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Unlocking Value from GA4:

Overcoming Challenges Faced by Affiliate Marketers

Navigating the GA4 Transition

The transition from Universal Analytics (UA) to Google Analytics 4 (GA4) presents a unique challenge for affiliate marketers. Since the discontinuation of Universal Analytics in July 2023, marketing teams have been adjusting to new norms. This change isn't just about learning a new platform and unfamiliar data model; it's about adapting to a dynamic environment where features and data interpretations are constantly evolving, often with minimal guidance from Google. Macro-level challenges with digital measurement have compounded the headache, like evolving consumer privacy norms, degraded data signals, and continued demand for personalized digital experiences. This guide will help you navigate these challenges and pain points while surfacing quick wins and long-term approaches to get more value from GA4.

Common Analytics Challenges Faced by Affiliate Marketers

1. **Attribution Complexity:**
   Marketing attribution continues to grow in both complexity and sophistication. The sheer volume and variety of digital marketing touchpoints make understanding which channels drove conversions incredibly complicated. Analytics solutions, like GA4, have attempted to address this with machine-learning-based attribution models. These models, however, rarely agree with ad platforms' self-attribution "black boxes" and are especially vulnerable to the bad data they are often fed.

   The responsibility of marketers using GA4 is twofold:
   a. Create and maintain meaningful and robust tracking codes and governance and configure marketing channels appropriately.
   b. Understand how and when to use the Data-Driven Attribution (DDA) versus traditional last click. What is DDA?
      i. Uses machine-learning algorithms to analyze all the touchpoints a user encounters on their journey to a conversion.
      ii. Assigns credit to each touchpoint based on how much it influenced the user's decision to convert. The attribution is dynamic and changes based on the data it receives. This divides credit (sale amounts) among multiple touchpoints.
      iii. Considers various factors, such as the order of touchpoints, the time between them, and the context of each interaction.
      iv. Tailors insights to your unique user journeys and can vary greatly from one business to another.

Next steps you can take today:

- Audit UTM parameters and confirm they are consistently deployed across all marketing links back to your site.
- Create your custom channel definitions if you aren't already using Google's recommended utm_medium and utm_source parameter values. Note: utm_medium=affiliate is the default for Affiliate.
- Integrate Google Analytics with Google Ads platforms.

2. **Data Accuracy and Quality:**

Inaccurate and unreliable data is a frequent source of distrust of analytics and erodes its value for both understanding and communicating marketing results. Further, different data sources will use similar data naming but different definitions and/or collection methods. These inconsistencies are exacerbated by limited integrations or incomplete data collection as customers journey across different channels, devices, and digital properties.

The responsibility for Quality Assurance is multifaceted:

a. Define and communicate what key data (conversions, metrics, dimensions) are named and what they mean across data sources.
b. Confirm that similar data in different platforms is consistently defined and measured across platforms, but embrace the fact that data will rarely, if ever, align one-to-one across sources.
c. Continuously monitor reporting in the context of website and marketing changes to catch issues early before they snowball.

Next steps you can take today:

- Turn on and configure "Internal Traffic" and "Developer Traffic" filters.
- Enable automatic event detection.
- Establish Quality Assurance (QA) processes and designate clear responsibilities to ensure that tags fire under the conditions you expect, with the data that you expect.
- Update data retention settings (default is two months, but you can increase it up to 14 months).
- Create custom insights and automated alerts to detect anomalies early and often.

3. **Conversion Tracking:**

The high volume of data collected from websites can make knowing which data is most valuable for understanding marketing results difficult. The most valuable analytics limits conversions to only those actions that represent business success, and all other metrics provide context for that success or failure.

Marketers need to properly understand and/or define:

a. The key user actions that create revenue or cost savings.
b. The precise interaction that is the conversion action.
c. Proxy interactions that can be used when the true actions can't be logged or accessed.

Next steps you can take today:

- Define the most important questions you have and determine which user actions on your site help you to answer these questions.
- Ensure that conversion tags are firing consistently to represent those actions.
- Assign the conversion label to only the appropriate events.
- Confirm that various data sources reporting the action are all capturing it the same way (or understand what the differences are).

4. **Understanding User Behavior:**

Conversions aren't the only user interactions that need to be understood. Capturing other strategic interactions is also important to assess how users interact with your site. When selecting other interactions to measure, keep in mind that every interaction doesn't matter for all use cases — especially within a sophisticated marketing program with varying objectives, multiple marketing touches, remarketing, and multiple sessions across different devices.

