apma The Affiliate & Partner Marketing Association

Explains...

Google Analytics 4

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The APMA Explains are guides that help you to make sense of an issue impacting the affiliate and partner marketing industries.

They explain the topic in a jargon and spin-proof way, presenting the facts and cutting through the noise.

You'll also hear from a variety of APMA members whose expertise helps provide some additional detail and insights.

Introduction

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> In *The APMA Explains* we explain the topic in a jargon and spin-proof way, presenting the facts and cutting through the noise.

Hello and welcome to the first of our *The APMA's Explains* series, which is on Google Analytics 4 (GA4).

Anyone currently using Google's Universal Analytics (UA) will be switched to their most up-to-date attribution tech, GA4, from July 2024.

GA4 varies from UA, as it measures and reports data, events and outcomes differently. UA existed alongside network and platform data for years, often resulting in two different datasets.

While there were often discrepancies between network and UA data, networks learned to work with the two datasets.

In this guide, we explain why GA4 is now reporting much bigger variances than those we've been used to with UA.

Google has also introduced a new attribution model called Data-Driven Attribution that is throwing up very different outcomes to those tracked by affiliate platforms. This is the new, default model in the attribution reports.

What data should you trust and how do you process two potentially very different sets of numbers at the same time?

Here we delve into the details, explaining why GA4 is reporting as it is, reassuring that network sales are still tracking accurately and offering some practical steps you can take to make sure your affiliate programme continues to function without any hitches.

What's GA4?

If you have a website, you probably want to know how visitors get to your site and interact with your content.

Maybe you have an online store and want to know how well-optimised your site is in driving customers.

GA4 is Google's latest version of their analytics tool. The technology is implemented on a website and provides these insights via a reporting dashboard.

Inevitably Google's tech is widely used, especially because the company offers a free version of its analytics that does the job for most businesses. According to **Builtwith**, more than 32 million websites are actively using a version of Google Analytics.

Why are we talking about GA4?

> "Many brands are asking why their two datasets, apparently measuring the same thing, are reporting such different numbers."

Google Analytics has been around for nearly 20 years. Universal Analytics (UA) arrived in 2012 and GA4, the latest version, was introduced in 2020.

In mid-2023 Google announced the retirement of UA and users would therefore have to use GA4. According to the company, the decision was based on the need to adapt to concerns about **consumers' privacy**, the **increasing use of multiple devices**, and the drive for **more comprehensive cross-platform insights**.

UA tracked conversions and multiple traffic sources, and this also included affiliate sales. As GA4 shows data in a new way, this has sometimes resulted in significant anomalies between GA4 data, affiliate network data and platform interface data that brands use to monitor the performance of their affiliate campaign.

Inevitably this has caused confusion, with many brands asking why their two datasets, apparently measuring the same thing, are reporting such different numbers.

What's causing the variances?

> The data we previously trusted is being interrogated in ways that it never has been before.

Head of Digital Marketing at APMA founder member, Genie Goals, **Imogen Collins**, helps answer this question:

"For many years, GA was an important source of truth for marketers - a standard deduplicated way to view performance from several different platforms. With the move to GA4, we are seeing big shifts in the way our data looks.

This means that the data we previously trusted is being interrogated in ways that it never has been before, and activity which has run successfully for many years, is perceived to have stopped working or be working much more effectively entirely due to changes in the way the data is presented."

The important word here is 'perceived', and we'll come back to this later in the guide.

Session-based activity

Imogen continues:
"The main attribution model used in UA was "last non-direct".

This means any retailer's conversions were attributed to the last non-direct channel they interacted with".

(NB: In this context, "last non-direct" means any user interaction that has come to the website from another source, in other words, a user not going directly to the website).

The simplest way to think about UA is that it was based on last click. That may not have given a complete view of how consumers make decisions about what they purchase but was a straightforward way of tracking conversion performance.

What's changed?

GA4 keeps track of what visitors are doing to get to your website. That might be the pages they visit, the buttons they've clicked and how long they spend interacting with different content.

These 'events' are the primary measurement in GA4.

