![apma logo] Affiliate & Partner Marketing Association

Independent audit of soft-click and similar technologies: Feb 2025

Project Brief

The APMA is commissioning an Independent audit of ten affiliate networks and platforms to test the veracity and implementation of soft-click, stand-down and similar proprietary technologies.

In January 2025, the APMA collected data from ten networks and platforms. This showed a 100% application of soft-click and stand-down rules, typically implemented for technologies such as browser extensions, toolbars and rebate catchers.

Some of these networks and platforms also apply these rules to other affiliates and affiliate models.

Given the self-reporting of soft-click applications by the networks and platforms in the report, the APMA wants to understand what technologies are used and how widely

adopted they are through a series of independently conducted control tests. An independently contracted consultant will carry out these tests in February 2025.

The methodology is described later in the brief.

The results will be anonymised for publication, and the APMA will contact individual networks and platforms directly with their results. The final report will include recommendations for the affiliate industry.

Given the significant coverage of this issue in light of accusations of cookie overwriting by browser extensions, we hope this independent report will provide a robust defence of the industry's ability to create solutions that deliver value to brands and publishers and mitigate the impact of such technologies.

Where non-adherence is found, we believe the APMA can act as a positive force for change. We hope this exercise will be emulated in other markets, providing brands with the assurances they need when operating across multiple markets.

Aims

1. Maintain confidence in the affiliate industry and its ability to assimilate potentially disruptive technologies within the existing ecosystem.
2. Prove that affiliate networks and platforms can self-regulate their controls around soft-click and similar technologies.
3. Prove to brands that effective controls ensure their marketing budgets and existing affiliate relationships are protected.

To achieve these aims, we will test the implementation of all affiliate networks and platforms that contributed to the APMA's [Downloadable Software & Browser Extensions in affiliate marketing: FAQs](#) and confirm their implementation of soft attribution rules.

We will check the soft attribution rules applied to the three common forms of affiliate marketing that the APMA's [Downloadable Software & Browser Extensions in affiliate marketing: FAQs identified as relevant for soft attribution](#).

For each affiliate type, a prominent test publisher representative of that category has been chosen:

Discount & Loyalty Browser Extension
On-site Marketing Technology
Pure-play Cashback Browser Extension

The hypothesis

All toolbar extension affiliates and those using similar technologies such as rebate catchers and toolbars agree, in partnering with these networks and platforms, to 'stand down' their cookies when another affiliate cookie is present.

Because many of these technologies are premised towards the conversion end of a transaction, the industry put in place these controls to protect earlier funnel affiliate activity.

Where no earlier funnel affiliate cookie is present, these technologies can claim the sale, assuming they are the last interaction before the consumer purchases.

To test our hypothesis we will examine three advertiser programmes for each affiliate network and platform.

The advertisers will be different for each network and platform and, where possible, the advertisers will have exclusive working relationships with their network

Each network/platform > test affiliate > advertiser will constitute a testing scenario journey.

We will test three affiliates per advertiser, and three advertisers per network or platform, making nine test scenarios per network or platform. With ten companies tested in total, this totals 90 individual tests in principle.

To test the journey we will need to replicate a consumer journey, clicking from a traditional affiliate to a soft-click-enabled affiliate. This two step process will allow us to monitor where overwriting does or doesn't occur. We will need to identify a control non-soft click affiliate.

It may not be possible to find an individual journey using our control for every network and platform and every affiliate. Where this occurs we will mark our findings 'N/A'.

The logic makes no assumption or claims about the quality of any of the activity; it is a check implemented to protect the existing affiliate ecosystem and was established when these technologies first entered the UK affiliate market around 2010.

Participants

These are the affiliate networks and platforms that will be tested:

Adtraction
Awin
CJ
Impact
Kwanko
Optimise
Partnerize
Rakuten
Tradedoubler
Webgains

Methodology

Each testing scenario will recreate an online user journey. The user journey will route via a standard affiliate publisher and onto the advertiser's website.

The user will then attempt to engage with the browser extension or on-site technology that should have soft attribution or stand-down rules applied. This will test whether the user can engage with the browser extension or on-site technology, and if they are, whether credit for the journey and subsequent purchase is given to the original referring publisher or the test publisher.

