Affiliate & Partner Marketing Association

Independent audit of attribution rules in the UK affiliate & partner marketing industry

November 2025

Executive Summary

The Affiliate & Partner Marketing Association (APMA) commissioned an independent researcher to examine how attribution rules are applied to browser extensions and on-site technologies in the UK affiliate market.

This report provides a detailed account of these attribution rules, the common types of affiliates they apply to, and how networks and platforms enforce them.

The audit looked at ten affiliate networks and platforms and three affiliate types:

- Discount browser extensions
- Cashback browser extensions
- On-site marketing technologies

The activity these affiliates run means they are “activated” when a customer is already on an advertiser’s site. That means they often risk overwriting the credit due to earlier affiliates who may be involved in the consumer’s purchase path.

Attribution rules, therefore, determine which affiliate is credited, whether they are the last referring affiliate or not.

‘Activated’ for this audit can mean different things.

For example, when we refer to browser extensions, we mean that the user has downloaded and installed this software in their web browser. By browsing on an advertiser’s site, they present alerts to that user. Typically, this could be a voucher discount or a cashback reward that the consumer could benefit from that they may not have been offered otherwise.

For on-site marketing technologies, ‘activated’ is commonly associated with the behaviour of a consumer, whether it’s as a consequence of a product they’re browsing on the advertiser’s site or if they are likely to exit the site. An example is a shopper who may be about to abandon a basket, who is then served with a discount to keep them on site and continue with their purchase.

The tests (carried out March–May 2025) found three approaches to attribution rules:

- **Soft-click**: the platform blocks an affiliate’s click from overwriting a prior referral.

- **Stand-down**: the affiliate suppresses its technology if it detects earlier affiliate traffic.

- **Standard last-click**: the most recent affiliate interaction takes full credit for the sale.

Stand-down was the most common standard, but, possibly because the technology is controlled by the affiliate, the consistency of its rollout varied.

Soft-click was less common, but it could be argued to be more reliable, as it is managed by platforms rather than individual affiliates.

Overall, 80% of test scenarios showed some kind of protection for the original referring affiliate, rather than pure last-click wins. Specifically, the audit found:

- 21 cases of affiliate-controlled stand-down
- 3 cases of soft-click
- 4 cases where soft-click acted as a back-up to stand-down.

However, the audit also uncovered scenarios that need additional consideration.

For example, users could manually reactivate extensions that had “stood down,” undoing the intended protection.

Overall, the audit highlights a recurring tension between user-facing benefits offered by extensions (such as reward pop-ups or reactivation by consumers) and the attribution safeguards designed to protect the wider affiliate ecosystem.

Striking the right balance between consumer experience and fair recognition of earlier funnel activity remains a central industry challenge.

APMA recommendations in brief

1. Broader use of soft-click and stand-down attribution

Both soft-click and stand-down approaches have merits, and their adoption often reflects regional and model-specific practices.

Soft-click provides consistency and reliability at the platform level, while stand-down is more common in cashback and loyalty contexts. Neither should be seen as universally superior; a balanced approach is needed. For companies that work with these partners, they must understand the issue and the multiple nuances.

2. Require stand-down for Cashback and Loyalty Extensions

Stand-down should be mandatory in cashback and loyalty contexts to protect earlier funnel affiliates. This safeguard must prevent pop-ups and reactivation prompts, ensuring fairness without undermining consumer rewards.

3. Prevent manual reactivation from restoring last-click for non-loyalty extensions.

The APMA believes consumer intent doesn't necessarily equate to a publisher being credited for it.

This goes to the heart of the belief that affiliate companies should prioritise and protect earlier funnel activity in some instances. We also recognise this can cause tension between a consumer's expectations and their shopping experience.

We recognise that some companies we audited take a different view and manual, unprompted activation by the consumer demonstrates intent and therefore should be treated differently from prompted reactivation.

While it may create a less-than-ideal consumer experience, attribution tools such as soft-click and stand-down were specifically designed to safeguard fairness rather than the consumer journey. Some companies may prioritise user journey over attribution logic. Brands should therefore weigh their options.

4. Standardise recognition of affiliate traffic

Standardised tagging conventions (such as UTM parameters) are needed to ensure stand-down logic is consistent across affiliates, platforms and advertisers. We encourage the relevant networks and advertisers to ensure they are used.