A key responsibility of marketing is to understand which behaviors are meaningful. Start by defining:

a. Objectives and goals for different marketing links, campaigns, and channels.
b. Key milestones and transitions in the conversion funnel.
c. Objectives for site components and element interactions within the funnel steps.
d. Which elements can be easily influenced or changed, and which ones can't.

Next steps you can take today:

- Set up last-click exploration reports using "Session Source," "Session Medium," and "Session Campaign" Parameters. Note: this will vary significantly from true "Last-Click" models.
- Use sequential segments to understand how your channels assist each other. (user segment with "Session Channel" = "affiliate" then "Session Channel" != "affiliate"). Summing conversions with this segment and the last-click conversions will give you contributions to conversions.
- Focus reporting on understanding success in terms of where marketing has influence (e.g., budget, creative license, developer support, etc.).

5. **Adapting to Platform Changes:**

Like other marketing technologies, Google Analytics is constantly changing. However, unlike other technology companies, Google routinely rolls out major feature updates in GA4 without much fanfare or explanation. Unless the changes are routinely reviewed, this can lead to additional confusion and frustration for marketers and complicate their efforts to understand the impact of their marketing initiatives. A successful marketing team will take responsibility for ongoing education to get the most value out of analytics.

Next steps you can take today:

- Learn more about the existing features of GA4 and best practices for reporting through Google's free online training materials.
- Keep up with official platform updates with Google's "What's New" page.
- Work with a partner who not only follows the updates but can also advise on the implications specific to your business.

Strategy-Led Design: Focus on high-value data and a solid data foundation for maximum impact

Addressing the quick wins above can put your teams on a path to better understanding customer behavior. But analytics is only truly valuable when it enables decision making and optimizations. This requires a disciplined strategic approach that's introduced early and often in your marketing technologies' lifecycles.

Somewhere between collecting the bare minimum data in web analytics and all available data from every interaction is a sweet spot. Specifically, the best approach is to define the right data to capture to support your business decisions and to do so consistently and accurately.

The path to "right-sizing" analytics starts with understanding business priorities, objectives, and capacity in terms of marketing and the website. For example:

- What is the affiliate partner program driving users to?
- What does a successful website visit from an affiliate partner look like?
- What are the steps in the journey that you can influence?
- How does partner reporting need to be organized for understanding across various internal and external stakeholders?
- How to categorize campaigns?
- What different objectives exist for different links?

While this list is far from exhaustive, these types of questions must be discussed, aligned on, and documented by an organization. And they must evolve over time as marketing and business priorities inevitably shift. In other words, analytics strategies are not "set-it-and-forget-it" but responsive and iterative.

What's Next

In the rapidly changing digital marketing landscape, the shift to GA4 presents both challenges and opportunities for affiliate marketers. In summary, there are three high-level keys to success.

- **Learning and adapting to the shifting digital measurement landscape:** Understanding analytics challenges with first-party web analytics solutions, like GA4, will give your business the advantage you need to stay ahead of your competition.
- **Overcoming analytics challenges:** Addressing key issues like attribution complexity, data accuracy, and conversion tracking will help enhance data-driven marketing decisions.
- **Implementing a strategy-led analytics approach and robust data foundation:** Focusing on high-value data that informs decisions will help drive growth.

This can be difficult for even the most sophisticated organizations to achieve on their own. Working with an experienced partner like Drumline can help you design and implement the best solution to move from analytics to insights and informed decisions.

PartnerCentric

About PartnerCentric

Founded by industry veteran Stephanie Harris, PartnerCentric is the largest independent partnership marketing agency in the U.S. Rooted in transparency, fierce independence and award-winning technology, PartnerCentric boldly drives a clearer path to better performance.

PartnerCentric creates value for some of the world's most respected powerhouse and challenger brands such as Lemonade, VSP Vision Plans, DTLR, and HIMS/HERS. Backed by a 20+ year record of operational innovation, PartnerCentric brings an all-in approach to campaign management that takes the mystery out of the marketing machine. Our solutions are designed to fully integrate with your analytics, optimize ad spend, and turn automated intelligence into outsized returns.

Globally recognized as the top affiliate marketing agency to work with, discover how better performance starts with PartnerCentric's award-winning technology and premium service. Visit www.PartnerCentric.com and follow us on LinkedIn and @partner_centric on twitter.

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About Drumline

At Drumline, we're obsessed with helping brands transform data into an ongoing cadence of insights with real-world applications that propel their business forward. Our services sit at the intersections of data, technology, math, and marketing, which form a powerful combination for answering questions, understanding marketing performance, optimizing customer experience, and informing strategic business decisions. Interested in partnering? Reach out to us at hello@heydrumline.com.