

A guide for successful marketing reporting

How to improve Google Analytics for meaningful measurement



Is your marketing reporting based on accurate Google Analytics data?

One of the biggest challenges with digital data tracking is having a trustworthy infrastructure setup to measure the right outcomes. Whether you're using digital data to evaluate how your media is performing or inform your content strategy, without the right configuration, you're at the risk of making ill-informed decisions.

Successful marketing strategies need to be built on reliable data infrastructure. It's worth spending extra resource to ensure website tracking in Google Analytics (GA) is accurate to enable meaningful marketing reporting.

Here are ten things you need to have in place.

TL;DR: if you're pressed for time, refer to 'problem' and 'action' points at the end of each recommendation.

1. Meaningful classification of traffic sources

Are you seeing a lot of website traffic grouped under the ambiguous channel called 'Other'? Is 'Paid Search' channel one group that contains both Brand and Generic ad traffic? What about traffic from paid partnerships not being categorised in an expected channel?

<input type="checkbox"/>	1. Organic Search	307,736 (30.54%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	2. (Other)	259,645 (25.77%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	3. Direct	164,854 (16.36%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	4. Branded Paid Search	106,984 (10.62%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	5. Generic Paid Search	106,111 (10.53%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	6. Referral	25,859 (2.57%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	7. Email	14,434 (1.43%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	8. Social	12,833 (1.27%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	9. Display	7,725 (0.77%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	10. Paid Search	1,502 (0.15%)

Sounds like your channel definitions aren't set up for meaningful analysis.

Traffic is organised in channels throughout analytics reports, which allows you to quickly check how traffic is performing on an aggregate level. Miscategorisation means that the correct channel is not going to get conversions and sales attributed to it, and make it difficult to see top line view of channel performance.

GA has a list of pre-defined channels based on a common list of traffic sources. It's a decent starting point but it doesn't serve most reporting objectives. Some sources don't fit the pre-defined list, campaigns on the same platform have different objectives, identical traffic classifiers are spelt or capitalised differently, and so on. There's a myriad of reasons why you see traffic categorised incorrectly in GA. It's all to do with what rules have been set up (or the lack of customisation) to tell GA how to classify this traffic.

Problem

Website traffic is not categorised in correct and expected channel groupings

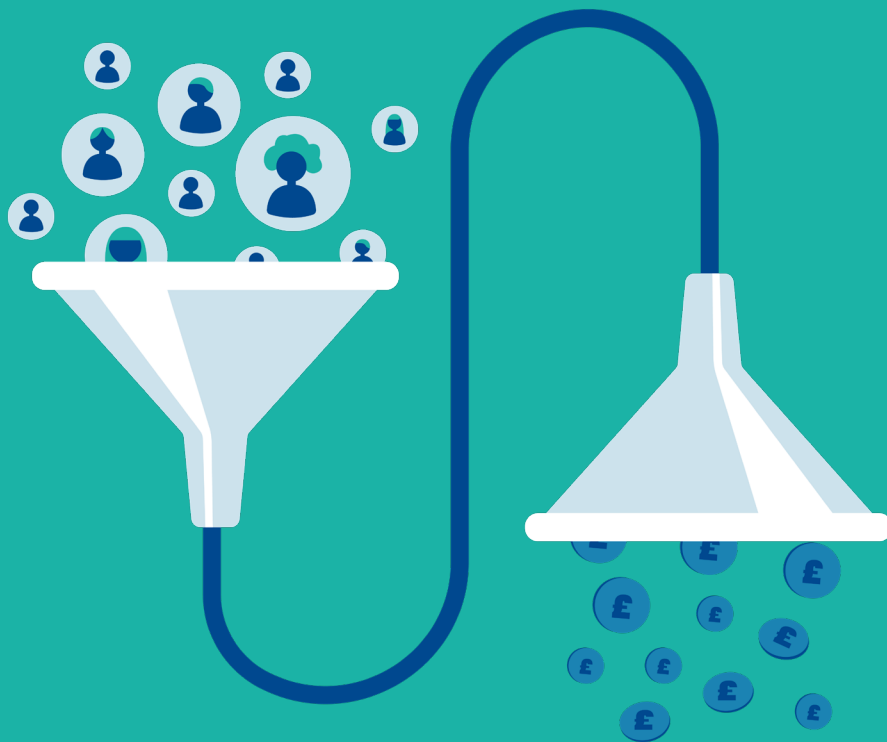
Action

Amend the channel definition rules so traffic is categorised accurately

2. Conversions are tracking

Tracking website conversions allows you to accurately evaluate the performance of ads and campaigns. But when forms change, website navigation gets updated, payment page is replaced with a better one, conversion tracking is often forgotten. The setup is not aligned with the site changes as they happen, which results in data tracking breaking and a loss in valuable conversion data.