5. Signpost stand-down and soft-click affiliates

Clear signposting of the affiliates subject to stand-down or soft-click requirements improves transparency for advertisers and publishers.

6. Encourage dual implementation

Encouraging both soft-click and stand-down together provides the most reliable and flexible safeguard for fair attribution.

7. Ensure no circumvention of attribution rules through subnetwork or other affiliate models.

Affiliates covered by attribution rules should not circumvent them by running their traffic through subnetworks or other affiliate models, such as voucher code sites. This could mean they avoid being subject to attribution rules. Where a subnetwork guarantees it can offer the same attribution logic for those affiliates, the activity is permitted. Again, transparency would help the entire industry.

Introduction

Affiliate marketing has traditionally worked on a last-click model: the final affiliate to touch a customer before purchase gets full credit for the sale.

This approach is simple but can be divisive.

Affiliates who insert themselves late in the journey (such as browser extensions or on-site tools) may overwrite earlier affiliates who introduced or influenced the customer.

To address this, the APMA commissioned an independent audit to understand how attribution logic is currently applied in the UK. The audit tested real user journeys to see whether platforms and affiliates are applying safeguards, such as “stand-down” or “soft-click,” to prevent unfair overwriting.

The goal of the audit is to give transparency, establish benchmarks, and support fairer rewards across the affiliate channel.

Background

Concerns about attribution fairness are not new. In December 2024, a widely watched YouTube video reignited the debate. The video claimed that the Honey browser extension was diverting commission from influencers and content publishers who had originally referred customers.

This highlighted the problem: affiliates that activate close to checkout can displace those who did the work of bringing in traffic earlier in the journey.

Browser extensions have been part of the affiliate industry for more than 15 years, first in the US and later in the UK. Early on, the UK industry created rules to manage how these technologies should behave. For example, when a consumer downloaded their technology, affiliates with browser extensions had to:

- Make the download specific to that technology. In other words, their solution could not be bundled with other software (downloads had to be transparent).
- Make it easy for consumers to uninstall their software.
- Be fully transparent about what the consumer is downloading and provide informed user consent (no hidden installs).
- Fully meet the expectations of the consumer (what was promised matched what was delivered).

The UK's Affiliate Marketing Council, which at the time was a subsidiary of the Internet Advertising Bureau, codified these rules in 2010 and updated them in 2015.

However, tracking rules — i.e., who should get credit for the sale and how 'valuable' those sales were — was never formally included as part of the code.

Standard affiliate tracking (last-click wins) continued to apply.

As a result, browser extensions often displaced other affiliates, which many felt was unfair to initiating affiliates who were often premised earlier in the sales funnel and whose activity was being overwritten because they'd driven a consumer to an advertiser's site, only for a piece of software to then activate.

To counter this, the industry developed informal rules: extensions and similar tools should "stand down" if another affiliate had already referred the customer. This practice was widely, though not universally, adopted.

For this audit, we are only analysing traffic that is referred by the affiliate channel and affiliate networks and platforms. Many of the criticisms of extensions and software come from partners whose traffic sits outside of the channel.

Where influencers, creators and other digital marketing channels are tracked by the networks and platforms we audit in this report, there is nothing those networks or platforms can do to control who is given credit for traffic and sales.

