GA4 & Affiliate marketing

The aim of this guide is to equip users of the necessary tools to understand and exploit GA4's functionalities while ensuring the accuracy of data tracking.
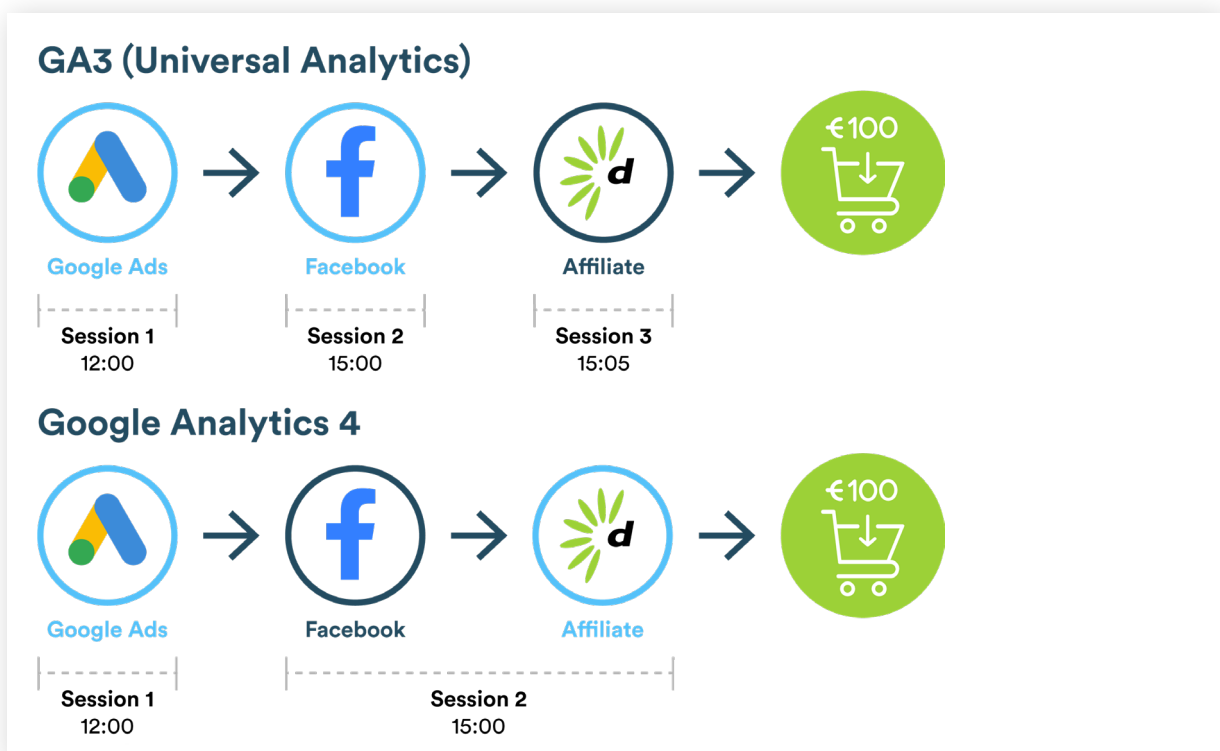
1. THE GOOGLE ANALYTICS 4 REVOLUTION

Following Google's discontinuation of support for Universal Analytics (UA) on 1 July 2023, the digital landscape underwent a major transformation in 2023 with the switch to Google Analytics 4 (GA4). This transition and the first figures to emerge have raised significant questions about the potential impact on the tracking and attribution of affiliate activities. As GA4 is a completely new analytics product with a fundamentally different data structure to Universal Analytics, it is essential to understand these differences to ensure accurate data tracking. Although Google does not fully recognise the problem, this guide offers alternative solutions. It includes alternative reporting templates in Google Analytics to more accurately assess the effectiveness of marketing from partners other than Google, such as affiliates, emailing and social networks.