Conversions are a fundamental component of any digital analytics infrastructure and, just like any other part of tracking, require setting up, checking and updating in line with website changes. They're needed when analysing the number of leads generated, new registrations, sales by new visits, and more. They're one of the most important metrics in GA because they demonstrate the performance of website, content and marketing.



Problem

There are no conversions tracked or data tracking is broken

Action

Set up conversion tracking using goal completions or update existing goals if they're not tracking anymore

3. Expanded view of customer life cycle

GA is useful for dedicated website data analysis, but in our increasingly convoluted world, we want to connect information from disparate sources for a more holistic view of customers.

You can connect analytics with other Google ad platforms and partner products to share data between platforms, and improve analysis capabilities by being able to see the entire customer journey from an ad click or Google Search to conversion on the website.

The tools you choose to connect to depend on your use case and what you have access to. Some integrations are also off limits due to the premium access requirements, such as any 360 marketing platforms. At the very minimum you should utilise the free integrations to [Google Ads](#), if using paid search ads, and [Search Console](#) for organic performance visibility.



Problem

GA is not set up with product integrations













Action

[Add links in GA settings to platforms you have access to](#)

4. Page links are tracked in a clean way

A lot of the traffic arrives to the website with various texts and numbers added to the end of the link. These parameters help GA classify traffic correctly, such as channels in #1. These could be added to visits coming from social or paid search ads, or partnership campaigns – anything that needs grouping in a specified way. So whilst these parameters have a purpose, they pollute reports by making the same link with different parameters look unique to GA. This has an impact on the level of effort and hours required to do meaningful content performance analysis.

Looking at any page specific report in analytics, you'll recognise parameters easily by looking for a question mark in the link, which precedes the parameters.

31.		887 (0.74%)
32.		870 (0.72%)
33.		836 (0.69%)
34.		797 (0.66%)
35.		790 (0.66%)
36.		762 (0.63%)
37.		722 (0.60%)
38.		707 (0.59%)
39.		640 (0.53%)
40.		617 (0.51%)
41.		604 (0.50%)
42.		557 (0.46%)

Have a quick look at the scale of the issue too. If affected pages make up less than 2% of total page views, there is no cause for worry. But it's still worth making a small update to analytics towards clean reporting on pages.

And if you really need to report on these parameters, then they can be pulled into a different custom field in GA whilst still keeping the links clean.

Problem

Links are broken up because parameters make them look unique to GA

Action

Add a filter to the reporting view to exclude parameters from links

5. There are no self referrals tracked

When someone clicks a link on another site to get to the client's site, this is classified as a referral traffic in GA because they were 'referred' to the site. A valid setup until you start seeing self referrals, so any visits that seem to have come from the client's live site.

This causes unreliable acquisition data reporting, attribution and inflated sessions. You'll see multiple sessions where you should be seeing only one because sessions are split due to this change in source.

This is especially problematic when the visit has come from your campaign but doesn't end up getting the conversion attributed because it looks to have come from a different source now.

Self-referrals often mean there are issues with implementation. It could be broken or missing tracking on the site, incorrect tracking setup across multiple domains that the client owns. This is a technical issue so will need to be investigated by the client and developers.



Problem

Client's website is shown as a referral in acquisition reports

Action

Raise the issue with the client and developers for them to investigate where tracking is missing or has broken

6. Visits from payment portal don't trigger a new visit

Similarly to the previous point, GA by default will record any traffic coming from the payment providers as referral traffic. In principle fine, if it's a genuine referral; but if this payment provider is implemented on the site, seeing this traffic categorised as referral means that these visits are being broken.

		Acquisition
<input type="checkbox"/>	Source ?	Sessions ? ↓
<input type="checkbox"/>		812,349 % of Total: 10.07% (8,064,186)
<input type="checkbox"/>		124,021 (15.27%)
<input type="checkbox"/>		116,458 (14.34%)
<input type="checkbox"/>		81,329 (10.01%)
<input type="checkbox"/>		75,996 (9.36%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	5. paypal.com	51,087 (6.29%)
<input type="checkbox"/>		46,813 (5.76%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	7. t.co	42,249 (5.20%)

A referral automatically triggers a new session but by making a simple change to settings, you can inform GA which referrals shouldn't trigger a new visit. If you do want traffic from specific sites to trigger a new session, then you don't need to make an update.