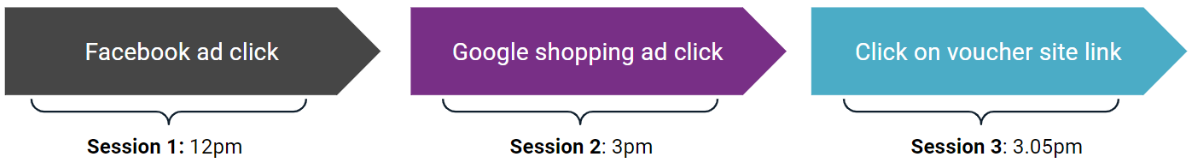
In UA when a user interacts with a distinct marketing link (say an affiliate link or a Facebook link), this would be recorded as a single session. Now, in GA4, these distinct 'events' can be recorded multiple times within a session.

A single session can therefore contain multiple pageviews, events, social interactions, and e-commerce transactions from different marketing channels.

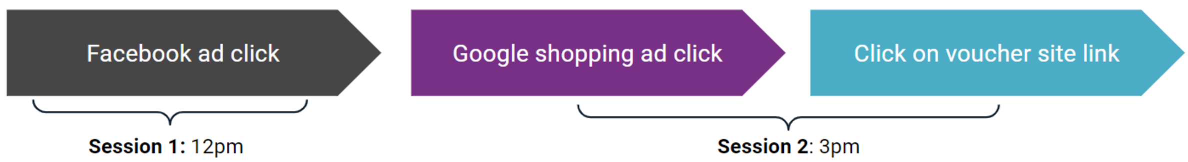
Imogen Collins explains in greater detail: *"An oft overlooked but very important difference between UA and GA4 is how sessions are defined. A session will still end when there has been a 30-minute period of inactivity but, unlike in UA, a session can now include multiple visits to the site with different campaign parameters, as long as these are within a single browsing time period.*

Let's show that visually.

UA. Here there are three different, distinct links: a Facebook ad, a Google Shopping click and then a voucher site. They are **three distinct sessions**. Using UA's last-referral logic, the voucher site would be credited with the sale:



GA4: The same journey in the new world shows just **two sessions**, as multiple events happen in the second 30-minute session. Here, the **first referring event in the last session** will be credited - the Google Shopping ad click:



Remember, crediting the first click in GA4 is a *fundamentally* different approach to UA's last-click approach.

What are the implications?

There are a couple of implications:

1. **GA4 might record fewer sessions.** The number of visits will be grouped into single sessions.

2. **Sales/later interactions will likely be reported on less and end up without any value assigned to them.** With our affiliate hat on, the last referring links (which often come via reward, loyalty, cashback and voucher sites), may show less revenue apportioned to them. As mentioned above, where there are multiple campaigns in the same session, GA4 assigns the sale to the **first** source of the **last** non-direct session. Remember, their sales are still valid, but less credit may be apportioned to them.

How is this impacting affiliate data?

> "Affiliate networks and platforms typically ask you to use the data reported in their systems to validate sales."

It's important to remember that affiliate networks and platforms typically ask you to use the data reported in their systems (not Google's) to validate your affiliate sales.

So, there is no change here: if you've used UA in the past, you have always had two sets of likely different data to consider side by side.

Anthony Clements, Adtraction's Managing Director for the UK, explains why this hasn't been too much of an issue in the past:

"The old UA product had blindspots when it came to affiliate marketing which caused well-documented differences in the two sets of numbers., but variances tended to be much smaller. Over the years we had grown used to dealing with this, including benchmarking common variances between affiliate platform numbers and UA".

We asked APMA member affiliate networks for feedback based on recent conversations with their retailer and brand clients:

ADTRACTION

Adtraction: *"We have seen marketers reporting a variance of over 80% from their affiliate platform compared to GA4, whereas in UA that variance was considerably lower."*

Adtraction has shared data for a retailer's programme they're currently running which starkly shows the difference between UA and GA4 reporting of affiliate revenue:

Period	Affiliate Platform (AP)	Universal Analytics (UA)	Revenue diff AP - UA	GA4	Revenue diff AP - GA4
2023-04	44,401	32,898	26%	4,005	91%
2023-05	50,611	46,004	9%	6,492	87%
2023-06	50,606	43,220	15%	5,350	89%
2023-07	47,718	39,093	18%	5,459	89%

"Overnight the affiliate channel suddenly looks much less effective and important to the business when in reality, the efficacy of the channel did not change. Assumptions used to benchmark the affiliate channel's performance and strategy no longer tally with what marketers are seeing in GA4. This could have immediate and longer-term repercussions".