2. WHAT CHANGES WITH GA4

GA4 vs UA: changes to user interaction tracking

GA4 also introduces significant changes to the way user interactions are tracked. Unlike UA, which recorded individual sessions, GA4 groups interactions into a single browsing period, which can lead to a reduction in the number of individual sessions and influence the way credits are allocated to different channels.

GA3 (Universal Analytics)

Google Ads → Facebook → Affiliate → €100

Session 1 — 12:00 | Session 2 — 15:00 | Session 3 — 15:05

Google Analytics 4

Google Ads → Facebook → Affiliate → €100

Session 1 — 12:00 | Session 2 — 15:00

GA4 vs UA: change of conversion model

The conversion window model has also changed with GA4, taking into account the last 50 touchpoints in a conversion journey, which tends to favour display and search, as opposed to the last 4 interactions in UA. Therefore, affiliate marketers need to ensure that their search window in their affiliate platform matches the parameters in GA4 to avoid it showing engagements not tracked by their platform.

GA4 vs UA: changes to event monitoring

Another major change is the way GA4 tracks events on the site. Whereas UA tracked user interactions via page views, GA4 allows advertisers to add up to 25 event metrics such as video plays and clicks on specific properties. This provides a better understanding of potential friction points on affiliate landing pages, which can lead to leakage or negatively affect conversions.

GA4 vs UA: change of attribution model

GA4 promotes data-driven attribution, using machine learning to distribute credit to different touchpoints that contributed to a conversion. This method takes into account various factors for a more nuanced attribution of credit, unlike UA which was based primarily on the last click.

However, GA4's data-driven attribution model results in data inaccuracies for non-Google channels. Google-owned channels are favoured in GA4, even though this is not officially recognised by the online giant. In addition, Google specifies some of the most troubling eligibility conditions, which can be a hindrance to proper tracking of actions: "Certain types of conversion actions must record 3.000 ad interactions and 300 conversions over 30 days to be eligible for data-based attribution. To remain eligible, these conversion actions must continue to generate 2.000 ad interactions and 200 conversions every 30 days.
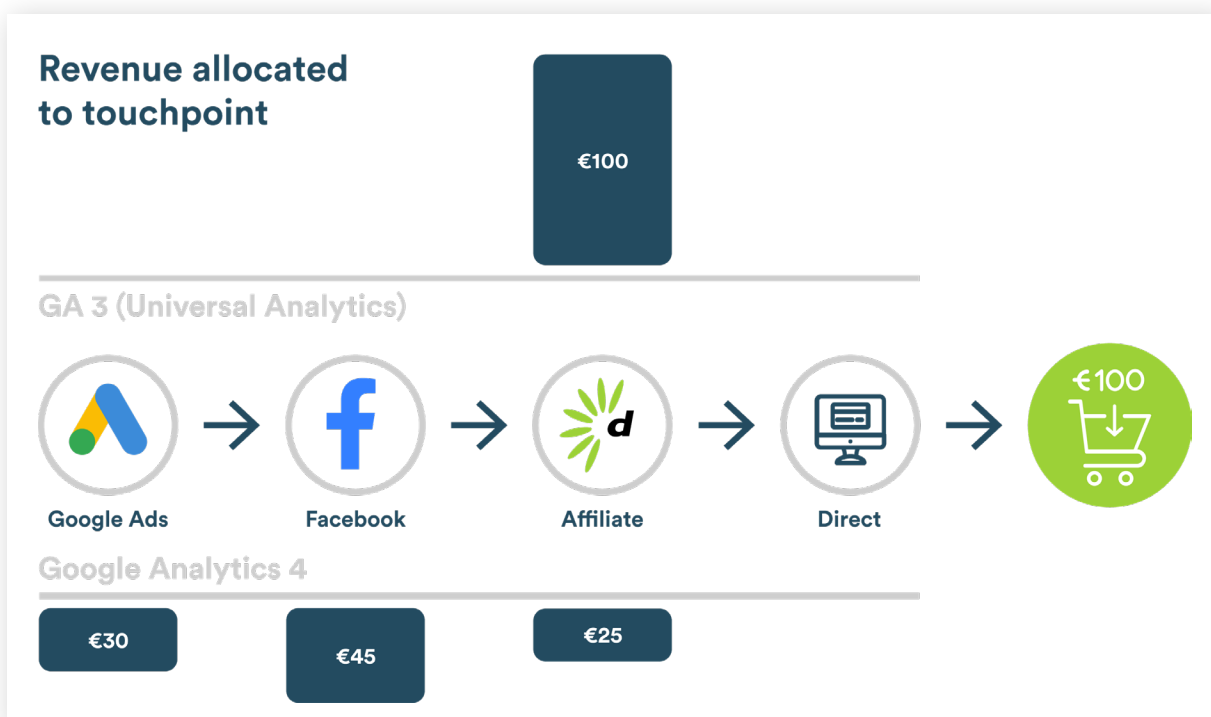
3. HOW GOOGLE PREFERS GOOGLE

