

Tracking in a post third-party cookie world

How affiliate partnerships can future-proof your marketing

October 2021

Digital marketing is undergoing unprecedented disruption.

Cookies are crumbling and many brands are questioning how they will be able to monitor the future performance of their marketing channels.

The good news, however, is that the affiliate marketing channel is one way to futureproof your ability to continue to track in this privacy-conscious age.

A collaboration between some of the largest affiliate businesses, this guide explains how affiliate marketing tracking works, why it is distinct from other channels, and how it can continue to function in a post-third party cookie world.

Designed for advertisers, agencies and publishers, this guide raises awareness of the best technical affiliate and partnership setups to ensure your affiliate marketing campaigns continue to grow and flourish.

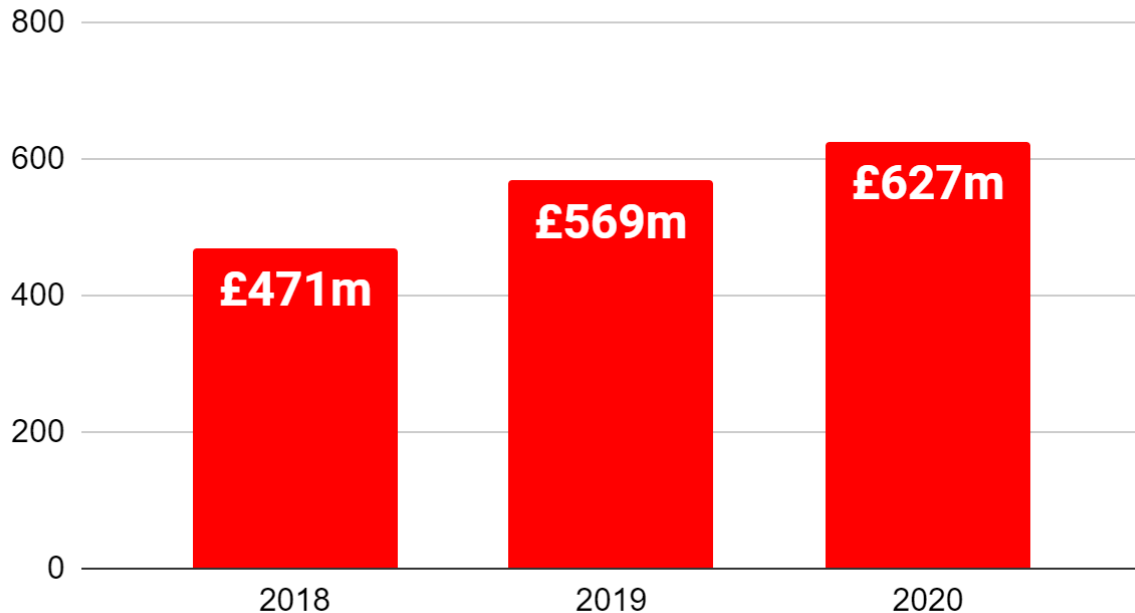
It has been created and endorsed by the following global affiliate marketing businesses:



Background to affiliate and partner marketing

According to the latest [IAB AdSpend study](#), affiliate and partner marketing is outperforming other digital marketing channels, growing by 10% in 2020.

Affiliate Marketing Growth (UK spend £m)



The industry's attractiveness is underpinned by a clear return on investment delivered by a payment on performance model.

Defined predominantly by its payment on performance model, the affiliate and partner channel allows brands to connect with thousands of blogs, influencers, price comparison sites, voucher/coupon and cashback and reward programs, who generate millions of new customers for retailers of all shapes and sizes.

