What Digital Marketers Need to Know About Cookies & Tracking by @rollerblader

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At one point in time, the cookie was the gold standard of tracking digital marketing efforts.

Flash forward even just a few years, the cookie began to date itself as attribution and multi-channel tracking became a thing.

Move forward to smartphones and, although cookies are still useful, a cookie can’t track across devices.

So can you still use them? Are they worth anything?

Yes, but you need to know how to use your data first.

This post will walk you through cookies across channels like affiliate, social media, email, and PPC and give you examples of when it can be trusted, when it can’t, and some possible alternatives for you.

By reading closely and running some of the tests, you can also make your company more profitable for a double win with the attribution and channel tests below.

Why Cookies Are Less Reliable

Consumers and Internet users became scared of “privacy” breaches and “being tracked” almost overnight. With demand comes a market and that turned into a few things.

- Cookie blockers for ads.
- Browsers making it easy to erase cookies upon closing

the window.
- Stopping cookies from being set as you hit a website.

This put the first dent in the dependability of cookies and tracking.

Next, you have last click attribution being a preferred tracking method (and for companies that really don't understand data, first click).

The problem with last click attribution is that you don't understand the entire journey of the customer, and, in some cases, you cause financial damage to your company.

A Sample Customer Journey

Here's an example I still see today that impacts how a company allocates their marketing budget and why they're spending in the wrong places:

- PPC bids on a term that is borderline profitable.
- The person goes and does a price comparison (years ago they would have found a Comparison Shopping Engine or CSE) and hits a couple of sites including a PR paid review. This now gets the cookie and because of last click, credit for the sale.
- Next the person decides not to purchase immediately because they get called into a meeting at work. A couple hours later while browsing Facebook they see a remarketing ad and click it. Now remarketing gets the sale.
- At checkout they see a coupon code box, they go to Google and type in yourdomain.com + coupons. If you allow coupon sites in your affiliate program, chances are you now have an affiliate cookie set and affiliate takes the final credit, even though it did little to nothing to help close the sale. I get into this later.

In this case, it looks like affiliates are a high volume channel because they're taking credit for a lot of sales, but in reality, affiliate just poached the sale last minute.

You can tell this if the affiliate site has incredibly high conversion rates and really short click to close time frames.

Many companies would assume spend more in affiliate because of last click attribution, but that is probably the wrong choice.

Without paying the commission to the affiliate who did not refer the sale, the PPC phrase that is borderline profitable is now more profitable.

But if you use last click, you won't know this and you may shut that phrase or ad group off. This causes damage to your company because you no longer have those customers coming in from the PPC term that was profitable, and it is because you did not have proper tracking and attribution in place.

But what if we add another step in, maybe the person couldn't get back to their computer and instead shops at home?

Now, none of the cookies are set. The influencer won't get their click, the coupon affiliate cannot intercept at checkout, and PPC which introduced the new customer will never get credit.

If you're asking why, it's simple.

The journey started and the cookies carried in all of these channels, but because the device changed there are no more cookies assigned to the customer.

The same goes if you send an email and the click happens on a mobile phone while the customer is at lunch. They get back to their desk and because there are a lot of fields making it hard to shop on a mobile phone, they checkout on their computer instead meaning the cookie is no longer applied to them.

Same with shopping from a website on their phone and purchasing in an app.

This is where tracking gets fun.

Tracking Without Cookies

You need to have a multi-device tracking platform installed or database-driven solutions, and that takes creativity, programming, and solid data analysis.

Here are four ways you can track without cookies and across devices.

1. Capture the Email Address & Name

If you can capture the email address and the name of the person, you can store this in a database and tie it to the referring channel at and post checkout.

Although it’s not perfect, if a cookie gets wiped, you can run the email addresses used at conversion back to the database and see where it was referred from.

2. Have the Person Login or Create an Account

Try to find a way to get the person to create an account or log in using a social media or Gmail account.

If the initial parameter has a UTM source of PPC and there is an affiliate later on, because it’s a logged in user you can keep track of the touchpoints for a better attribution line.

There are tools built specifically for this type of tracking that I use with my clients. Now you can start to view each of the touchpoints and begin testing which channels to keep or leave based on conversion rates dropping and total revenue going up or down.

Maybe you remove influencers and see that revenue drop without this touchpoint and/or total conversion rates decrease. That means the influencer played a part in the closing of the sale and you should keep it going and try to expand.

3. Log the IP Address & Cookie of the User

If you notice the same IP logged on from two separate devices around the same time and in the same categories or product mixes, there may be a way for you to group that into the same user.

If you can tag that user as the same customer, you can now get the same as above, but have another level of data to show what is working and what is not.

4. Capture a Full Lead via a Free Trial or Promise of a Discount

If you remove the coupon site that shows up for your brand + coupons in Google like in the example above, revenue may go up by the amount of the commission and affiliate network fee.

However, double check your conversion rates and total sales for the store (**not for the affiliate channel**) and make sure they stay the same or similar.

If they do, the coupon site may not have impacted the sale and your company can be more profitable by not having the ones intercepting your shopping cart in your affiliate program. This is just an example as a general statement, you need to test everything for yourself.

Bonus tip: The best solution I've found if you find coupon websites poaching your shopping cart and/or using affiliate links is to rank your own site for your URL + coupons in Google. By replacing the current sites showing up for that

term in all of the 1 – 5 positions with non-affiliate sites you can control the codes on the sites and you don't have to pay commissions, your customer support team to handle complaints because of non-working codes or affiliate network fees.

Conclusion

Cookies are still important and are a standard, but with a continuing demand for less tracking and less cookies like Europe's GDPR and Apple's ITP compliance blocking third-party cookies, you must adjust and keep up with the times.

The good news is that if you have someone who is good with data and attribution and can also come up with creative solutions, you will no longer be cookie dependent and can begin to scale your company with real tracking, attribution and hopefully become more profitable.

Now I'm off to go buy a cookie. Wow, this post made me hungry!

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