How Attribution Models Affect an Affiliate Program

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Affiliate programs are an essential component of digital sales strategies, evolving with technological advancements and shifting consumer behaviors. In 2025, advertisers must navigate a more complex landscape of attribution models to optimize their programs effectively. This updated paper builds on foundational insights, incorporating new data and trends to better equip advertisers with the knowledge to choose the right attribution model.

What Is an Attribution Model?

Attribution is giving proper credit to types of partners involved in a customer's experience leading up to making a purchase. Attribution can refer to acknowledging the different types of marketing partners or affiliates who help influence or convert someone to an actionable customer.

According to Google, an attribution model is the rule, or set of rules, that determines how credit for sales and conversions is assigned to touchpoints in conversion paths. For example, the Last Interaction model in Analytics assigns 100% credit to the final touchpoints (i.e., clicks) that immediately precede sales or conversions.

Updated Attribution Models and Their Implications

- **First-Click Attribution**
  - **Definition:** First-Click attribution assigns 100% of the value to the first click in a clickstream. The advertiser determines a lookback window, often between 1-90 days. After a sale, the first click within the determined lookback window receives 100% of the value.
  - **Considerations:**
    - The first-click attribution model encourages top of funnel (early journey) publishers.
    - Other publishers, including those who may have played a more important or time-consuming role in the customer's purchase journey, are not rewarded for their efforts. For example, with First-Click Attribution, a Loyalty publisher would not receive commission if the customer first clicked an advertiser's affiliate link on Instagram within the lookback window.

- **Last-Click Attribution**
  - **Definition**: The final affiliate touchpoint in the sales funnel receives 100% of the attribution.
  - **Considerations:**
    - This remains one of the simplest and most widely adopted models, particularly effective for loyalty and cashback programs that drive last-minute purchase decisions.
    - By ignoring other contributing touchpoints, this model misses opportunities to reward earlier affiliates, such as comparison sites and influencers. 35% of affiliate sales in 2025 involve multiple touchpoints, highlighting the limitations of a singular focus on the last click.

- **Coupon Code Attribution**
  - **Definition**: A unique, exclusive coupon code is tied to a specific affiliate, ensuring they receive 100% of the sale's credit when the code is used at checkout.
  - **Considerations:**:
    - Protects affiliates from clickstream interference and guarantees commissions regardless of the customer's journey. It's particularly beneficial for affiliates operating on platforms where clickable links are impractical, like podcasts or offline advertising.
    - If customers share these codes through unofficial channels, advertisers may lose tracking data, and affiliates might not generate direct traffic. Studies show 20% of private coupon codes are redeemed without prior engagement with the issuing affiliate.

- **Preferred Publisher Attribution**
  - **Definition**: A preferred publisher designated by the advertiser receives 100% of the credit for any sale they touch, regardless of their position in the funnel.
  - **Considerations**:
    - Ensures high-performing or strategic partners receive guaranteed credit, incentivizing deeper collaboration and unique promotions.
    - Smaller affiliates often feel overlooked, as preferred publishers can dominate conversions even when they played a minor role. This can reduce overall network diversity and innovation.

- **Custom Attribution**
  - **Definition**: A bespoke attribution setup, allowing advertisers to combine models or create entirely unique rules for distributing credit.
  - **Considerations**:
    - Offers flexibility, enabling advertisers to align attribution with specific business objectives or channel strategies. Custom rules can prioritize high-value actions, such as long engagement times or high-conversion channels.
    - Complexity can increase implementation and maintenance costs. Without proper transparency, affiliates may struggle to understand or trust custom attribution rules.

- **Linear Attribution**
  - **Definition**: Every touchpoint in the conversion path, including affiliates and other marketing channels, shares equal credit for the sale.
  - **Considerations**:
    - This model fairly distributes value across all contributors, encouraging collaboration between affiliates in the funnel. Particularly effective in multi-touch environments, where the average consumer engages with 3-4 affiliates before purchasing.
    - Equal credit may undervalue critical contributors, such as the first click that initiated the journey or the last click that sealed the deal, leading to inefficiencies in commission allocation.

- **Time Decay Attribution**
  - **Definition**: Touchpoints closest in time to the sale receive the most credit, while earlier engagements receive progressively less.
  - **Considerations**:
    - Recognizes and rewards the affiliates that play a decisive role in pushing customers to convert. Time Decay Attribution works well for high-consideration purchases, where the final interactions often reflect key decision-making moments.
    - Early touchpoints, such as influencers or review sites, often receive minimal credit, despite driving initial interest. This is problematic in categories where 60% of consumers begin their research weeks before purchasing.

