A Deep Dive Into the Most Controversial Attribution Models of 2025

Examining Affiliate Attribution in a Multi-Channel Performance Marketing Landscape

Created by:
PMA Coupons & Deals Council

Performance Marketing Association

Introduction

Affiliate marketing has become an integral part of the digital marketing ecosystem, yet attribution assignment remains a contentious and highly debated issue. Attribution models determine how value is distributed among affiliates, publishers, and advertisers—decisions that directly impact performance, fairness, and growth across the ecosystem. Too often, attribution is siloed, overlooking the influence of other marketing channels such as paid search, email, and social media. This lack of cross-channel insight can misrepresent performance, skew incentives, and create inefficiencies throughout the performance marketing space.

This article explores three of the most debated attribution models in affiliate marketing:

- **Last-Click Attribution**: The industry standard, but often criticized for its oversimplification.
- **Preferred Publisher Attribution**: A model that incentivizes top performers, sometimes at the cost of competition.
- **Multi-Touch Attribution**: A model that credits all customer touchpoints to reflect the full journey, yet struggles with complexity and limited adoption.

Each model is analyzed through industry research and practical insight.

Last-Click Attribution: Simplicity at the Cost of Accuracy

Model Overview

Last-click attribution assigns 100% of the conversion credit to the final affiliate interaction before purchase. This model remains popular due to its simplicity and historical precedence—most affiliate networks, including Awin, default to this approach (Sherer, 2017). It assumes that the final interaction was the most decisive, thus deserving full credit.

How it works

- **Single-Touch Credit Assignment**: Credit is given entirely to the last affiliate click before purchase, regardless of earlier touchpoints.
- **Simplified Tracking Logic**: Built-in cookie-based tracking systems make it easy to implement across affiliate programs (Sramek, 2025).

Strengths

- **Ease of Implementation**: It requires minimal tracking infrastructure and is compatible with most affiliate network platforms.
- **Clear Conversion Path:** The linear model aligns with traditional reporting structures, offering direct cause-effect narratives that are easy for marketers to interpret.
- **Aligns with Transactional Incentives**: Since the last interaction typically reflects high purchase intent, advertisers often view it as the most valuable. In many cases, it coincides with a point-of-sale trigger, such as applying a coupon code or activating a cashback offer.

Limitations

- **Undervalues Upper-Funnel Affiliates**: Influencers, for example, are an upper funnel affiliate who oftentimes lose attribution under the last click attribution. This issue has received ample attention recently due to the pending lawsuits with some of the largest publishers as detailed in the Affiliate Attribution and Last Click Lawsuits article by the Performance Marketing Association (Performance Marketing Association, 2025).
- **Promotes Click Hijacking**: Coupon and loyalty sites are incentivized to insert themselves at the final touchpoint, sometimes seconds before conversion, leading to credit misallocation (Stevens, 2020).
- **Neglects Other Marketing Channels**: Last-click ignores contributions from email, paid search, SEO, display ads, and offline channels (Ng, 2024). A user who was initially influenced by a blog post or a paid social ad, but completed the purchase via a cashback site, effectively erases early contributions from reporting.

Industry Insight

According to LeadsRx (2024), “Today’s consumers are interacting with brands through a variety of touchpoints—often multiple times before making a final purchasing decision. From engaging with social media ads to clicking on an email, browsing a website, or listening to a podcast, customers are rarely convinced by just one touchpoint.” (LeadsRX, 2024). The Performance Marketing Association (PMA) further highlights that reliance on last-click undervalues collaborative partner networks and discourages strategic content creation. Studies in digital attribution suggest that single-touch models often create systemic biases that misallocate budget and undermine channel collaboration (Performance Marketing Association, 2025).

Future Consideration

Despite its flaws, last-click remains dominant. However, brands seeking to improve performance attribution are increasingly looking to multi-touch frameworks, albeit cautiously due to technical and operational barriers. Industry leaders are beginning to incorporate multi-touch models for internal insights, even if payouts remain last-click based.

Preferred Publisher Attribution: Strategic Advantage or Market Distortion?

Model Overview

Preferred Publisher Attribution gives exclusive credit to a designated partner, regardless of other affiliate interactions in the conversion path (Performance Marketing Association, 2025). This model is used to secure premium placements with high-performing affiliates in some cases.