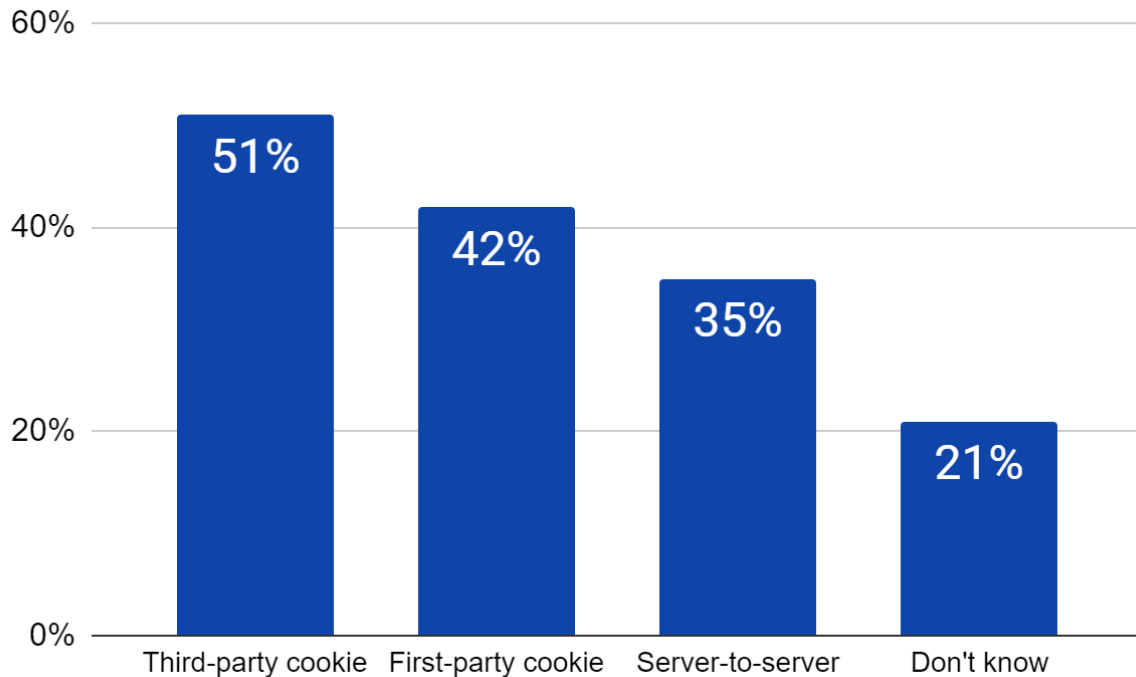
Affiliate tracking awareness

As the channel continues to experience high growth, it's vital that if you're running an affiliate program, you have the optimal tracking set-up to maximise impact.

The IAB's Affiliate and Partnerships Group surveyed almost 200 agencies and advertisers in early 2021, and found more than half of them plan to ramp up their affiliate and partnerships investment as it is ranked highly for ROI, delivering sales and customer acquisition¹

The survey, however, found half of businesses believe their programs are reliant on third-party cookies with one in five also saying they don't know how their affiliate programs is tracked:

¹ <https://www.iabuk.com/news-article/study-50-marketers-saw-increase-affiliate-spend-2020>



Therefore it's important we explain the foundations of the channel's tracking and the current technical set-up because no one needs to be reliant on third-party cookies to track affiliate and partner sales.

In fact affiliate and partner marketing offers robust and privacy-conscious alternatives that can allay concerns and provide confidence in how affiliate and partner sales are tracked.

Wider trends

It's a fact of life that regardless of which online marketing activity we're considering, we're operating against the backdrop of privacy regulation and big tech's reactions to it. This means digital marketing companies are adapting how they track their marketing and also how they handle consumer data.

The changes we're reacting to are coming from three main sources, all driven by a goal of giving consumers more choice about how their data is accessed, stored and shared:

1. Web browsers are restricting how data is shared across websites and across organisations.
2. Consumers have options for when and how their data can be shared and stored.
3. Regulatory bodies are defining requirements about how consumers should be informed and given choices about how their data is used by online businesses.

Why these changes matter for anyone who uses affiliate and partner marketing

Affiliate and partner marketing is less reliant on personal consumer data than other digital advertising models, but these changes still impact us.

Without the ability to see how advertising influences customer behaviour and actions, there is no way to understand how marketing campaigns are performing nor is there a way to optimise campaigns.

In response, affiliate marketing companies have adapted the technologies they use to ensure any necessary data continues to be viable.