Preferred Publisher Status

Preferred publisher status is a more recent offering whereby an affiliate network will allow one publisher to have a “Preferred” status when it comes to a specific merchant. Generally, the merchant will select a specific publisher to garner Preferred status in exchange for preferential treatment (i.e. “free” on-site placements, emails, newsletter mentions, featured homepage placement, etc.). As a preferred publisher, the affiliate just needs to be one touch point at any spot within the shopping funnel to earn the entire click. That means the Preferred Publisher could be the first click, last click or anywhere in between before the consumer completes his or her purchase. No matter who else is in the overall process, the Preferred Publisher is the only one that will receive credit for the sale.

- **Updates in 2025:** Some networks leverage blockchain to ensure transparency in preferred publisher contracts, addressing concerns of "click theft."
- **Considerations:** Preferred publisher dominance skews rewards, particularly for smaller affiliates, causing friction within affiliate ecosystems. Critics argue that the model discourages innovation among non-preferred publishers.

Shared Commissions

- **Advancements:** Enhanced AI-driven attribution platforms now allow dynamic shared commission splits based on engagement metrics like time on page, click depth, and assisted conversions. This ensures fairer distribution.
- **Considerations:** Loyalty and cashback sites continue to face challenges explaining fluctuating cashback rates to consumers. Even with predictive models, some networks still struggle to fairly reward high-funnel contributors.

New Developments in Affiliate Attribution Tools

Affiliate networks in 2025 are embracing more nuanced attribution models, driven by data-rich environments and consumer expectations for personalization:

1. **Hybrid Attribution Models:** Platforms are now offering customizable hybrid models, combining linear, time decay, and weighted rules to suit advertisers' unique needs.
2. **AI-Powered Insights:** Advanced analytics tools leverage machine learning to provide real-time insights into attribution, highlighting undervalued publishers and optimizing commission strategies.
3. **Privacy-First Tracking:** Post-cookie solutions such as server-to-server tracking and consent-based IDs ensure compliance with GDPR 2.0 and other regulations while maintaining accurate attribution data.
4. **Event Attribution:** Attributing any additional actions or stages outside of the main conversion.
5. **Email Attribution:** Attributing conversions when the converting user’s email address has already been previously attributed to an affiliate.

Key Considerations for 2025

1. **Cross-Device Journeys:** With **77% of consumers using multiple devices during their purchase path**, advertisers must prioritize cross-device attribution models that ensure fair credit distribution.
2. **Influencer and Content Affiliates:** Influencers may now drive over **30% of affiliate program revenue**, emphasizing the need for models that reward upper-funnel engagement.
3. **AI and Blockchain:** AI-enhanced models are increasingly essential for making sense of vast datasets, while blockchain offers unprecedented transparency and security in attribution reporting.

Attribution Tools by Network

Every affiliate network or platform chooses what it wants for an attribution model. While “last click” is still the most popular approach, affiliate networks have embraced different models based upon their users. What follows is a snapshot of some of the PMA member networks and platforms and which models are currently part of their offerings.

- **First Click**: The first affiliate touched in the sales funnel gets 100% of the attribution.
- **Last Click**: The last affiliate touched in the sales funnel gets 100% of the attribution.
- **Coupon Code Attribution**: An exclusive coupon code is tied to a specific affiliate. The unique code will attribute 100% of sales to the affiliate based on that coupon code.
- **Preferred Publisher:** No matter how many other touchpoints are in the sales funnel, if a Preferred Publisher is one of them, they will get 100% of the attribution.
- **Custom Attribution**: Unique attribution setup that could be any combination of the other models or something new.
- **Linear**: Each touchpoint in the conversion path - multiple affiliates or various sources such as Paid Search, Social Network, Email, and Direct channels - would share equal credit for the sale.
- **Time Decay:** The touchpoints closest in time to the sale or conversion get the credit.

Network/ Platform	First Click	Last Click	Coupon Code	Preferred Publisher	Custom	Linear	Time Decay
Ascend by Partnerize	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Avantlink	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Awin	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
CJ Affiliate	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Everflow	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Inflektion.ai	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
LinkConnector	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Partnerize	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rakuten Advertising	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
ShareASale	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
UberNet	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No

The affiliate marketing industry was built on Last-Click attribution. While this has served the industry well enough in growing a mature and respected piece of the digital sales channel for many companies, the rise in new technology has allowed virtually any advertiser to choose an attribution model that better suits the acquisition of customers and sales they value most. Moving forward, we will continue to see networks offer more levers for advertisers in how they compensate affiliates.

Conclusion

Attribution in affiliate marketing is more sophisticated in 2025 than ever before. Advertisers must balance fairness with simplicity, rewarding all touchpoints appropriately while maintaining transparency. With tools and models continuously evolving, those who invest in cutting-edge attribution strategies will gain a significant competitive advantage in the affiliate space.

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