How It Works

- **Custom Attribution Configuration:** Brands may assign priority status to a chosen affiliate, adjusting their tracking setup so that this partner receives full credit for any sale they're part of no matter when they engaged the customer during the buying process.
- **Performance-Driven Partnership Deals:** These agreements are often formalized in contracts, where guaranteed attribution is exchanged for high-value placements like homepage features or exclusive campaign promotions.

Strengths

- **Secures Premium Exposure**: Brands can negotiate homepage placements, exclusive email newsletters, or seasonal campaign features with influential publishers based on this attribution structure.
- **Attracts Scalable Media Investment:** Predictable revenue allows preferred partners to invest in media buying, paid placements, and more robust content strategies.

Limitations

- **Reduces Competition**: Smaller affiliates are systematically excluded from commissions, reducing diversity in the affiliate mix. This leads to consolidation, where few players get the share of budget and exposure.
- **Breaks Attribution Logic:** The override mechanism undermines accuracy and fairness in reward distribution, often rewarding affiliates with minimal incremental impact.
- **Increases Dependence**: Advertisers risk over-reliance on a few affiliates, making them vulnerable to shifting partner priorities, platform changes, or escalated commission demands.

Industry Insight

Preferred Publisher Attribution models, which allocate exclusive credit to designated affiliates, have sparked debate regarding their impact on market dynamics. According to the "State of the Nation 2024: Affiliate and Partner Marketing" report by Partnerize (Ellis, 2024), such models can lead to consolidation within the affiliate landscape, potentially stifling competition and innovation. The report emphasizes the importance of fostering a diverse affiliate mix to maintain a healthy and dynamic market.

Future Consideration

This model should only be employed within a diversified strategy. Used exclusively, it erodes competitive integrity and long-tail affiliate participation, which are essential to sustainable growth. Advertisers must evaluate preferred partnerships and balance them with inclusive attribution logic across their program.

Exploring Multi-Touch Attribution: Beyond Single-Click Models

Model Overview

Multi-touch attribution frameworks represent a category of models that assign value across various consumer touchpoints using rule-based (e.g., linear, time-decay, position-based) or algorithmic methods (Segment, n.d.). These models aim to reflect the full consumer journey by distributing credit across all relevant interactions.

How it Works

- **Credit Distribution Across Touchpoints:** Multi-touch attribution assigns weighted credit to all marketing interactions such as affiliate links, paid ads, emails, and influencer content based on predefined rules or algorithmic models that assess each touchpoint's impact on conversion (Salesforce, n.d.).
- **Technical Implementation**: It requires integration with analytics tools and affiliate platforms to track the full customer journey and accurately map value across channels (Dougherty, 2024).

Multi-Touch Attribution Models

1. **Linear Attribution:** Equal weight to all touchpoints. Useful for campaigns where each interaction contributes similarly to conversion.
2. **Time Decay:** Later touchpoints receive more credit. Ideal for urgency-driven purchases or retargeting-heavy funnels.
3. **Position-Based (U-Shaped):** Emphasizes first and last interactions. Common in B2B and high-consideration retail purchases.
4. **Algorithmic/Custom Models:** Use historical performance data and machine learning to assign value based on real behavioral patterns.

Strengths

- **Enhanced Attribution Accuracy:** In some instances, it captures the full customer journey to better assess each affiliate and channel's incremental value.
- **Equitable Value Distribution:** Ensures fair credit for upper- and mid-funnel affiliates, promoting a more balanced and sustainable ecosystem.
- **Improved Budget Allocation:** In the article "How Multi-Touch Attribution Drives Better ROI Across All Channels" by LeadsRX (LeadsRX, 2024) claims multi touch attribution allows for smarter investment by identifying which touchpoints drive the greatest impact.

Limitations

- **Limited in Commission Payouts**: While useful analytically, few advertisers operationalize these models for affiliate payments.
- **Requires Custom Integration**: Multi-touch models need enhanced data collection and integration with platforms like Google Analytics 4, Adobe Experience Cloud, or custom CDPs (Adobe, 2024).
- **Complexity in Communication:** Publishers often struggle to understand variable commission models, leading to confusion and mistrust if transparency is not maintained.

Industry Insight

Multi-touch models offer greater attribution fidelity but are rarely executed at scale in affiliate-specific contexts due to technical constraints and stakeholder complexity. They are more commonly used for internal decision-making, media mix modeling, and understanding the role of digital channels holistically.

