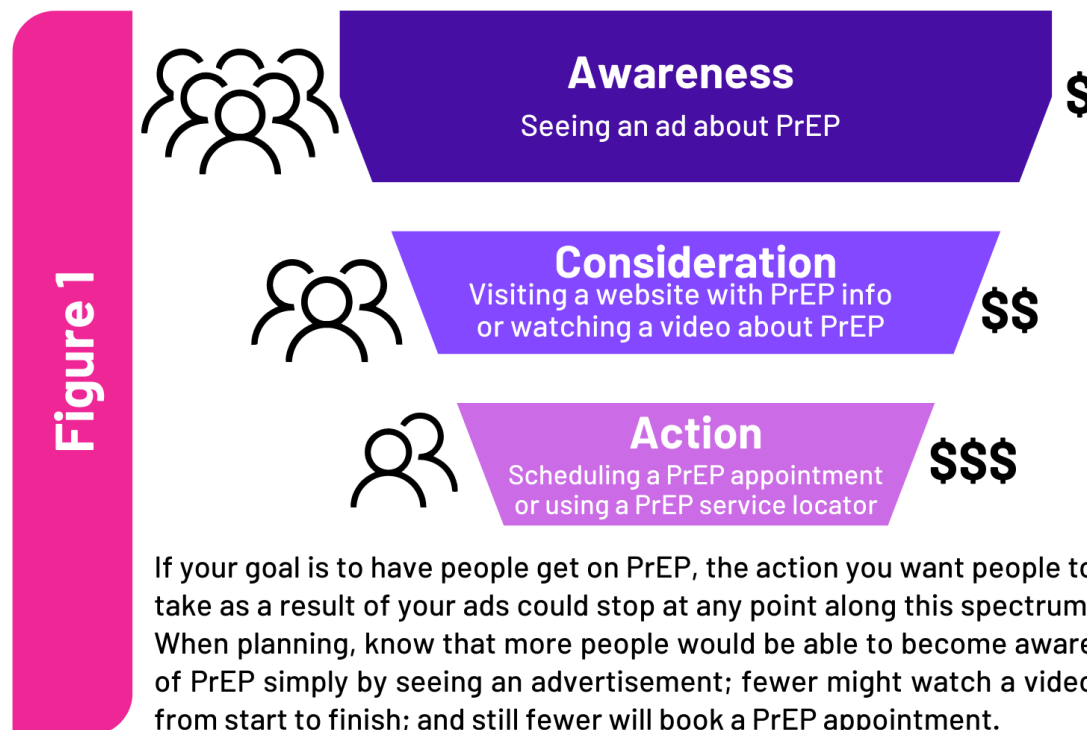
Note: Please refer to the footnotes and [key terms glossary](#) for definitions of advertising terms.

Special thanks to Robert Bole (Signal) and Chris Conlan for their reviews of this document.

2022 Recommendations for Maximizing Ad Effectiveness

1. Assess *whether* you should buy an ad, considering budget, scale, and goals.

- Before buying an ad, make sure you have, or can create, the essential components. These include creative assets¹ with the correct sizes (customized to each platform) and a landing page to receive digital traffic, formatted for both a laptop and a mobile phone. If you don't have these, then do not buy an ad.
 - If you don't have the expertise to purchase ads, hire an advertising agency or contract with an expert to do it for you. It is usually worth the extra cost.
- Be realistic! Make sure your budget is big enough to achieve your goals.
 - There are a range of actions that a campaign can direct users to take. Increasing awareness is often the easiest for people to engage, while other actions (like scheduling a PrEP appointment) may require a bigger budget since it requires both more complex designs and the willingness of users to take more action than reading an ad. **See Figure 1.**
 - Use [budgeting tools](#) to assess if you can afford to buy ads based on your goal.



¹ **Creative or Creative Assets:** The ad(s) that an advertiser is running. These can be: words only, visual, video, and GIF.

- Consider the ways in which different promotion strategies can support or duplicate efforts.
 - For example, if organic content² leads to conversions³ on Instagram, it may not be advisable to spend money there; however, boosting posts can increase the number of people who see your organic content or who follow your page can help.
 - Explore whether it is a good use of money to pay for search ads⁴; if your search engine optimization (SEO)⁵ is effective, your site will appear at the top of the search options so you may not need search ads.