Advertisers who continue to use legacy tracking methods will likely see a decline in their affiliate partnership opportunities as publishers choose to work with brands who track accurately and pay them for the conversions they drive.

These legacy tracking technologies used for affiliate and partner marketing have heavily relied on third-party cookies which are now being restricted and degraded on almost all web browsers and mobile devices.

How does affiliate marketing track?

Affiliate marketing tracking allows brands to record the clicks, impressions, and sales delivered by their affiliates, publishers and partners. These interactions can take place on all consumer devices and can also occur offline.

A typical affiliate journey tracked by any of the companies endorsing this guide looks like this:

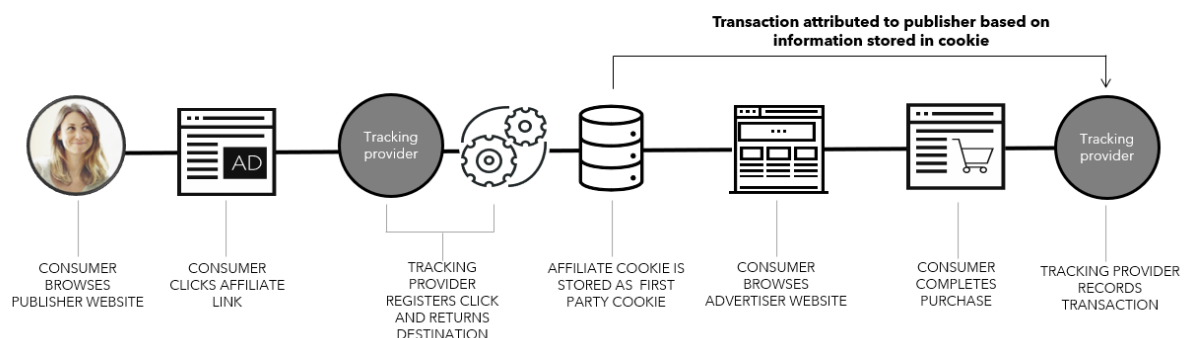


Figure 1. A topline overview of the affiliate customer journey and tracking

An affiliate network or SaaS platform, like all those mentioned in this guide, acts as the intermediary; it's a marketing technology business that looks after the tracking, reporting and payments for you (we will refer to them as the 'technology provider').

Each of these technology providers have created their own proprietary tracking methods used by brands and publishers to connect them and track their unique journeys.

They typically will have their own terminology and phraseology they use to talk about their tracking, so it is recommended you contact your technology provider(s) to ask them for their technical integration documents. At the end of this guide, you will find links to each business.

Given most affiliates and partners are remunerated on a cost-per-action (usually a sale), it is imperative that the tracking is robust and able to deal with any technical limitations such as ad-blocking technology and the depreciation of third-party cookies.

The nuts and bolts

When launching an affiliate program, advertisers need to add affiliate tracking code to their website to record affiliate interactions which all technology providers can advise on.

Here's an illustration of how the tracking functions as depicted in Figure 1.

1. Publishers add tracking links to brand links across their website, whether that is via text, banner, product feed/API or widgets. Tracking begins when a user (or consumer) clicks on a link on an affiliate's website. This link might be to a product that has been reviewed by a blogger, or a discount on a voucher or coupon website.
2. When a consumer clicks through to the advertiser website via the tracking link, a click is tracked to recognise that journey.
3. Advertisers should then store a first-party cookie which captures the details of that click, including the ID of the publisher whose site the user clicked through from, details of the product clicked and time of the click.
4. Advertisers will need to ensure they have complied with local privacy laws, such as obtaining any applicable consents for the use of cookies and processing of any personal data.
5. When a consumer makes a purchase, they will be redirected to a "Thank You"/"Order Confirmation" page at which point the sale can be tracked by reading the details in the cookie which in turn activates the tracking method, such as:
 - a. a pixel placed on the "Thank You"/"Order Confirmation" page
 - b. a server-to-server (S2S) call
 - c. an API call

When the transaction tracks, it is typically recommended that you pass the following data to your technology provider in order to identify individual transactions and attribute the transaction to the publisher:

- The order or sale identifier
- The basket amount
- The publisher identifier

Based on the goals and strategies of the advertiser, they may decide to pass additional information from the tracked sale, such as product purchased, delivery method and so on.