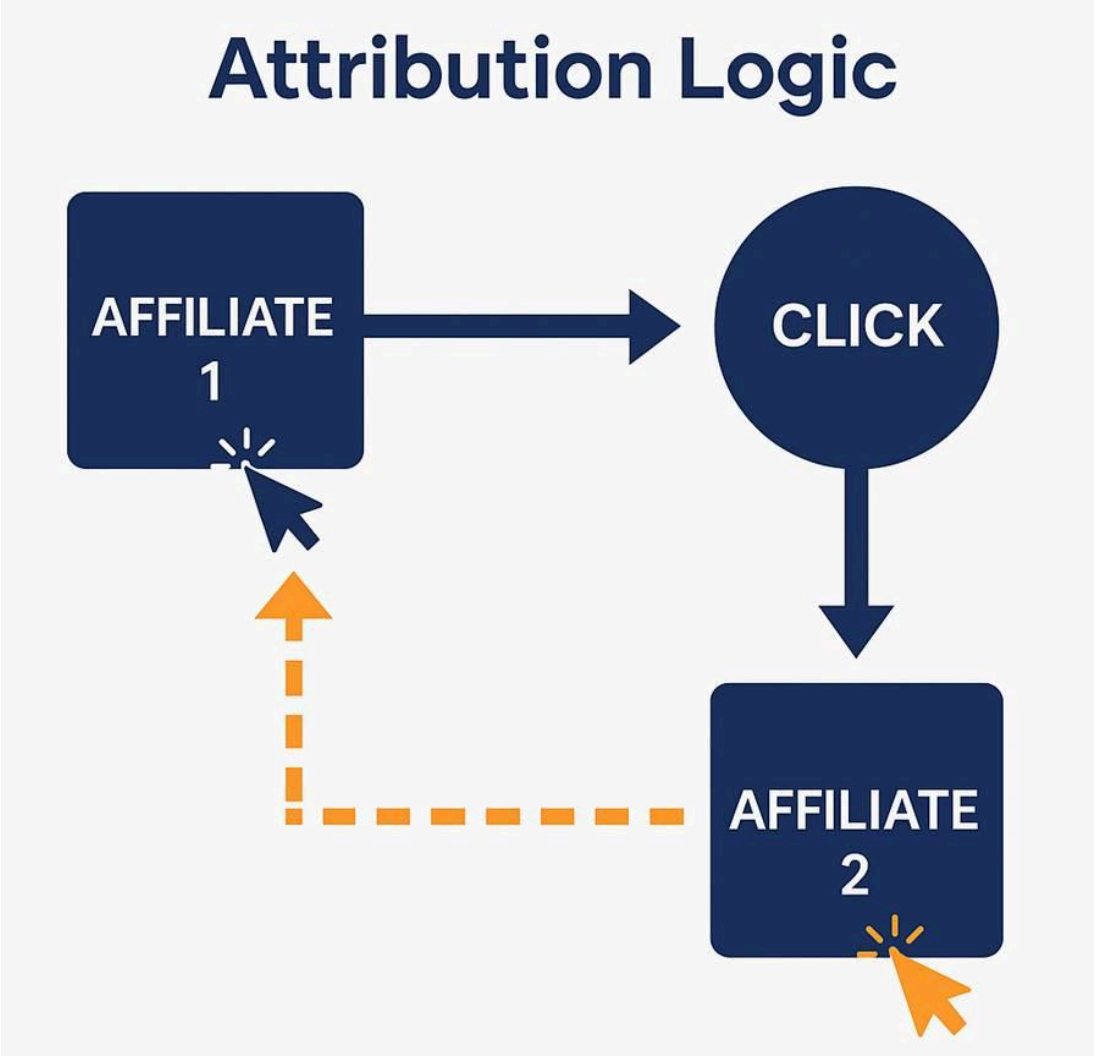
In these cases, the advertiser must bear responsibility for how they recognise and then reward their individual partners' contributions.

How attribution logic works

In the example shown below, two affiliates are involved in a sale.

The first affiliate generates the initial click. A second affiliate then appears later in the journey, serving ads, discounts, cashback or another prompt that the consumer clicks. In the case of the attribution solutions we will discuss today, the original affiliate still receives credit for the sale, as indicated by the orange dotted line.

If only one affiliate is involved, the standard last click rule applies, meaning that this affiliate will receive credit for the transaction regardless of who they are and the role they played in converting the sale.



Although there is broad agreement across the industry that attribution logic is necessary to protect the affiliate ecosystem, implementation has largely been left to individual platforms and affiliates (sometimes affiliates control the logic, whereas sometimes

networks and platforms do). This has resulted in different approaches and no consistent industry standard.

The audit is not designed to criticise certain practices, networks or platforms. Indeed, UK companies have been generous with their time and understanding of what we are trying to achieve. While it can be popular (and easy) to blame networks and platforms for tracking shortcomings, we believe they want better standards and strive for best practice implementation. Where we identified shortfalls, they were quick to respond.

To carry out the audit, the APMA appointed an independent consultant in early 2025. The consultant has more than 20 years of affiliate marketing experience and has worked with some of the largest businesses in the sector.