Awin: *"The default attribution model applied by Google in GA4 significantly undervalues, and in certain cases, disregards the important role played by partners in the path to conversion, especially those in the lower funnel. Consequently, a number of Awin clients are reporting a significant increase in differences between the two platforms."*

CJ: *"In some cases, clients report that GA4 is significantly increasing attribution toward Google-owned channels, compared to their previous UA version. This has the inverse effect of reducing attribution to non-Google channels. These errors seem specific to GA4. We're not seeing these changes within CJ tracking or reporting, which remains accurate and stable."*

Rakuten Advertising: *"The switch from traditional attribution models has magnified tracking discrepancies, particularly for non-Google channels. Google's intention to replace various attribution models affects the entire affiliate industry. The default switch raises concerns about accuracy and consistency in reporting between platforms."*

Webgains: *"We are seeing that GA4's shift in attribution models has had a notable impact on tracking discrepancies in the affiliate industry between our numbers and theirs, and clients' trust in the tracking of GA4 is slowly diminishing. Some accounts are experiencing significant variations compared to UA. This raises* *concerns about the accuracy and consistency of GA4's reporting, particularly for non-Google channels."*

Tradedoubler: *"Numerous Tradedoubler clients have reported that GA4 notably under-reports revenue for marketing channels outside of Google, such as affiliate marketing, in comparison to previous versions of Google Analytics."*

Kwanko: *"Even though the use of Google Analytics will probably always result in discrepancies between our numbers and theirs, if the advertiser has no other option but GA4, we strongly recommend using GA4 naming conventions in UTM tracking (medium, source) and choosing a last-click attribution model rather than DDA. This will not make all discrepancies disappear, but it will bring the tracking closer to the actual numbers. Additionally, consider creating custom dimensions to enhance follow-up on the numbers."*

Key Takeaways

- Google has changed how it measures sessions.
- It now ignores the presence of new campaign information if it occurs within the window of what defines a session.
- With a focus on the *first* campaign information in the *final* session before the conversion, Google has changed their value measurement to only assign credit to the first click in a session.
- This can result in reduced acknowledgement of affiliate activity.
- Networks are aware of these variances and are assuring clients that their tracking is unaffected.
- The Advertising reports in GA4 (which is where attribution lives), *do not* have the same definition of sessions as outlined above. Using the example above, comparing UA versus GA4, the third session is reported. Advertising reports effectively let you get back to a very similar view as to what UA had, if you choose 'last click' model.

What should you do?

Remember, networks and platforms haven't changed anything about how they track and report your data.

It is also likely that you're bound by their contract terms that require you to process actions and conversions based on their data. Again, this hasn't changed. Networks continue to monitor and test their tracking to ensure they are robustly recording sales.

All attribution solutions will have their logic built into them and while the interpretation and representation of actions, events and sessions may have altered, the underlying tracking of them by networks remains unaltered. Affiliate tracking is not wrong, it continues to reflect and report on last-click attribution with the obvious action of a sale. A first interaction initiates a customer's journey but ignores the final contribution to generating the transaction.

What is Google's Data Driven Attribution?

> "Remember, network recorded revenue is *actual*, GA4's when layered with their attribution machine learning, is *interpretative*."

Hopefully, if you've got this far, you're keeping up with the changes. But they don't stop there because GA4 also introduces another feature: Data Driven Attribution (DDA) that many networks are citing as having the biggest impact on the numbers.

DDA is a Google algorithm that uses machine learning technology to understand how different events contribute to conversions.

It assesses these events - ads, clicks and devices - and provides reports that show how each of them impacts each other. It is designed to help you make better decisions about where to invest your marketing budget. But as we've already stated, it ignores or does not fairly report on *all* interactions.

In theory, this means it will look across the whole path to purchase rather than take a last-click attribution view. But the reason it has ruffled affiliate feathers is because DDA is now the default setting for GA4, compounding some of the big variances we've discussed.

Think of DDA as a way of deciding which marketing channels are helping to drive consumers at different stages of a purchase decision. It also includes in its algorithm many of those last referring links that in GA4's new session logic are now excluded.

Remember, network recorded revenue is *actual*, GA4's when layered with their attribution machine learning, is *interpretative.*

Let's assess some findings from the networks:

CJ looked at their data for more than 1,200 clients. Google's methodology would likely exclude ~98% of affiliate conversion paths from its DDA mode for all affiliate networks, using a hidden model to measure them instead.