Your technology provider will be able to provide you with a list of available data points they can track. Again, it is important to consider any privacy implications of processing this information.

Technology providers may have 'back-up' tracking methods as well to capture any sales lost due to errors with the primary tracking method. Each provider can advise on these.

To maintain an overall view of your affiliate performance, it is essential to ensure that clicks, and sales are tracked across all journeys. Tracking should therefore be integrated across all device types. This also includes app tracking which can often be overlooked, but it is now common for sales driven by a transactional app to be a significant part of a brand's revenue.

You should also speak to your technology provider about site-wide tagging that allows you to work with other affiliate partners that offer additional ways to generate customers and optimise consumer journeys on your website.

How do I know what tracking set-up I have?

As we've mentioned there are different ways to track, and many brands have different tracking set-ups driven by their own priorities. It is important to sense check your current set-up.

You may already have the optimal tracking in place, however, you may be relying on less robust or legacy-based tracking and therefore need to book in time to upgrade now. If you don't, it could have the following consequences:

- You cannot track affiliate sales properly and comprehensively
- Your sales cannot be attributed to the appropriate affiliate
- Commission is therefore apportioned incorrectly
- Your campaign becomes difficult to measure and optimise
- Affiliates and partners lose visibility on how they're performing on your program and switch their attention and links to competitors

Every technology provider mentioned in this document has dedicated tracking teams who can advise and help you.

What other reasons are there to upgrade your tracking?

As well as the general reasons for optimising your tracking set-up, there are a series of other issues that threaten the ability to track your affiliate and partner activity or limit the scope of your marketing efforts.

1. Governments and institutions are regulating how consumers are tracked online.

While regulation does not dictate what specific tracking technology has to be used, it does require that the use of cookies (and similar technologies) complies with data protection and privacy rules.

If upgrades are necessary to address or maintain compliance then it is important you use the opportunity to switch to methods and solutions to ensure compliance with these regulations.

In its simplest form, affiliate marketing tracks very little personal data.

This can be seen when looking at other forms of digital advertising that rely on creating profiles to serve ads. Coupled with the precise conversion measurement that affiliate tracking provides, affiliate marketing should be an important consideration for brands.

2. In-app affiliate and partner sales must not be overlooked

With more and more sales tracked in mobile apps, brands should ensure they are tracking sales on handsets.

If a program has already been integrated to track affiliate and partner sales and you then launch a transactional app, tracking must be reviewed and upgraded to accommodate affiliate campaign tracking.

App sales can add valuable revenue for brands as well as offering a full picture of how affiliates and partners add value across the whole purchase path. It's important to fairly reward affiliates and partners who are driving these sales and vital to ensure long term campaign sustainability. Speak to your technology provider who can advise you on the best set-up for your app tracking.

3. Many affiliate sales can be tracked offline and in-store

In an increasingly cashless society, if you're a multi-channel retailer with stores, you may be thinking about how you connect consumers who are interacting with your brand in both physical and online settings.

Most technology providers will work with partners who can help you track these interactions. Again, reach out to them to find out more so you have a fuller view across the customer journey.

Bringing it all together

The affiliate and partner channel offers a fantastic place for brands to safely invest, boasting an impressive ROI of £16 for every £1 spent².

The industry has also spent years heavily investing in robust tracking solutions that overcome many of the challenges facing other marketing channels. Because technology providers are directly integrated with brands' websites, their ability to use first party data means they are well positioned to deal with the inevitable demise of third-party cookies.

But that doesn't mean you should be complacent if you're using affiliate and partner marketing to drive sales. Check your tracking is fit for purpose and optimised to take advantage of the channel's growth, using the latest technology to track across every customer journey.

How can I find out more?

[Adtraction](#)

[Awin](#)

[CJ](#)

[Impact](#)

[Optimise](#)

[Partnerize](#)

[Rakuten Advertising](#)

[Tradedoubler](#)