In the first half of 2025, the consultant designed and ran a series of tests, which form the basis of the results presented in this report.

The audit was jointly funded by APMA members Awin, CJ, Redbrain and Tradedoubler. These organisations did not influence the findings or recommendations. As a small not-for-profit, the APMA could not have completed this work without their financial support.

To ensure independence, the auditor remained anonymous to the networks and platforms tested. The methodology and report were authored by the auditor in collaboration with APMA, with additional feedback and oversight provided by the APMA Governance and Advisory Boards.

It is important to note that the auditor's role was predominantly focused on carrying out the testing.

The findings and recommendations are provided by the APMA and its Advisory and Governance Boards. Networks and platforms have been given access to the reports findings.

The APMA thanks Awin, CJ, Redbrain, and Tradedoubler for their support in funding this project.

Terminology used and other useful notes

- **Attribution logic** is the set of tracking rules designed to stop certain affiliate types, especially those that activate on an advertiser's website, from overwriting referrals made by other affiliates.

- **The terms affiliate, publisher and partner are often used interchangeably.** The label does not matter. If a business operates within the affiliate ecosystem, it is subject to the same attribution rules.

- **Definitions of the solutions and principles at play:**

    - **Soft-click**: *Platform or network-level rules* that stop certain clicks from overwriting existing tracking.

    - **Stand-down**: *Affiliate-level rules* where a browser extension or technology tool suppresses itself if prior affiliate traffic is detected.

    - **Cookie hierarchies**: Logic that prioritises attribution based on affiliate type or by where the affiliate sits in the funnel.

- **Attribution rules beyond last-click are most relevant for affiliate models that do not send new users to advertisers** but instead interact with them once they are already on the advertiser's site.

- **Examples include:**
    - Browser extensions
    - On-site overlays
    - Basket abandonment tools
    - Conversion rate optimisation platforms
    - Chatbots
    - Retargeting technologies

- **The purpose of attribution logic is to maintain the integrity of affiliate marketing.** It allows different affiliate types to coexist within cost-per-action (CPA) marketing. Attribution logic is the industry's way of recognising the contribution of all affiliates across the sales funnel while upholding the rule that an advertiser should pay one affiliate for one sale. It is sometimes arbitrary and is not necessarily an ideal solution, but it acknowledges the role of different affiliates in driving customers.

- **More recently, some brands and platforms have begun experimenting with multi-reward mechanisms,** where more than one affiliate can be credited for a single sale. This introduces another layer to the discussion around attribution and fairness, but it is also important to treat both issues separately, as they deal with different issues and motivations.

Audit Methodology

This audit examined how ten UK-based affiliate platforms apply attribution logic in customer journeys where:

1. Multiple affiliates are involved, and
2. One of those affiliates is an on-site technology or a browser extension.

The ten platforms took part voluntarily, providing initial information to the APMA in a self-reporting document published in January 2025.

Three affiliate types were selected for testing. Each operates in a way that engages the consumer only once they are already on an advertiser's website:

- **Discount browser extension**: a browser add-on used to source discounts and offers.
- **On-site marketing technology**: software integrated into an advertiser's site to display overlays or marketing messages, such as basket abandonment prompts.
- **Cashback browser extension**: a browser add-on that allows users to claim cashback on purchases.

The tests were designed to replicate real user behaviour. Each scenario began with a click from a "control" affiliate, usually a cashback or discount site. This represented a standard referral that would normally be credited under last-click rules.

The auditor then deliberately activated the test affiliate's solution, such as clicking on the extension or triggering an on-site overlay, and completed a purchase. The outcome showed whether the original referral was preserved or overwritten by the test affiliate.

Each platform was tested across three advertiser partnerships and each of the three affiliate types, giving 90 possible scenarios. In practice, not all advertisers worked with all affiliates, particularly for on-site technology, so the total tested was slightly lower.

To ensure consistency, the following controls were applied:

- All tests were run in Google Chrome on the same desktop device.
- Cookies were cleared before each session, and consent prompts were accepted.
- No other browser extensions were active.
- No ad blockers or private browsing modes were used.