Rakuten Advertising's team validated their tracking against GA4 transactions – commissioned or not across all Google channels, affiliates, and more. They found they tracked 99.4% of orders that GA4 recorded. Of that, 84% were assigned to the affiliate channel, with the remaining 16% spread over Google on a last-click wins basis, not DDA.

Tradedoubler scrutinised sales from a large online store, focusing on typical user journeys involving Google marketing channels. They found that one in six of these journeys were attributed to Tradedoubler by GA4, and the remaining were attributed to Google marketing channels.

Because it considers everything, GA4 tends to downplay the last referring channel - in other words, because affiliate models are often premised on sales and not other actions, their contribution has been reduced. It has also been claimed that DDA favours Google's marketing services and products.

That's the view **CJ** holds: *"Google's current design for GA4/DDA contains inherent and unavoidable biases toward Google-owned channels. Google's own documentation alludes to such biases. CJ's data indicates that DDA is not able to provide reliable measurement of the affiliate channel".*

Head of Marketing at **Global Savings Group**, Ben Smye, adds: *"There is speculation that GA4's default attribution setting, called data-driven attribution, is inherently biased towards Google channels. If this is true, then it's possible in GA4 that the affiliate channel will be getting less credit than it's due".*

Tradedoubler: *"According to Google's support articles, GA4's architecture favours Google-owned channels. Our assessments suggest the DDA offers unreliable readings for affiliate channels."*

Acceleration Partners indicates this bias may be addressed in time: *"GA4's current design incorporates inherent biases in favour of Google-owned channels. This bias is explicitly acknowledged in GA4 documentation, which emphasizes its focus on interactions within Google's Search, YouTube, Display, and Discovery Ads. As currently configured, GA4 does not accurately track or attribute revenue for non-Google channels, including email, SMS, or affiliate. This is the root cause of revenue discrepancies, and it is expected to be addressed and refined by Google over time".*

Finally, we asked a brand for their view. **Sami Dabek**, Senior Digital Marketing Manager at **Mamas & Papas** said: *"GA4 has had a huge impact on channel performance. For us, we found the differing attribution models between GA4 and UA have negatively impacted traffic, and positively impacted conversion rate and therefore revenue, complicating year-on-year comparisons.*

Looking specifically at the affiliate channel, the impact here makes it more important than ever to take a holistic view of performance and ROI across all our digital marketing channels."

Key Takeaways

- DDA is just one interpretation of data and focuses on Google owned channels to the exclusion of others (such as affiliate)

- It is a useful addition for considering your marketing activity in its end but,
    - Research the logic and methodology it uses
    - Understand how it tracks all marketing channels
    - Acknowledge it underreports affiliate contribution
    - Carry out your own tests
    - Have confidence in your affiliate tracking
    - Keep an eye out for future changes

What practical steps do you need to take?

> APMA members are universal in their conviction that affiliate tracking remains robust and trustworthy.

Google's important role in attribution and brands' reliance on its marketing services, means that when their data appears at odds with the affiliate channel's alarm bells may ring.

There is a risk that you will see less value in the affiliate channel based on looking at Google's data in isolation with the resulting impact on your affiliate budgets.

APMA members however are universal in their conviction that affiliate tracking remains robust and trustworthy.

You can also change GA4's global attribution settings for GA4 back to a last-click model but this will not necessarily mirror your previous reports. In fact, some members have reported that they have yet to see a way of measuring in GA4 that is similar to that of UA.

However, if you want to keep reporting in a way that some believe is like that of UA you can adjust your settings:

Admin > Attribution Settings > selecting 'Last Click' option.

Remember, Google is still applying a different tracking algorithm and like in the UA days, the data will not completely tally with your network data, but it is likely to be far more closely aligned.

When you change the settings, the data will not retrospectively update, so make a note of when you do.

Remember GA4's default reporting dimension is Default Channel Group.

This view relies on rule-based channel groups but is unlikely to be relevant to the way most affiliate programmes pass data to Google Analytics. When using any Google Analytics report make sure the dimension is relevant to the way your affiliate platform captures and passes data to Google Analytics. This is normally done using the source or medium parameter.

APMA Member recommendations

It's likely if you're a brand reading this you will be using one of our member's affiliate tracking or services. So, let's consider their specific recommendations:

Acceleration PARTNERS

"While Google continues to improve GA4 for marketers, it is imperative to leverage affiliate network data for pattern recognition, campaign scoring, optimisation strategies, and recruitment.

