

Attribution Without Chaos

A Topic-Centric Framework
for Modern Marketing

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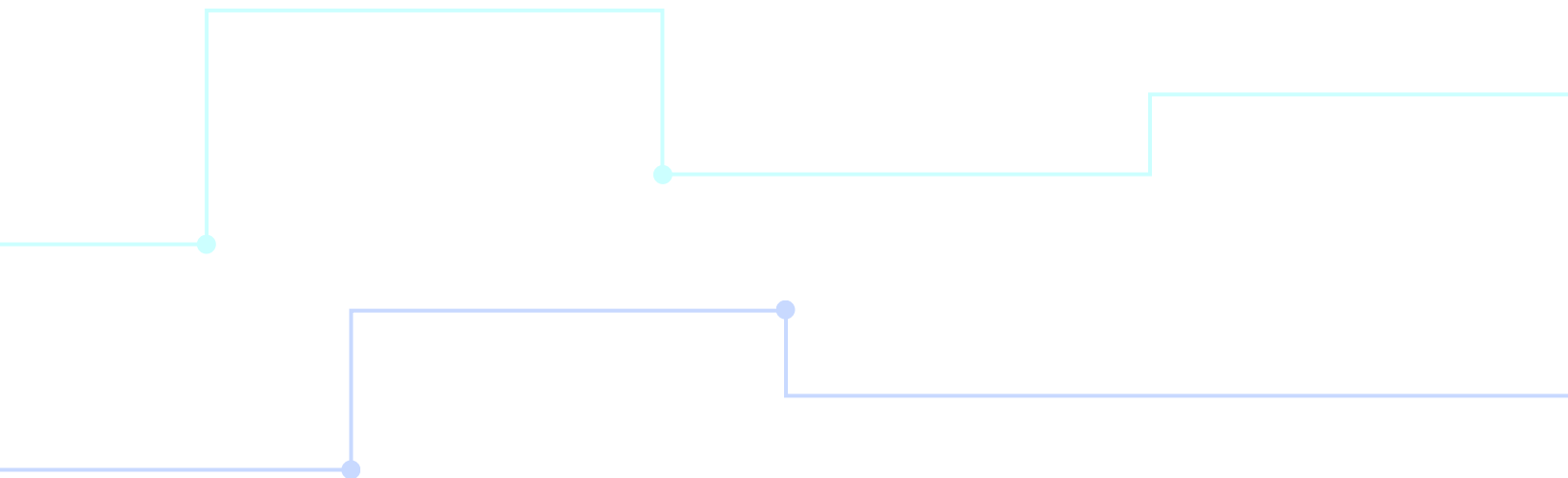
Introduction

Ask any marketer what their #1 issue is and you will get one answer – attribution. It can be expressed in two different ways. Some people will describe their valiant but failed battle to wrestle attribution insights accurately from all the data gushing out of various platforms. Or, you may hear the soft sigh of surrender as they quietly respond about how they failed in their attribution efforts.

Attribution has been a thorny issue for decades, certainly well before digital tracking came on the scene. It requires understanding the complex customer journey, which is defined by unpredictable human behaviors, making it an inherently messy subject.

While often unexpected, digital marketing has actually made attribution measurements more complex. The flood of disjointed behavioral data (like clicks) layered on top of digital profile information combines to paint a hazy picture, leaving the end result obscured and unclear.

No wonder people are hurting. Still, everyone needs to demonstrate efficacy – agencies, adtech firms, consultancies, and every marketing practitioner at companies both large and small. Many complex models developed by the smartest math geeks out there threw everything at the problem, yet chaos still reigns.



The problem is that for every question these models answer, two new ones emerge, which then spawn more models and, of course, more complex questions. Some of these models are well-known, others not so much. All of them, however, have real intelligence limitations:

- First touch attribution assigns all credit for conversion to the marketing effort that first brings a customer in.
- Last touch attribution is the opposite of first touch attribution and gives all conversion credit to the final touchpoint that leads to a sale.
- Linear attribution is a multi-source attribution model that assigns equal weight to all touchpoints that converted a prospect.
- Position based attribution, sometimes called “U-shaped attribution,” is where the first and last touchpoints get 40% of the credit for conversion, while the remaining 20% is split between other touchpoints.
- Time Decay Attribution assigns the greatest credit to the touchpoints that occur closest to conversion but allows for credit to be given to others as well.
- W-Shaped Attribution recognizes three main touchpoints; a first touch; middle touch (like an eBook download) and last touch conversion.