2. Invest more in placement than content.

- Experts repeatedly affirm that outcomes on different ad platforms are substantially improved by maximizing media placement budgets and controlling costs for ad content, design, and format.
- The more you spend on creative, the less money you have for ad placement. *This means that, if you've spent 50% of your budget on creative, the ads have to perform twice as well in producing click-throughs or actions as if you ran existing ads.*
- For purchasers with smaller budgets, certain platforms may be out of reach due to ad buy minimums.
- Representation in content **does still matter**. For free creative asset resources, see [recommendation #6](#).

MORE BANG FOR YOUR BUCK.



If you start with a \$100,000 budget and spend \$50,000 on developing creative assets, your \$50,000 ad buy has to be as effective in reaching your goal if you started with free ads and spent your entire \$100,000 on placement.

² **Organic content:** Free social media content (posts, photos, video, etc.) that all users can access on their feed or through hashtags. These are not ads but can be used to meet your campaign goals with existing social media followers.

³ **Conversion:** Desired actions someone took based seeing an ad (i.e. Clicks, form fills, schedule an appointment, etc.)

⁴ **Search ad:** An ad that will come up when someone uses a search engine to look for information about a specific topic (like “Where can I get an HIV test?” or “What is undetectable?”)

⁵ **Search engine optimization (SEO):** Increasing a website’s visibility in the organic search results of major search engines, not done through paid search ads.

3. Buy ads on a mixture of platforms that include social media, search, display, and dating apps. Optimize and change your buys based on real-time monitoring.

- Start with small buys to test which ad units⁶ meet your campaign goals, usually the lowest cost-per-action (CPA)⁷. Plan to do this every time, even if you have purchased on the same platform or sent out the same messages before. Use A-B testing whenever possible to compare different ad units.

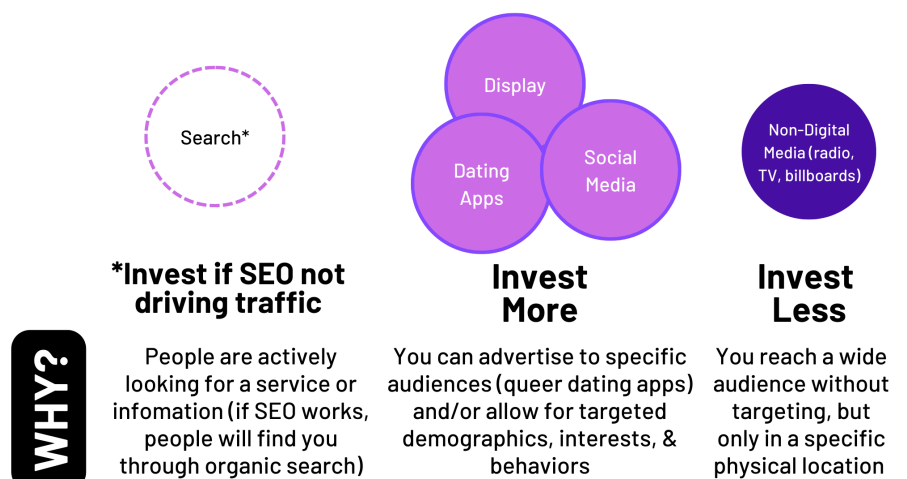
- Prioritize investment in areas where you have more options to segment and target your audience before assigning funds to channels where targeting is less accurate or available. **See Figure 2.**

- Make sure you review each platform's content policies. Some examples to consider when crafting imagery or language:

- Some platforms classify shirtless photos as prohibited content.
- Other platforms may **shadow ban**⁸ your ads or account based on language around sex, including about HIV, STI testing, and polyamory.
- Some platforms may prohibit medical or pharmaceutical devices. This can make it more difficult to promote certain items, such as self-test kits for HIV and STIs. A way to circumvent this obstacle that some ad purchasers use is to use language related to "self-testing" rather than calling out the test kit itself.

- Expect and plan for variation in campaign outcomes. Monitor campaigns by reviewing impressions, clicks, CPA throughout their duration and consider changing your platform as

Figure 2



⁶ **Ad unit:** The specific size and placement of an ad.

⁷ **Cost-per-action (CPA):** The cost paid for a single conversion from an ad.