Where possible, the control affiliate was a cashback site. This allowed the auditor to confirm attribution directly by checking whether the sale appeared in their cashback account. It also avoided complications caused by “multi-attribution” or partial credit, which some networks and platforms support. Cashback programmes cannot accept partial credit, so this gave the clearest view of whether attribution logic worked correctly.

All tests were conducted between March and May 2025.

The Results

The audit found three main approaches used by platforms and affiliates when more than one partner was involved in a customer journey:

- Soft-click: The platform blocks the test affiliate's click from overwriting a previous referral.
- Stand-down: The affiliate detects earlier affiliate traffic and suppresses its own service so it does not claim credit.
- No change: No safeguard is applied. The last affiliate interaction receives full credit, following the industry's standard last-click rule.

Each of the ten platforms was tested across three affiliate models. The table below summarises the attribution behaviour observed.

We have not identified the platforms, affiliates, or advertisers involved.

Platform or Network	Discount Browser Extension	On-site Marketing Technology	Cashback Browser Extension
One	Soft-click	Stand-down	Stand-down
Two	Soft-click	Stand-down	Stand-down
Three	Stand-down	Stand-down	Stand-down
Four	No Change	Stand-down	Stand-down
Five	N/A*	Stand-down	Stand-down
Six	Stand-down	Stand-down	No Change

Seven	No Change	No Change	Stand-down
Eight	Stand-down	Stand-down	Stand-down
Nine	Soft-click	Stand-down	Stand-down
Ten	No Change	Stand-down	Stand-down

N/A" indicates that the platform did not have an active relationship with the test affiliate.

Soft-click

Because it is managed centrally by the network or platform, soft-click is considered one of the most reliable forms of protection.

It can be applied across all an affiliate's partnerships at once and does not depend on the affiliate to configure it correctly.

In this audit, soft-click was less common than stand-down. Out of the ten platforms tested, only three used soft-click as their main approach. In every case, the logic was applied at network or platform level.

Where it was present, soft-click consistently preserved the original affiliate's tracking, even when the test affiliate was deliberately reactivated after having been stood down.

Soft-click appeared only on European-led platforms.

In four scenarios it was layered behind stand-down. In these cases, even if the affiliate's own stand-down mechanism failed or was reactivated by the consumer, soft-click acted as a safety net, protecting the commission of the original referring affiliate.

Stand-down

Stand-down works because the extension or on-site tool suppresses itself, either fully or partially, so it does not claim credit for the sale.

Stand-down was the most widely used approach, appearing in 21 test scenarios. However, the way it was implemented varied significantly between affiliates and platforms.

For browser extensions, stand-down could usually be spotted because the normal pop-up or notification badge did not appear. In some cases, a passive signal remained, such as a badge on the extension icon, but no active offer was shown.

Some affiliates went further and displayed clear messages to the consumer, explaining that the extension had been disabled because another discount, loyalty or reward service had already been used. This messaging was entirely controlled by the affiliate.

The effectiveness of stand-down depends on the affiliate correctly identifying prior affiliate traffic and setting up suppression rules. There is no industry standard for how to do this. As a result, affiliates can implement stand-down differently.

In these tests, browser extensions used a mix of methods, while on-site technologies tended to take an all-or-nothing approach: either fully visible to the user or completely suppressed.

Browser extension stand-down can be grouped into two types:

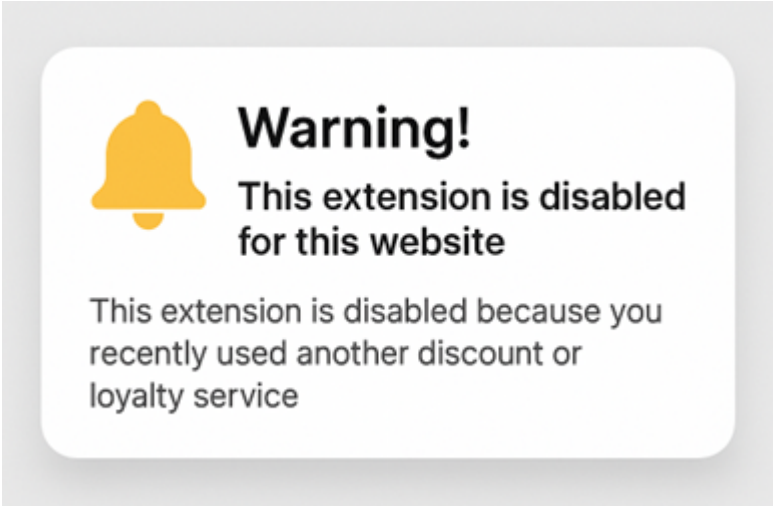
- **Full stand-down:** The extension is completely disabled. No pop-ups or badges appear. If the user clicks on the extension, they may see a clear message explaining that it has been disabled.
- **Light stand-down:** The extension removes pop-ups but may leave behind small indicators, such as a badge. If the user clicks on it, there may be no explanation provided.