Unfortunately, none of these models made attribution any easier. Complicating the situation further, different ad platforms adopted different models to make them look as good as possible in the acquisition game. For instance and perhaps most famously, Google adopted the Last Click attribution model, taking all the “conversion credit” irrespective of any marketing that preceded the click. Other ad platforms followed suit such as Honey – a browser extension for online coupons which took credit for sales if the user activated a coupon through their service. This deeply dishonorable practice steals revenue from influencers and bloggers who worked hard to get that visitor to their or their affiliates’ sites.

No matter the math thrown at the attribution question, the intelligence seems to be in short supply.

I. Why Winning the Attribution War is so Tough

“Never give up on something that you can’t go a day without thinking about.”

– Winston Churchill



Crafting cogent measurement technologies and processes is a daily battle. As adtech platforms, business goals, and leadership continuously shift, all bets are off. One constant amongst the sea of change however, is the need to transform attribution data into intelligence. Unfortunately, this regularly defeats marketers both experienced and novice, with few emerging triumphant. Most don't really trust the results of data pasted together across siloed systems.

Questions abound.

Trusted answers? Less so.

- How did a new **branding program** contribute to the company's bottom line?
- How did a new **campaign** perform in the aggregate?
- How did a new campaign perform against specific metrics:
 - Qualified leads
 - Revenue/sales
 - CPA (Cost per Acquisition) goals
- Which specific **channel** performed best within a campaign?

- What is the ROI upside if spending was increased in the channel(s) that performed well?
- If spending is increased in one channel and not others, will outcomes still perform profitably?
- How do we test creative impacts on outcomes versus media/channel performance?

All of these battles leave marketers exhausted. It's easy to give up, as many do. Too often, in the process, marketers think it's **their** fault attribution isn't working.

The plain truth is that as they are being tackled today, these measurement battles cannot be won.

Why?

There is an irreconcilable tension between the internet's core as a content-serving engine and the flawed people behavioral data coming from channel-centric attribution systems. As a result;

- People can be faked
- Click data can be gamed
- Engagement data can be simulated

This is why after all the effort and mental expenditures; there is typically very little to show for it.

Even if data systems are first party data, all this data must "talk to" platforms with third-party profiles or "unified ID's." Not a pretty sight. Then sales data needs to be applied to the right marketing funnel data, and all of this has to be defined in narrow, media-channels terms. The net result is either chaos, or number that just don't make sense. This all leads to organizations that are data-rich but intelligence-poor.

No wonder companies make bad media choices all the time often based on superficial or false data and tactics. Conversion is erroneously attributed to a single tactic regardless of the cumulative effect of activities conducted before the conversion.

More troubling is that amidst all of the data about clicks, impressions and CPMs, there is no clear ROI answer — resulting in a tsunami of data and doubt. This issue has contributed to, in my opinion, the dismally short life of a CMO who only can squeeze out an average of 25 months, compared to a CFO with an average tenure of 54 months (Forbes).

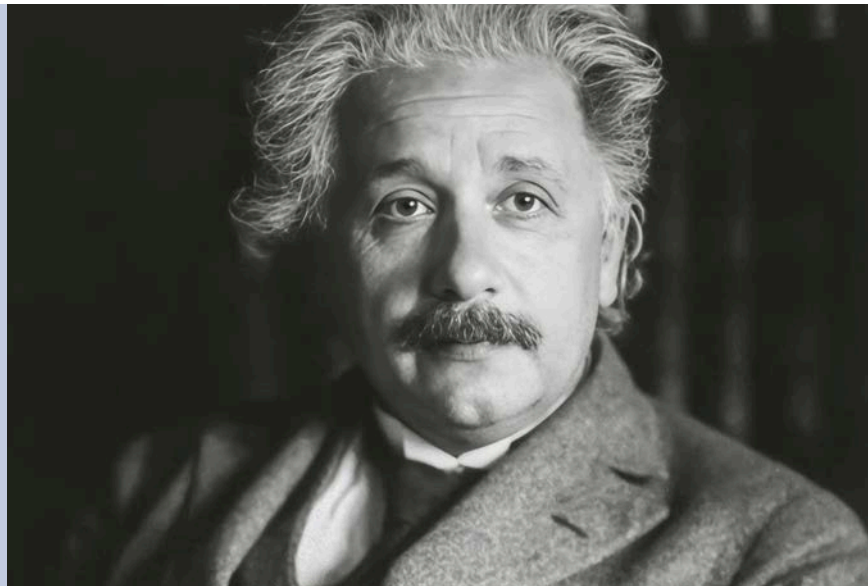
Throughout all the data wrangling, one foundational truth was lost; most attribution models are not nuanced enough to account for all the data and human behavioral variables.