We strongly recommend that brands consider affiliate network data as their primary source of reliable information until GA4 aligns better with network data."

ADTRACTION

"A better solution for advertisers looking to more closely replicate their old in GA4 is to use the Model Comparisons reporting. This will display a side-by-side comparison of last-click and DDA models, with both views being attributed using the non-direct method. The Last click column is the one that will more closely reflect conversion reporting from the old GA world."

AFFILIATE FUTURE

"Google created GA4 as a tool to help website owners better understand attribution within Google's channels. It is best to use GA4 as a guide on the overall view of Google's products rather than for transaction validation across everything, including affiliates. If you MUST use GA4, make sure it is set up for "last click" and your Affiliate Future account has the correct parameters appended to all links."

AWIN

"We recommend advertisers have their Awin tracking configured to de-duplicate sales at point of conversion and only use internal data to validate sales – avoiding the need to use GA for validation purposes. For advertisers looking to get a greater understanding of the contributions made by partners across the customer journey, we recommend utilising our Awin attribution powered reports. In contrast to GA4, these reports are completely transparent and unbiased, providing the insight needed to develop advanced strategies and optimise performance."

CJ™

"With the current methodology, you should not use Google's Data-Driven Attribution model to measure the affiliate channel, particularly if you are using the updated version of DDA in GA4. CJ has robust tools available for measuring the value of your affiliate channel."

Global Savings Group

"You should not choose the 'Google paid channels' attribution option, no matter which model you choose, unless you only really invest in Google Ads and have no interest in any other channels."

Optimise

"We recommend that the DDA in GA4 is not suitable for Affiliate Tracking. Advertisers should instead utilise "Last Click" attribution to ensure an accurate measure of all sales channels."

When validating sales, we recommend advertisers use their own data warehouse (where they fulfil their orders) instead of relying solely on GA4. In fact, your data warehouse should be used to validate sales against GA4 and your affiliate network. Now that Google data has changed, it doesn't mean that your affiliate tracking is wrong. It means it's different.

Our assessments suggest the DDA offers unreliable readings for affiliate channels. For precise last-click tracking, it's advisable to avoid the new DDA in GA4.

You should review the attribution model you're using within GA4 and see which channel the sales are being attributed to and why. It's also key to ensure the correct UTM parameters are added to your affiliate tracking links and the correct events are set-up within GA4.

It's important not to cancel transactions or discredit marketing channels based solely on discrepancies. Cancelling transactions or discrediting marketing channels prematurely can lead to missed opportunities and lost sales, as well as potentially hinder relationships with affiliate partners.

Final Takeaways

- If you're using an affiliate network to track your sales, you can rest easy. Their tracking hasn't changed, and your programme won't be impacted.

- But, perhaps this is a great opportunity to check your current set-up to see if your tracking is fit for purpose in 2024.

- Don't get too hung up if you're seeing major variances between your network and GA4. You can configure your reports to replicate a similar view to the old last-non-direct settings.

- Remember, no attribution is perfect and has natural bias built into it. With GA4 that may also mean the data focuses on the impact of Google's own services. Google has acknowledged there are gaps in what it reports and, no doubt, future iterations will focus on improvements.

We want to encourage advertisers to talk to their affiliate tracking partners for help with GA4: don't suffer in silence and draw bad conclusions.

Your network, agency and platform can help you explore different reporting views in GA4 or using Data Studio. Just get in touch and mention you need some assurances about your tracking set-up.

Further reading

Acceleration Partners: https://www.accelerationpartners.com/resources/navigating-ga4-affiliate-marketing/

Adtraction: https://adtraction.com/blog/measuring-partner-marketing-using-ga4

Awin: https://www.awin.com/gb/compliance-and-regulations/google-analytics-4

CJ: https://junction.cj.com/article/this-is-why-youre-seeing-a-drop-in-affiliate-traffic-since-migrating-to-ga4

Genie Goals: https://www.geniegoals.co.uk/blog/ga4-attribution-digital-marketing

Optimise: https://optimisemedia.com/blog/google-analytics-4-affiliate-marketing-impacts/

Rakuten Advertising: https://blog.rakutenadvertising.com/en-uk/marketing-strategies/ga4-affiliate-marketing/

Tradedoubler: https://www.tradedoubler.com/en/blog/google-analytics-4/

Webgains: https://www.webgains.com/public/en/moving-to-ga4-data-driven-attribution/

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