Full Stand-Down

The browser extension was completely suppressed for the user.

- No pop-ups
- No notification badge shows on the browser extension icon

- If the user actively clicks on the browser extension, it shows a message to the user to fully explain that it has been stood down due to the user previously visiting another marketing service



Light Stand-Down

The browser extension retains some functionality to catch the user's attention and / or trigger a trackable click:

- No pop-ups
- A notification badge still shows on the browser extension icon

- If the user actively clicks on the browser extension icon there is no message to tell the user that it has been stood-down

With these more detailed stand-down definitions in mind, we can add additional detail to the results table:

Network	Discount Browser Extension	On-site Marketing Technology	Cashback Browser Extension
One	Soft-click	Stand-down (Full)	Stand-down (Light)
Two	Soft-click	Stand-down (Full)	Stand-down (Full)
Three	Stand-down (Full)	Stand-down (Full)	Stand-down (Full)
Four	No Change	Stand-down (Full)	Stand-down (Light)
Five	N/A*	Stand-down (Full)	Stand-down (Full)
Six	Stand-down (Light)	Stand-down (Full)	No Change
Seven	No Change	No Change	Stand-down (Full)
Eight	Stand-down (Full)	Stand-down (Full)	Stand-down (Full)

Nine	Soft-click	Stand-down (Full)	Stand-down (Light)
Ten	No Change	Stand-down (Full)	Stand-down (Full)

N/A denotes a platform that did not work with the test affiliate.

Both discount and cashback browser extensions were observed using a mix of full and light stand-down methods, depending on the platform.

Using these definitions, the results table can be expanded to show which type of stand-down was applied in each case.

It is important to note that stand-down can be undermined by user behaviour. If a consumer manually reactivates an extension or overlay after it has stood down, the system reverts to last-click attribution. This means the reactivated affiliate can overwrite the tracking of the original referring affiliate, nullifying the purpose of stand-down.

Discount Browser Extension

The discount browser extension showed a range of behaviours across the ten platforms tested:

- 3 platforms applied **soft-click**, which prevented overwriting entirely.
- 3 platforms relied on **stand-down** mechanisms controlled by the affiliate.
- 3 platforms applied **no protection**, defaulting to standard last-click attribution.
- 1 platform did not have an active partnership with the extension.

In the scenarios where no overwrite protection was applied, the test affiliate claimed full credit for the sale, displacing the original control affiliate.

When the discount browser extension used stand-down, it often displayed a message to the consumer explaining that the tool was inactive because they had already visited the advertiser via another discount or reward service. However, the extension also gave the consumer the option to reactivate it. If reactivated, standard last-click rules came back into effect, and the extension could claim the sale.

On-site marketing technology

On-site marketing technology, which is integrated directly into advertiser websites, has become an increasingly common part of the affiliate industry over the past five years. These tools trigger overlays or marketing messages, such as basket abandonment prompts, when a customer visits the advertiser's site.

They represent a variety of business models and have grown and developed over time.

From the outset these business models and affiliate types have operated according to attribution rules and it is a recognised requirement of them to work within the mainstream of the UK affiliate industry

In the audit, on-site marketing technology consistently stood down when it detected prior affiliate traffic. Only one test failed, which was later traced to a misconfigured tracking parameter that was subsequently corrected.

To test the limits of this safeguard, the auditor deliberately disabled stand-down in a second phase. In four cases, platform-level soft-click logic stepped in and prevented the on-site technology from claiming the sale. The commission was instead awarded to the original control affiliate.