⁸ **Shadow banning:** The ways platforms may remove or reduce the visibility of a user's content without telling them, such as: hiding their content from hashtags, preventing their posts from appearing in feeds, and stopping them from commenting.

soon as you realize your campaign is not meeting your goals.

- If budget and capacity allow, buy programmatic over direct buys.
 - Programmatic buys⁹ can help you place ads on a variety of platforms
 - If your budget meets the minimums required by a platform to get managed services, you may be able to get better placement with direct buys.

BROADEN YOUR BUDGET.

When developing your budget, choose broad categories to break down your spend (like "Online Promotion" or "Dating Apps & Social Networks"). If you propose a specific buy, such as "\$5000 for Grindr," you may face limitations from funders if you have previously committed to spending a certain amount per platform.

3A. Know the strengths & limitations of purchasing ads on queer dating apps.

- Queer dating apps are well-suited for reaching an audience of cisgender men who have sex with men (MSM) and trans people.
- While it is not possible to build an audience¹⁰ and retarget¹¹ users through the apps, the apps reduce the need to learn how to effectively reach cisgender MSM through other social media sites, such as Twitter or Instagram.
 - While trans and non-binary people are also on dating apps that cater to MSM, know that any trans-specific ads will likely be shown to a large population of cisgender MSM.
- Apps can provide simple metrics like impressions¹² and click-through rate (CTR)¹³. If you need more detailed data, you have to link to a landing page where you can collect more detailed metrics.
- Although some apps can ensure that advertisements reach MSM in a particular geographic location, targeting individuals by characteristics which may be included in user profiles (race, HIV status, etc.) is not possible.

⁹ **Programmatic buy:** Using a platform, such as Google's DV360, to buy and optimize ads on websites and applications through real-time bidding instead of direct negotiations with the publishers (websites or applications) themselves.

¹⁰ **Building an audience:** Gaining insights into digital behaviors that make someone more likely to be interested in a specific message or to take a desired action based on email lists, site visitors or other keyword or affinity group data from past campaigns

¹¹ **Retargeting:** Refers to buying ads that target individuals who have previously visited a campaign's website. Retargeting enables an increase in conversion rate (or action taken) by reaching individuals who have previously demonstrated interest in a given message by clicking on an ad in the past.

¹² **Impressions:** The number of times any one ad was seen (Reach x Frequency)

¹³ **Click-through rate (CTR):** Average number of clicks on an ad per hundred times it is seen, expressed as a percentage.

- Placing ads on dating apps where many people are often focused on looking for a sexual encounter may result in lower CTR than ads on other websites where users are often in a browsing mode with no specific purpose. **See Figure 3.**
- Many apps have different amounts of inventory¹⁴ in a range of sizes. Often banners (320x50 pixels) are most commonly available, so plan accordingly when you are developing your ads.
- Some dating apps require a large minimum to be spent to get staff support (also known as managed services). Grindr provides a self-service platform making ad buys accessible to those with smaller budgets.

Figure 3



Dating app users may not want to take your desired action right now, but they may want to reference a resource later (like a PrEP locator or a link to schedule a testing appointment).

An **inbox message**, which stays in the user's inbox instead of disappearing immediately, may be better than a pop up or banner that appears only once for these types of services if **your goal is action** thather than awareness.

4. Improve targeting of ads to ensure the biggest impact by referencing current public health data.

- Use surveillance data.
 - Target locations where:
 - Outbreaks have occurred or continue to occur
 - HIV or STI incidence is ongoing
 - Low treatment or prevention uptake is present
 - Overdose rates are high
 - Use [AIDSVu](#), [AHEAD](#), and [CDC data](#) as resources. Refer to local data as available.
- When placing ads, "Test, Learn and Apply." Continue to refine targeting criteria to build your audience based on early outcome data and key success metrics. Continue to place those ads which yield the best results.

¹⁴ **Inventory:** The number and type of ads that can be purchased.