Problem

Payment portal is tracked as a referral in acquisition reports

Action

Exclude these visits from being tracked as a referral

7. Campaigns are tagged

Traffic coming from ad campaigns, social networks, search engines and other sources is found in analytics reports as campaigns and traffic sources. You want to be able to analyse these effectively and understand whether your product launch campaign is performing better in search or on social. To be able to do that, campaign traffic has to arrive to the site with tags and parameters containing the information that signals to GA how these need to be grouped.

```
http://www.example.com/?utm_source=exampleblog&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=summer-sale
http://www.example.com/?utm_source=newsletter1&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=summer-sale
http://www.example.com/?utm_source=newsletter1&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=summer-sale&utm_content=toplink
```

Without campaign tags or parameters, all traffic will appear under organic, referral or direct sources instead.

Parameters can be added to campaigns either manually or automatically. The latter is recommended for ad platforms where this option is available.

Never tag internal site links with campaign parameters. GA will see any traffic coming with parameters as having come from outside of the site, which starts a new visit. This breaks up the session and the original source, like a paid one, doesn't get the credit.

Problem

Campaign data isn't grouped in expected buckets due to the lack of or inconsistent tagging

Action

Implement consistent approach to campaign tagging and follow best practices

8. Spam and test traffic isn't tracked

It's likely that client's GA is recording traffic not only from the main website. This could be from staging and test environments, sub domains, service sites (eg Google Translate or Web Light), bot and spam sites, and others. Having any other data in your reports that is not actual live data will result in skewed reports and you may be reporting false numbers.

You want to ensure that traffic in GA is accurate and only for the website that is being reported on, whether it's only the main site, or live site + sub domains. This is where we check what domains have been tracked (called hostnames in GA).

The easiest solution is to only include traffic from domains that are valid. So anything else that doesn't match the allowed list of domains will not be included in GA reporting.



Problem

GA data includes spam and test traffic skewing reporting

Action

Update GA filter settings so only traffic from a valid domain is tracked

9. Text is automatically lowercased

Using a mixture of lowercase and uppercase letters for the same campaign name or ad platform source will break up data in GA. This is caused by GA seeing as everything unique, unless every letter matches identically. Mixed cases make for messy report data, which is hard to analyse.

This is often seen in keywords that people enter on the site, texts used in dropdown lists, product models selected by the customer, and so on. Any text that is captured for GA reporting is at the risk of being captured multiple times due to the use of mixed cases.

Instead of the risk of misinterpreting data or missing partial data because it's not grouped under the same value, a simple update means that all values are automatically recorded as lowercase no matter how the customer typed it on the site or how you spelt it when tagging a campaign.



Problem

You're seeing a mixture of lowercase and uppercase data in GA

Action

Add a filter to turn everything lowercase automatically

10. Only unique sales are tracked

If duplicate sales are being recorded in GA there'll be issues with over-reporting of revenue and transactions, misattribution of conversions and discrepancies with internal sales records. You'll see skewed sales data against campaigns you're analysing, making it look like they performed better than was the case.

The reason why sales are counted more than once is that duplicate sales information is being sent to GA. It can happen because the confirmation page was reloaded triggering duplicate information.

It's a common problem for any business with ecommerce tracking and a really easy one to check for. Compare the number of rows against the total number of transactions. If the number of transactions is higher than the number of rows, then duplicate transactions are being logged in GA. An even easier method is to [add a custom report to the desired view](#), and check the numbers that way.

Transaction ID ?	Transactions ?
	4,827 % of Total: 100.00% (4,827)
1.	5 (0.10%)
2.	5 (0.10%)
3.	4 (0.08%)
4.	4 (0.08%)
5.	4 (0.08%)
6.	3 (0.06%)
7.	3 (0.06%)
8.	3 (0.06%)
9.	3 (0.06%)
10.	3 (0.06%)

Show rows: 10 Go to: 1 1-10 of 4648

Whilst this is something you can easily check, it's not something you can easily fix. This one requires some work from developers to ensure that the transaction data is sent only once from the confirmation page.

Problem

Duplicate transactions are tracked in GA

Action

[Check for the problem with the custom report](#), and inform client and developers if duplicates are tracked

Bonus tip

Just like a website is ever evolving and updated with the latest products, new offers or cool functionality, so does the digital analytics tracking infrastructure require maintenance to maintain data integrity and quality.

Regular web and app updates made by development teams and changing of ownership often mean that digital data tracking infrastructure doesn't get the same attention and can quickly become outdated as a result. Periodic reviews of Google Analytics setup are critical to ensure that the data is trusted and reliable; and that marketing decisions can be made with confidence.

Whilst some recommendations need less frequent checks, ie tracking data from valid domains, any key reports should be checked a lot more frequently. For example, if the website or ad campaigns get updated every month, check that key reports containing marketing, conversions and custom tracking are collecting data on a monthly basis. Anything on the settings level can be sense checked every 3 – 6 months.

With key recommendations and regular checks in place, you'll be equipped with reliable Google Analytics data to make informed marketing decisions.