In the other cases, standard last-click rules applied, and the on-site technology claimed the sale despite an earlier referral.

This highlighted a key risk: stand-down can fail if it is not correctly configured. In those situations, last-click logic applies and the original referring affiliate loses out. Platforms that support soft-click provide an important safety net in these scenarios, ensuring that referring affiliates are not displaced by technical errors or manual overrides.

Cashback Browser Extension

Cashback browser extensions are designed to reward consumers directly, so soft-click logic is generally not applied. If it were, consumers would be prevented from earning cashback, which would undermine the model.

Instead, strong stand-down behaviour was observed in almost all of the tests. In these cases, the extension either did not activate at all or appeared only in a passive form. For example, users could see that cashback was available, but they could not click to claim it unless they took deliberate action to reactivate the extension.

One test scenario did not trigger stand-down correctly, but this was isolated and inconsistent with the affiliate's usual behaviour. As expected, no soft-click protections were applied in any cashback scenarios.

Stand-down is therefore the only practical safeguard for cashback or loyalty extensions. Soft-click would prevent the consumer from earning their reward, but stand-down can prevent the extension from unfairly overwriting another affiliate's referral unless the user makes a conscious decision to re-engage it.

It is also worth noting that stand-down behaviour can differ depending on the browser. All tests in this audit were run in Chrome, which showed consistent behaviour. In other browsers such as Firefox or Safari, extensions may behave differently.

Key Observations

The audit highlighted several consistent patterns:

- **Soft-click was uncommon**. It appeared in only a minority of cases and was mainly applied to discount browser extensions. Soft-click was found primarily on European-led platforms.
- **Stand-down was more widely used, but uneven in quality**. In some cases, extensions or overlays were only partially suppressed, leaving behind indicators or messages. This created potential confusion for users and allowed opportunities for last-click logic to be reintroduced.
- **User reactivation always overrode safeguards**. Whenever an extension was manually re-engaged by the consumer, the system reverted to standard last-click attribution, and the test affiliate claimed the sale.
- **Soft-click was applied consistently**. Where platforms used soft-click, they applied it uniformly to both discount browser extensions and on-site marketing technologies.
- **Browser choice may influence results**. All tests were conducted in Chrome, which showed the most reliable behaviour. Extensions can behave differently in other browsers, such as Firefox or Safari, though this was not within the scope of the audit.
- **Stand-down is vulnerable**. Because it depends on correct affiliate setup, such as URL parameters, changes in advertiser configuration can cause it to fail. When this happens, original referring affiliates may lose credit. Soft-click, being controlled centrally by the platform, provides more reliable protection. These failures were not considered intentional, but they underline the need for regular auditing.

Recommendations

‘Towards consistent attribution standards’

The affiliate industry needs consistent, enforceable attribution standards to ensure fairness between partner types.

Based on APMA’s audit findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Broader use of soft-click and stand-down attribution

Both soft-click and stand-down approaches have merits, and their adoption often reflects regional and model-specific practices.

Soft-click provides consistency and reliability at platform level, while stand-down is required in cashback and loyalty contexts. Neither should be seen as universally superior; a balanced approach is needed.

Soft-click attribution, where applied, proved reliable in preventing unwanted overwriting of credit due to the actions of later affiliates. It is particularly effective for non-cashback models such as browser extensions and on-site overlays.

Soft-click is straightforward for platforms and advertisers to understand and implement. It is especially valuable where suppression of the user experience is not commercially necessary (e.g. cashback extensions).

2. Require stand-down for Cashback and Loyalty Extensions

Where soft-click cannot be used (e.g. cashback and loyalty), stand-down is essential. Any affiliate operating a browser extension that triggers when a consumer is on an advertiser’s site should have a robust stand-down mechanism.

Stand-down must:

- Prevent the extension from appearing (“popping up”) when the user has been referred by another affiliate.
- Avoid automatic activation and make no attempt to encourage the user to reactivate it.
- Not revert to normal functionality after a set time or page view.

3. Prevent manual reactivation from restoring last-click

Manual, unprompted activation by the consumer demonstrates intent and can be treated differently from prompted reactivation. However, this sits at odds with the industry's long-standing priority of protecting earlier funnel activity.