- Build and share best practices on utilizing [Facebook affinity groups](#)¹⁵ and [Google keywords](#) that effectively reach priority populations to improve ad targeting.
- As technology and privacy policies evolve, restrictions on targeting by demographics, personal attributes, or interests may limit ability to target your campaigns.
- Consider audience size. It is possible to over- or under-saturate a market, depending on population size and number of other ads that are competing to reach the same audience.
 - For example, if you are placing ads for National HIV Testing Day, there may be other advertisers who are also placing similar ads on the same day. Even if you are keeping saturation in mind with your own ads, you may be part of inadvertently sending the same people multiple messages, surpassing your optimal frequency¹⁶. The questions you should ask in this scenario is: *What is the total number of people you're trying to reach in your area? How many times do they need to see your ad (or may be seeing a similar ad, if around a special event or awareness day)?*
- Determine an optimal frequency of ads over a period of time based on cost per action to avoid over/under saturating a market.
 - Optimal frequency may differ by a variety of campaign factors, including but not limited to: audience, platform, geographic location, and ad unit. For example, audiences that are new to learning about PrEP may need more messages than audiences who are already knowledgeable about PrEP.
 - Tracking frequency versus conversion rate¹⁷ over time will help in determining optimal frequency.

5. Prioritize collecting and sharing cost-per-action data and monitoring outcomes whenever possible.

- Define the actions you want people to take as a result of seeing an ad (click, watch, follow, visit, contact, schedule, order, etc.).
 - If the campaign focuses on awareness, impressions and/or CTR may be the most appropriate metric, but if your goal is to get someone to schedule a PrEP appointment, then you probably want to be focused on CPA.
 - Don't trust the media vendors to give you the best data. Collect the data yourself by

¹⁵ **Affinity group:** A group of people that share a goal or interest based on their online behavior used for defining and targeting an audience on digital platforms like Google and Facebook.

¹⁶ **Optimal frequency:** The number of times an advertiser needs to show any one ad to each member of an audience to get them to take action at the lowest cost.

¹⁷ **Conversion rate:** The rate at which people who saw an ad take the action that the advertiser wanted (Conversions / Impressions)

creating UTM codes¹⁸ that label the traffic source. For example, if you advertise on OKCupid, put "utm_source=ok_cupid" in the URL, and use your Google Analytics to figure out how many *real* clicks you got from OKCupid.

- As technology and privacy policies evolve, restrictions on conversion tracking may limit your ability to evaluate your campaigns.

PROTECT PRIVACY.

Plan for privacy protections and appropriate data security measures for personal identifiable information (PII) or personal health information (PHI) when defining which actions will be followed as part of monitoring. Just because you *can* reach individuals by certain health and demographic attributes *doesn't mean you should*. For example, targeting HIV-positive people or MSM requires gathering PII or *assumed* PHI, even if their HIV status or identity cannot be confirmed.

- Use past campaign performance to establish a budget for media. If no previous data is available, develop a budget to reach everyone in the audience three times.
- Use other campaigns' data to establish benchmarks and to assist in making informed decisions about ad buys. These may be based on your previous campaigns or similar campaigns from other public health ad purchasers who can share their metrics with you.
- Establish tracking and analytics systems that enable attribution of viewers' actions back to ads and media channels to calculate the cost paid per action.
- Collecting CPA may not be possible if you don't have the budget or capacity to build out analytic systems. In this case, tracking and optimizing ad buys using metrics like cost-per-mille (CPM)¹⁹, cost-per-click (CPC)²⁰, and/or CTR may be all that's feasible.
- While there are challenges when comparing different populations or actions that are being measured, make an effort to obtain as many performance indicators as possible, either from the platform themselves, or through ad agencies that might be involved in the



The more data collected, the better the field will be able to improve advertising cost-effectiveness.

¹⁸ **UTM code:** A set of tags added to URLs to identify and track traffic generated by a specific ad campaign, and traffic sources (social media, dating apps, email, etc.).

¹⁹ **Cost-per-mille (CPM):** The cost paid to show an ad 1000 times.

²⁰ **Cost-per-click (CPC):** The cost paid for a single click on an ad.

implementation of the initiative. Where possible, consider how this data compares to offline recruitment costs.

CPA IS INTEGRAL TO EVALUATION EFFORTS.

For Funders: Whenever possible, encourage funders to include CPA as an objective in their Requests for Proposals, rather than collecting only the number of impressions or clicks. If possible, include an “action,” such as making an appointment, entering a ZIP code into a test site directory, or filling out a form.