AI-Driven Attribution: Promise and Pitfalls

Model Overview

AI attribution uses machine learning to dynamically assign value based on a user's path to conversion (Adobe, 2024). It adjusts weighting in real time, often across all digital channels, including affiliate, search, social, and email. Unlike rules-based attribution, AI continuously adapts based on ongoing performance signals (Adobe, 2023).

Strengths

- **Dynamic Credit Assignment**: AI models optimize weightings based on historical behavioral trends and probabilistic modeling. Companies like Tracify have already executed dynamic behavior based attribution (tracify.ai, n.d.).
- **Cross-Channel Analysis:** Provides a holistic view of digital performance by linking touch points across channels and devices.
- **Custom Attribution Models**: AI can generate unique models per segment or customer type, enabling hyper-personalized marketing strategies (LeadsRX, 2024).

Limitations

- **Fraud Detection Not Inherent:** While AI can aid fraud detection, this is a separate function from attribution modeling. Attribution models do not inherently identify fraud and should not be relied upon for compliance.
- **Not Widely Used for Commissioning:** Most AI attribution is analytical, not transactional. Advertisers rarely use these models to determine affiliate payments due to lack of transparency and inconsistent benchmarks.

Industry Insight

A 2024 peer-reviewed study published in the Journal of Interactive Marketing found that AI-driven attribution models significantly improve the accuracy of multi-channel marketing measurement, particularly when supported by high-quality first-party data. The research emphasizes that while AI enables more dynamic and granular attribution across touchpoints, its effectiveness relies on sustained investment in data infrastructure and organizational readiness to interpret complex, algorithmic outputs (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2024).

Future Consideration

As artificial intelligence becomes more important and frequently integrated into digital marketing, its role in shaping how value is assigned across affiliate programs is growing rapidly. To make AI-driven attribution models more widely adopted, the industry must address several key challenges. One major factor is transparency—both advertisers and affiliates need a clearer understanding of how credit is determined to build confidence in these systems. Another issue is accessibility; many current tools are too costly or complex to implement at scale. Finally, there's a need for consistent standards that define how AI

attribution should be used in compensation models. Without shared guidelines, adoption will likely remain limited to analytical insights rather than real-world payment structures (CustomGPT, 2025).

Attribution in a Cookieless Future: Rethinking Data Infrastructure

The End of Third-Party Cookies

Google Chrome represents 66.3% of global browser usage according to StatCounter (Statcounter, 2025). This disrupts traditional tracking mechanisms used in affiliate programs since the industry is accustomed to working with third party cookies for tracking and other marketing activities.

Impacts on Affiliate Marketing

- **Loss of Cross-Domain Tracking:** Without cookies, tracking users across affiliate sites and advertiser properties becomes limited in specific channels like hobbyist content blogs, as opposed to a channel like Card Linked Offer publishers who don't rely on Third Party Cookies for example (Cardlytics, n.d.).
- **Shift to First-Party Data:** Brands must leverage email addresses, login data, and server-side tracking, etc. to maintain attribution fidelity and measurement standards.

New Solutions

- **Affiliate ID Tracking:** Click IDs, passed directly via URL parameters, are replacing cookie-based session tracking. These IDs can persist within first-party storage mechanisms.
- **Server-to-Server (S2S) Tracking**: Advertisers now share conversion data via APIs, ensuring privacy-compliant and accurate attribution. Leading networks have already migrated the majority of their clients to this model (Partnerstack, 2024).

Industry Misunderstandings

- **Affiliate Visibility Not Reduced:** Affiliates have never had full access to granular behavioral data. Attribution changes do not remove visibility they never had.
- **Data Sharing Concerns Overstated**: Most advertisers are already sharing the same conversion data pre- and post-cookie, with no new obligations beyond compliance. Concerns about data leakage or overexposure are largely theoretical.

Conclusion

Affiliate marketing is in the midst of a major shift. Older approaches, like last-click attribution, are becoming outdated in today's complex, multi-channel environment. Newer attribution models such as multi-touch models and those who will be powered by AI in the future more commonly are looking to provide a clearer picture of how conversions happen. With the decline of third-party cookies, adopting systems based on first-party data and privacy conscious practices is also becoming increasingly important.

Looking ahead, how attribution evolves will depend on how willing the industry is to rethink how credit is shared. With better data tools and more advanced technology available, marketers now have the opportunity to create systems that are not just efficient, but also fair and forward-thinking.