While it may create a less than ideal consumer experience, attribution tools such as soft-click and stand-down were specifically designed to safeguard fairness for earlier referrers.

Mitigation could come through alternative payment models, but rewarding earlier funnel activity ultimately relies on advertisers adopting solutions and partners providing the technology. For this reason, the consensus remains that last-click technologies should be considered secondary to earlier funnel contributions.

Extensions that use reward pop-ups or allow consumer reactivation should be evaluated in light of the trade-off they present: while they appear to deliver consumer benefit, they can undermine attribution safeguards. Any adoption of such mechanisms should be balanced with clear attribution rules and, where appropriate, alternative payment models.

- Extensions and on-site tools should not prompt users to reactivate.
- If users manually re-enable an extension, the platform should prevent commission being claimed unless the user's journey has clearly restarted independently.
- If a network or platform allows the extension or software to claim the commission, brands should consider how to reward earlier funnel affiliates.

4. Standardise recognition of affiliate traffic

Stand-down logic depends on identifying referral parameters. Currently, there is no industry-wide standard for this.

- A move towards standardised tagging conventions **(e.g. utm_channel=affiliate)** would ensure consistency.
- In the US, "Afsrc=1" is commonly used as a stand-down reference. In the UK, adoption has been sporadic.
- US-based Adblock and shopping extension Pie have open-sourced their stand-down rules, providing valuable transparency for affiliates, platforms, and advertisers.

5. Signpost stand-down and soft-click affiliates

Platforms should give advertisers clear visibility into which affiliates are subject to stand-down or soft-click requirements. This transparency allows advertisers to make informed decisions before approving partnerships.

Platforms should also allow advertisers to look up the stand-down/soft-click status of affiliates they already work with.

How this is done is for the network or platform to decide. They may choose to add an icon or disclosure notification against the affiliates who are subject to attribution rules. We would encourage this to be readily and easily available for their clients to access.

6. Encourage dual implementation

Stand-down and soft-click are not mutually exclusive. Platforms can deploy soft-click as a central attribution safeguard for conversion-oriented affiliates, while affiliates apply stand-down as an additional layer if it fits their model.

This dual approach combines:

- The reliability of central attribution controls.
- The flexibility for affiliates to manage when and how their solutions are shown to consumers.

7. Ensure no circumvention of attribution rules through subnetwork or other affiliate models.

It has been noted by industry commentators over the past year that some affiliates who should be subject to attribution rules have avoided them by running activity through subnetworks.

Subnetworks allow affiliates to join them and are subject to the attribution rules set by networks and platforms. This is typically on a standard last click wins basis.

Therefore, affiliates covered by attribution rules should not circumvent them by running their traffic through subnetworks or other affiliate models, such as voucher code sites.

Where a subnetwork guarantees it can offer the same attribution logic for those affiliates, the activity is permitted. Again, transparency would help the entire industry.

Conclusion

The audit shows that in over 80% of cases, some form of safeguard was applied to prevent later affiliates overwriting earlier referrals. Despite high-profile criticism of browser extensions such as Honey, most scenarios demonstrated that either the platform or the affiliate had implemented attribution logic that protected original referrers.

However, implementation remains inconsistent. Soft-click is reliable when applied universally by a platform, but its adoption is limited. Stand-down controls, while more common, vary in quality and can be undermined by browser differences, user reactivation, and advertiser configurations. These findings reinforce that on-site affiliates, extensions, overlays and other conversion tools, should follow different attribution standards from partners who drive inbound traffic.

Attribution logic only governs traffic tracked within the affiliate ecosystem. Many criticisms stem from channels sitting outside this stack; if creator or influencer activity is tracked separately, overwriting will continue unless brands bring those journeys under affiliate tracking.

Subnetworks can also circumvent attribution safeguards; see Recommendation 7 for guidance. Some subnetworks have indicated willingness to support soft-click at a sub-ID level, offering additional protection where needed.

A lack of transparency and education, highlighted again during the Honey fallout, contributes to confusion around attribution behaviour. Greater visibility of how attribution works would improve trust and confidence across the ecosystem.

To maintain a fair and sustainable environment, the industry should move towards more consistent governance of attribution, combining the reliability of platform-level protections with transparent, well-implemented affiliate-side controls.