For Editors and Reviewers: Whenever possible, peer-reviewed articles should include these metrics for manuscripts that reference online recruitment.

6. Leverage existing, open-source creative assets and resources.

- CDC, Greater Than AIDS (GTA), and BHOC have developed and compiled a number of advertising campaigns that are available for use by other agencies. By using them, public health agencies can save money developing new advertisements. While every jurisdiction is unique, there are often many similarities among and between communities, and key messages are typically the same.
 - [CDC Campaigns](#)
 - [Greater Than AIDS](#)
 - [BHOC Ad Clearinghouse](#) and [Sexual Health & Liberation Stock Photo Collection](#)
- Consider the possibility for [regional and national coordination](#) on larger ad buys or ad buys with similar messaging to prevent driving up costs with competing bids as well as saturating the market with competing messages.
- By using one landing page, such as [GetTested.CDC.gov](#) or [Let's Stop HIV Together](#), health organizations can reduce costs and improve analytics.
- Given the amount of available research that's already been done on messaging, it is better to leverage messaging that has worked in other campaigns with similar goals and objectives, rather than spending limited funds on additional primary research.
 - Messaging needs to be simple and to the point, with clear cues to action
 - Messaging should be empowering and strengths-based, and portray positive, caring relationships
 - While sexually explicit language can get attention (e.g., impressions, clicks), it may not necessarily lead to users taking action (e.g. conversions)
 - Incentives and conveying urgency are effective (“Get condoms now!” “Limited time!”)
 - Use A-B testing to explore variations in message, imagery, and CTA and see what

works best

- Consider alternatives to focus groups, such as research that focuses on what users think and feel rather than what they say and do (using strategies based on [human-centered design](#)).

7. If capacity and budget allow, test bilingual English/Spanish messaging and targeting to contribute to data about reaching Spanish speakers.

- People may have very different levels of fluency in English. Language access and comfort is a spectrum. Don't make assumptions someone will go through your campaign entirely in one language. For example, some will click on English ads and end up completing a Spanish "action" if available and vice versa.
- Building campaigns in Spanish from start to finish, rather than translating English campaigns into Spanish, may have a greater impact.
 - Review the model that NYC DOH created with their [iLISTOS! campaign](#).
- More research is needed on Spanish language and bilingual advertising, including:
 - Targeting based on mobile phone language settings
 - Using bilingual search terms in Spanish ads
 - Having one version of creative assets with both languages appearing on it

2019 Recommendations on Advocacy for Platform Policy Changes & Advertising Capacity Building for Public Health Agencies

The below recommendations were first drafted in 2019. BHOC plans to host additional convenings on these topics later in 2022. We anticipate updating the recommendations below and discussing issues related to advocacy and capacity building.

1. BHOC and partners need to work with Google, Facebook, and other social media platforms to clarify policies about retargeting with messages about sensitive health information.

- Retargeting refers to buying ads that target individuals who have previously engaged in a specific online behavior, such as visited a campaign's website or searched for HIV information. Retargeting enables an increase in conversion rate (or action taken) by reaching individuals who have previously indicated an interest in the given offer, or the behavior being promoted.
- Retargeting is a highly effective tactic when used for other topics.

2. Coordinate and expand clearinghouse(s) for ads and campaigns.

- Utilizing pre-existing creative will allow dedicating more money for ad placement and will enable increased efficiency, especially for jurisdictions and CBOs with smaller budgets.
- Promote use of [BHOC's ad clearinghouse](#) through capacity-building and other mechanisms.

3. Identify and share strategies for addressing ad placement barriers within health departments.

- In those health departments which do not allow placing ads on dating apps, consider alternatives, such as Facebook, Instagram or Google, which often perform as well as or better than apps.
- Use a third-party ad agency and/or contract through community-based organizations to place ads.

4. Mobilize partners to advocate for free or discounted ads, improved reporting data from apps, Google, and Facebook, and addressing ad restrictions within the social media sector.