References

Adobe. (2023, 14 3). *Attribution AI overview*. Adobe. https://experienceleague.adobe.com/en/docs/experience-platform/intelligent-services/attribution-ai/overview

Adobe. (2024, 2 13). *Introduction to Attribution AI*. Adobe. https://experienceleague.adobe.com/en/docs/platform-learn/tutorials/intelligent-services/introduction-to-attribution-ai

Cardlytics. (n.d.). *Cardlytics*. Card-linked Offers 101. https://www.cardlytics.com/blog/card-linked-offers-101

CustomGPT. (2025). *Exploring AI Affiliate Programs: What You Need to Know in 2025*. CustomGPT. https://customgpt.ai/exploring-ai-affiliate-programs/

Dougherty, S. (2024, 11 26). *Top multi-touch attribution tools for 2025*. Funnel.IO. https://funnel.io/blog/top-mta-tools-2025

Ellis, K. (2024, 10 23). *[REPORT] State of the Nation 2024: Affiliate and Partner Marketing*. Partnerize. https://partnerize.com/resources/blog/report-state-of-the-nation-2024-affiliate-and-partner-marketing

Emerald Publishing Limited. (2024, 7 10). *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*. Scispace. https://scispace.com/journals/journal-of-research-in-interactive-marketing-3n2cgze8

LeadsRX. (2024, 8 7). *Leveraging AI for Enhanced Attribution Accuracy*. LeadsRX. https://leadsrx.com/resources/blog/leveraging-ai-for-enhanced-attribution-accuracy/

leadsrx. (2024, 09 12). *Why Last-Click Attribution is Failing Marketers in 2024*. leadsrx. https://leadsrx.com/resources/blog/why-last-click-attribution-is-failing-marketers-in-2024/

leadsrx. (2024, 12 27). *How Multi-Touch Attribution Drives Better ROI Across All Channels*. leadsrx. https://leadsrx.com/resources/blog/how-multi-touch-attribution-drives-better-roi-across-all-channels/

Ng, T. (2024, 11 7). *Last Click Attribution: Why It Fails and What to Do Next (2025)*. trueprofit. https://trueprofit.io/blog/last-click-attribution

Partnerstack. (2024, 4). *Partnerstack*. Introduction to server to server (S2S) tracking. https://docs.partnerstack.com/docs/server-to-server-s2s-tracking#:~:text=A%20Server%2Dto%2Dserver%20tracking,to%20the%20PartnerStack%20tracking%20server.

Performance Marketing Association. (2025, 1 9). *PMA White Paper How Attribution Models Affect an Affiliate Program.* Performance Marketing Association. https://thepma.org/pma-whitepaper-how-attribution-models-affect-an-affiliate-program/

Performance Marketing Association. (2025, 2). *Attribution and Last Click Lawsuits*. Performance Marketing Association. https://thepma.org/affiliate-attribution-and-last-click-lawsuits/

Salesforce. (n.d.). *Multi-touch attribution defined*. Salesforce. https://www.salesforce.com/marketing/multi-touch-attribution/

Segment. (n.d.). *A Guide to Multi-Touch Attribution: What It Is and How to Do It*. Segment. https://segment.com/academy/advanced-analytics/an-introduction-to-multi-touch-attribution/

Sherer, S. (2017, 6 9). *Attributing value in the affiliate channel*. Awin. https://www.awin.com/us/affiliate-marketing/attributing-value-in-the-affiliate-channel

Sramek, E. (2025, 1 11). *Starting an Affiliate Network: All Types of Affiliate Tracking Methods (2025 Update)*. Scaleo. https://www.scaleo.io/blog/affiliate-network-affiliate-tracking-method-types/#:~:text=Cookie-Based%20Tracking%20%F0%9F%8D%AA,commerce%20sites%2C%20short%20sales%20cycles.&text=Similar%20to%20standard%20cookies%2C%20but,tracking%20while%20keeping%20it%20sim

Statcounter. (2025, 2). *Statcounter*. Statcounter Global Statistics. https://gs.statcounter.com/browser-market-share

Stevens, W. (2020, 6 24). *Traffic Arbitrage: How Coupon Sites Cause Friction In Your Customer's Experience*. seerinteractive. https://www.seerinteractive.com/insights/how-coupon-sites-cause-friction