Beyond the minimum threshold of 400 conversions required for a channel to become visible in the GA4 DDA model, interactions with Google channels also benefit from increased valuation in this model. Google pays particular attention to advertising data from its own channels and network, which leads to a more consistent and preferential measurement of interactions with the Google ecosystem compared to other non-Google acquisition channels.

When measuring impressions and views, the DDA only takes into account impression and view data from Google-owned channels, ignoring those from non-Google channels. This exclusion creates a significant imbalance between Google and non-Google channel touchpoints, likely to bias the DDA results in favour of the former.

Clicks on Google are recorded using the Google Click Identifier (GCLID), a unique parameter reserved for Google channels which can be automatically added to any link in these channels. In contrast, non-Google channels are asked to use a less reliable manual tagging solution (UTM parameters) to identify clicks in GA4. This difference in treatment leads GA4 to track clicks from Google channels more reliably and in greater detail than clicks from other channels. In the event of confusion between a non-Google channel and a Google channel with regard to the generation of an interaction, GA4 systematically gives priority to the Google "gclid".

IN CONCLUSION

In previous versions of Google Analytics, it was possible to disable this bias automatic beaconing to ensure permanent accounting of non-Google click data. This option has been removed in GA4, despite its necessity to avoid data discrepancies in Google Analytics products.

4. OPT FOR A STRATEGY THAT IS NOT LINKED TO GOOGLE

Marketers in Europe using GA4 report significant discrepancies of over 80% between their partner marketing platforms and Google Analytics, which can lead to incorrect decisions about the contribution of acquisition channels.

Although differences between partnership marketing and Universal Analytics have always existed, they are generally between 10 and 25%. With GA4, certain channels or segments can be successful or difficult depending on the overall mix of channels and marketing strategies of the website.

For example, a strong focus on branded search can negatively affect the performance of paid social media, but this does not necessarily mean that paid social media is performing poorly. Similarly, a longer period of consideration can have a negative impact on affiliate performance compared to a shorter period of time.

If advertisers base their spending entirely on the best-performing channels indicated by GA4, this could lead them to abandoning all other channels, skewing the data in favour of Google-owned channels.

GA4 represents a major evolution in web analytics with new features and enhancements, but its implementation requires a thorough understanding of the new features and differences from UA in order to take full advantage of them by correctly interpreting data to optimise marketing strategies.

5. OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Configure GA4 correctly
Ensure that your GA4 account is configured appropriately to reflect your business objectives and marketing strategies. This includes setting up personalised conversions and events to track specific user interactions related to your affiliate programmes.

Align your attribution methodologies
If your previous version of Google Analytics used a specific attribution methodology, make sure that your GA4 configuration is aligned with that methodology. For example, if you were using the last-click attribution model, make sure that GA4 is also configured accordingly.