Here is a more detailed breakdown of the user journey:

- The starting point for each testing scenario will be a clean browser with no cookies associated to either the affiliate network / software provider/platform, the advertiser or browser extension/technology. All cookies will be accepted to ensure no blocking occurs by a consent management platform.

- The user will first click on the link of a 'control 'affiliate. This will be a standard affiliate publisher where a normal post-click tracking experience will be set. The user will be automatically directed to the advertiser's website.

- Once the user has landed on the advertiser's website the affiliate network /platform's tracking will be verified to ensure that the correct first and third-party cookies for the control publisher have been set.

- Then the user will engage with the relevant browser extension / on-site technology that is under test. If the user is unable to engage with the test publisher's functionality it will be noted as a potential stand-down scenario

- Assuming the user can see the test affiliate's functionality, they will make the affirmative click to either copy or use an offer (depending on the behaviour of the browser extension in relation to show it sets affiliate tracking). Under standard 'last-click-wins affiliate tracking' the expectation at this point is that the action of the user copying or clicking on an offer served by the browser extension / on-site technology will trigger affiliate tracking

- Soft-attribution technology should take over at this point to prevent the browser extension / on-site technology being credited with an affiliate marketing sale. This should ensure the original-referring affiliate publisher will receive credit for referring the sale to the advertiser.

- The affiliate network / platform's cookies and tags will now be checked in the browser to ensure the cookies, url parameters and other required attribution tags have not been overwritten by the browser extension / on-site technology.

- If any network or platform has concerns that soft-click attribution occurs server-side and we may not be able to see it, we can work with the control affiliate to complete a test transaction and ask them to verify they are credited with the sale.

- Using soft attribution rules the ultimate outcome should be that the sale tracks back to the control publisher that originally referred the user to the advertiser's website. This will be checked in the control affiliate's account at the relevant affiliate network / software provider allowing for any lag in transaction processing time

Test Considerations

1. The same control affiliate will be used for all testing scenarios across all networks / platforms.

2. For all testing scenarios the user will always fully accept the cookie consent notification on the advertiser's website. If the cookie consent notification is not triggered the test will be re-run once more.

3. All tests will be completed on Google Chrome. There will be no ad-blockers installed that could interfere with affiliate tracking.

4. All tests will be completed in normal browsing (not private browsing) mode.

5. All tests will be carried out on the same desktop device.

6. All advertisers that are chosen should display the affiliate network / platform's tracking on all sales.

7. This is a UK based test, so all advertisers selected will be able to receive transactions in the UK / GBP.

Co-operation from networks / platforms

Although not required, it would be helpful to receive some information from all the affiliate networks / platforms that are being included in the test.

This ensures that the APMA can properly represent how each company is implementing their specific soft attribution / stand-down rules.

-   Does the affiliate network / platform soft attribute the chosen test affiliate?

-   Is the affiliate network / platform"s soft attribution technology controlled in-house or does it rely on the affiliate to stand down when another affiliate is present in the user journey?

-   Can the affiliate network / platform confirm the name of both the first and third party cookies that are used in their tracking to register the identity of the publisher?

-   Can the affiliate network / platform use any server-side attribution rules outside of the active cookies set on a user's browser to decide which affiliate is credited with a sale?

-   Does the affiliate network / platform want to nominate a long list of advertisers to be used in the test (we cannot guarantee we will select from this list or share which ones we will test in advance)?

Other

We will not publicly name any networks or platforms where we find soft-click and stand-down rules aren't active.

Each network's and platform's data will be listed anonymously as 'Network One, Network Two… etc.',

We will share our findings with each network and platform before publication. Ultimately we hope that, should we find any shortcomings, is due to oversight rather than intention.

Our report will include a series of recommendations based on the outcomes of this test and practical advice advertisers should consider.

Advertisers should draw their conclusions about whether they want to work with any affiliate based on their business goals. That logically applies to the affiliates subject to our test. Should they have follow-up questions they should consult their affiliate partners, network or platform and agency where applicable.

The independent consultant will remain anonymous.

The APMA has signed an NDA with them so we cannot share this information with any business.

Cost

The cost of this project is £4,000.

We hope to recoup the cost through financial support from members and non-members (named or anonymous).

Given the importance of this project we hope such a relatively small amount can be funded by industry.

If you would like to contribute to the cost of this project or have any questions, please contact Kevin Edwards (kevin.edwards@theapma.co.uk).