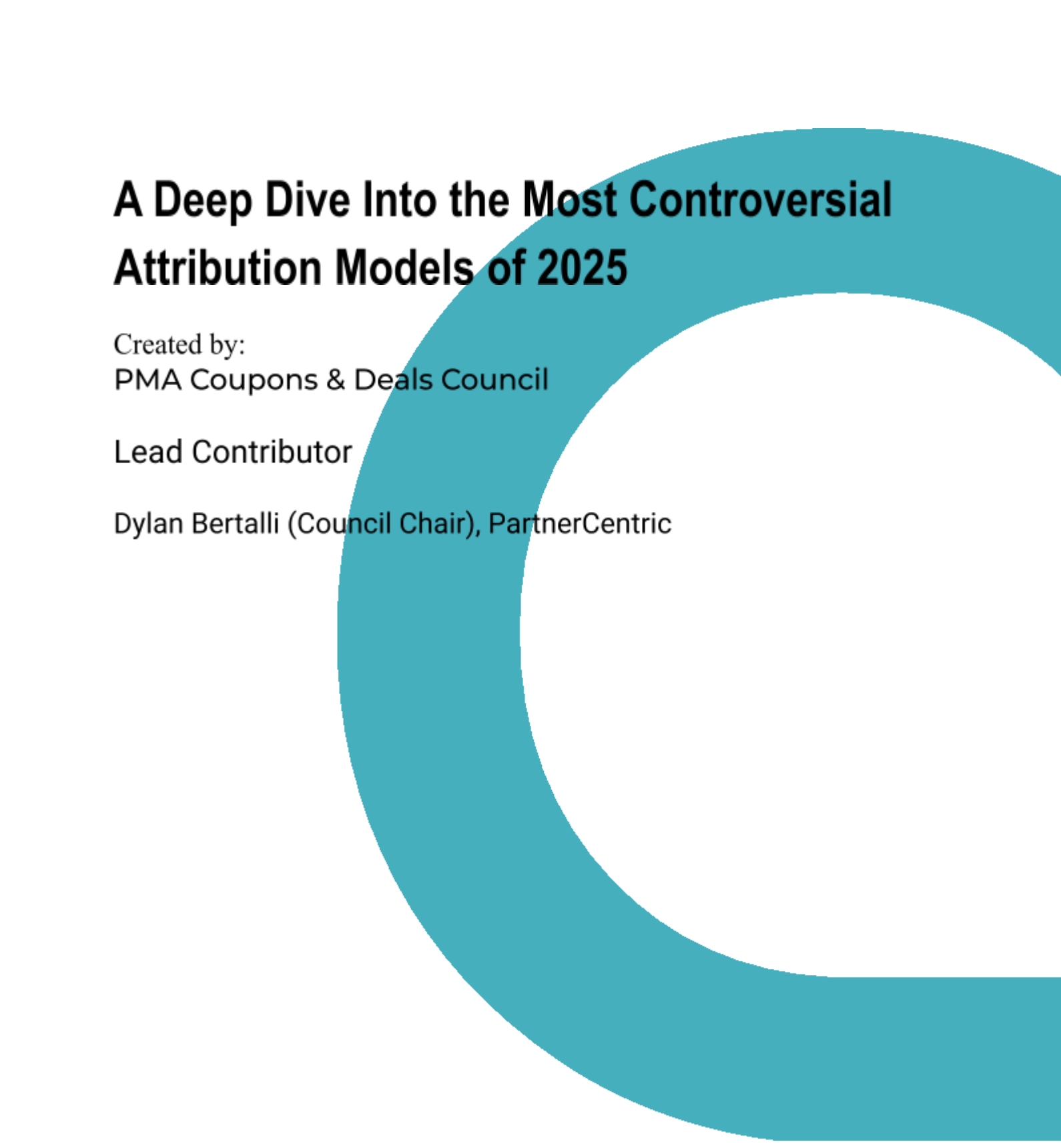
tracify.ai. (n.d.). *AI Behavior-Based Attribution*. tracify.ai. https://www.tracify.ai/features/ai-behavior-based-attribution

A Deep Dive Into the Most Controversial Attribution Models of 2025

Created by:
PMA Coupons & Deals Council

Lead Contributor

Dylan Bertalli (Council Chair), PartnerCentric



Performance Marketing Association

For more information on the PMA, our resources, or membership please visit www.thepma.org