Minimise tracking discrepancies
To minimise tracking discrepancies between GA4 and affiliate platforms, adopt consistent naming conventions for your campaigns and use UTM tracking URLs to accurately track the traffic sources and performance of different campaigns.

Consult affiliate platforms
Although GA4 is a powerful tool for monitoring overall website performance, it is advisable to consult the data provided by affiliate partners on a regular basis to obtain accurate information about conversions and the revenue generated by your affiliate partners.

6. CONFIGURATION RECOMMENDATIONS

Sales validation with GA4

Advertisers have often combined the use of Google Analytics with their internal sales data to verify sales. However, it is now advisable not to confirm affiliate sales on the basis of GA4 data alone. Attributed data is best viewed as information that provides a comprehensive and strategic overview of the overall performance of the marketing mix. It is not advisable to use this data to approve or reject payments, especially when there are other pay-per-click channels, whether or not they generate conversions, such as Google Ads, Facebook etc.

To improve performance monitoring, here are a few recommendations:

- Use the Google Analytics naming convention for UTM (medium, source) tracking

- Trigger the marketing tag simultaneously with the conversion event

- Use the name of the conversion event to add the required parameter (important for analysing conversions)

- Create a custom definition based on the new parameter created. This will allow you to understand exactly where the conversions are and to which channel they are attributed. Ensure that the "transaction_id" is correctly sent to Google Analytics

- Exclude referring sites that should not be taken into account for conversion analysis, such as payment domains (PayPal or others)

- Use a last-click attribution model rather than DDA. While this won't eliminate all discrepancies, it will come closer to real tracking. Go to: Administration > Data display > Attribution parameters > select the option "Paid and native channels: Last click"

GA4 reports can be adapted to provide a more accurate perspective on the value of partnership marketing. Here are some options for marketers to consider:

- A simple option is to adjust GA4's global attribution settings back to a last-click model. To do this, go to the administration tab, then to attribution settings, and select the option "last click". However, this will affect the attribution model for all GA4 channels and will only have an effect on future data, without retroactively modifying GA4 data.

- A more advanced solution for advertisers looking to reproduce their old Universal Analytics reports more faithfully in GA4 is to use the Model Comparison report. To do this, go to the advertising tab and then Model Comparison. You will initially see a screen where the affiliate channel is not defined due to channel attribution problems. To adjust this, switch to the primary dimension, usually set to "Default Channel Group", and change it to the utm attribute used to pass the channel level identifier for affiliate marketing, such as the "Source" UTM. Then configure the date range as required.

This approach will allow a side-by-side comparison of the Last click and data-driven attribution models, both attributed using the 'non-direct method'. Although these views do not correspond exactly to Universal Analytics, the Last Click view in the model comparison report will provide a closer representation of the old UA data.

- Make sure that deduplication is configured
- GA data should not be used for validation purposes
- Use tools that highlight the publisher's value: funnel report, incrementality
- Keep a close eye on rejection rates
- Encouraging advertisers to use the "last touch" model in GA

ABOUT THE CPA

Founded in 2008, the CPA (Collectif pour les Acteurs du Marketing Digital) is the trade association for players in the performance-based digital marketing sector, which is the cornerstone of any digital acquisition strategy.

The CPA represents expert Publishers and Service Providers, offering independent, tailor-made solutions to digital marketing decision-makers (advertisers and e-merchants) to support their development.
Through its activities (White Papers, Quality Charters, Recommendations, Events & Networking), the CPA is meeting four main objectives:

To regulate a teeming and constantly changing market, to provide information on best practice in digital acquisition, to ensure that it is implemented within the legal framework, and to represent the rights and interests of its members.

Faced with the proliferation of acquisition m o d e ls and increasingly complex user journeys, the members of the CPA are committed to putting their expertise, their understanding of the sector and their spirit of innovation at the service of their customers.

The CPA brings together the main players in the digital marketing market, which represents 10,000 jobs and sales of 600 million euros.