- Facebook, Google, Twitter, and many apps have limits on language and images that often inhibit running effective ads.
 - There are significant limitations in targeting messages by disease or sexual orientation.
- The current processes for appealing a rejected advertisement vary by platform but are often not transparent nor consistent.
- Public health organizations need to advocate for:
 - Clear guidelines about ad acceptance or rejection
 - An appeal process for denials which is accessible and transparent
 - Advertising discounts for non-profit organizations
 - Distinguishing between intentional and accidental clicks when reporting data. This is particularly important on app-based interstitial and prestitial ads, which viewers often click on in order to move on to see other app users.
 - Apps to share information about which ads had the greatest success.
 - Apps to allow targeting by key demographics

Additional Resources

- [Ad Clearinghouse](#) – Building Healthy Online Communities
- [Advertising Online Resource Center for Public Health](#) – Building Healthy Online Communities
- [Public Health Digital Advertising Coordination Calendar](#) – Building Healthy Online Communities
- [Sexual Health & Liberation Stock Photo Collection](#) – Building Healthy Online Communities
- [CDC Campaigns](#) – Centers for Disease Control & Prevention
- [Greater Than AIDS Campaigns](#) – Greater Than AIDS
- [Campaign Budgeting Calculator](#) – Water & Stone Marketing
- [UTM Code Generator for Tracking Analytics](#) – Google Analytics

Key Terms Glossary

Ad network: A vendor that connects advertisers to publishers. Ad networks act as a single point of contact between publishers and advertisers, helping negotiate supply and demand. Google Ads is an example of an ad network because advertisers can purchase ads on millions of websites through it without having to negotiate rates with each site individually.

Ad unit: The specific size and placement of an ad.

Affinity group: A group of people that share a goal or interest based on their online behavior used for defining and targeting an audience on digital platforms like Google and Facebook.

Audience: The people to whom ads are being shown.

Building an audience: Gaining insights into digital behaviors that make someone more likely to be interested in a specific message or to take a desired action based on email lists, site visitors or other keyword or affinity group data from past campaigns.

Conversion: Desired actions someone took based seeing an ad (i.e. Clicks, form fills, schedule an appointment, etc.).

Conversion rate: The rate at which people who saw an ad take the action that the advertiser wanted (Conversions / Impressions).

Cost-per-action (CPA): The cost paid for a single conversion from an ad.

Cost-per-click (CPC): The cost paid for a single click on an ad.

Cost-per-mille (CPM): The cost paid to show an ad 1000 times.

Click-through rate (CTR): Average number of clicks on an ad per hundred times it is seen, expressed as a percentage.

Creative/Creative Assets: The ad(s) that an advertiser is running. These can be: words only, visual, video, and GIF.

Direct buy: Buying and placing ads with a publisher of one or more websites or applications through a self-serve platform or with the assistance of a sales representative. If you are negotiating rates and sending a check to the publisher you are buying ads directly.

Frequency: The number of times each person sees any one ad.

Inventory: The number and type of ads that can be purchased.

Impressions: The number of times any one ad was seen (Reach x Frequency).

Optimal frequency: The number of times an advertiser needs to show any one ad to each

member of an audience to get them to take action at the lowest cost.

Organic content: Free social media content (posts, photos, video, etc.) that all users can access on their feed or through hashtags. These are not ads but can be used to meet your campaign goals with existing social media followers.

Placement: Where an ad is shown or “placed.”

Programmatic buy: Using an ad network platform, such as Google's DV360, to buy and optimize ads on websites and applications through real-time bidding instead of direct negotiations with the publishers (websites or applications) themselves.

Reach: The number of people that see an ad.

Retargeting: Refers to buying ads that target individuals who have previously visited a campaign's website. Retargeting enables an increase in conversion rate (or action taken) by reaching individuals who have previously demonstrated interest in a given message by clicking on an ad in the past.

Search ad: An ad that will come up when someone uses a search engine to look for information about a specific topic (like “Where can I get an HIV test?” or “What is undetectable?”).

Search engine optimization (SEO): Increasing a website's visibility in the organic search results of major search engines, not done through paid search ads.

Shadow banning: The ways platforms may remove or reduce the visibility of a user's content without telling them, such as: hiding their content from hashtags, preventing their posts from appearing in feeds, and stopping them from commenting. [Read more here](#) about how this impacts public health efforts.

Spend: The amount of money an advertiser will spend on ad placement.

Targeting: The parameters used to define an audience.

UTM/UTM code: A set of tags added to URLs to identify and track traffic generated by a specific ad campaign, and traffic sources (social media, dating apps, email, etc.).