This sets the stage for attribution insanity.

II. The Insanity Of Today's Popular Attribution Systems

“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

– Albert Einstein



Marketers have a responsibility to create measurement and attribution systems to provide important transparency to their organizations.

This is why, again and again, marketers use attribution systems in an attempt to answer realistic questions about a marketing campaign's performance. The problem is that, in the best possible world, current attribution systems work maybe 50% of the time. Maybe.

Trying to track who clicked, **and** connect that to a specific user profile, **and** trace it back to the original source puts marketers in an impossible position. To attempt this data feat, difficult decisions have to be made about the investment needed to create a genuinely useful measurement attribution system. Then more difficult decisions need to be made about which vendors or agencies they trust to figure it out.

In the absence of intelligent attribution, the tendency is to trust only the most basic information, excluding problematic or not easily explained metrics. This shallow analysis makes marketers even more lacking in intelligence, as they flail about in the ROI marketing winds.

The insanity is that marketers keep trying, again and again and again using old fashioned attribution methods.

It's obvious that marketers need a new approach, but what could an alternate method look like?

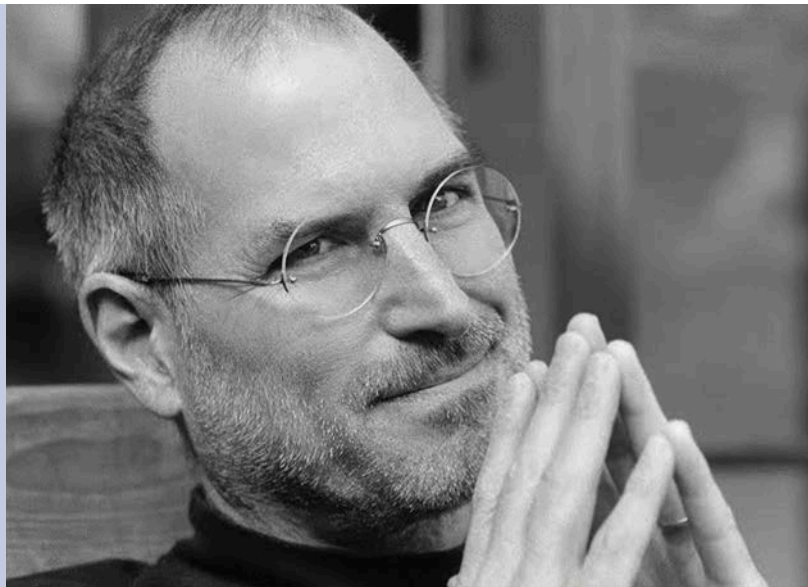
Not surprising, a new approach is more than just a new platform or tech stack or data strategy. It requires new thinking to define what attribution really looks like and what is excluded.

It requires a clean slate to imagine what can be.

III. The Reinvention Of Attribution Measurements

"I'm as proud of many of the things we haven't done as the things we have done. Innovation is saying no to a thousand things."

– Steve Jobs



Reorienting attribution to succeed in this new model requires a mental shift.

It requires that we become a data skeptic who challenges the attribution promises made by platforms.

It requires that we say “no” to attribution schemas which require too many crossings, over too many data bridges with too many points of failure.

It requires us to stay cautious when data companies talk about API as the “easy way” to move data around. Moving data is easy. Getting disparate data to make any sense in the aggregate however, is a tall order. When data flows across seven or ten different sources, the API calls become increasingly complex and cannot guarantee data integrity.

This is why evolving to a new attribution model requires a re-imagining of what we originally thought attribution should be – a change of perspective to make the leap from old models to a new system that promises to be stronger and more resilient to meet the attribution moment.

Adopting a New Set of Expectations and an Attribution Framework

Attribution is used to understand how effective programs are at generating outcomes. This has a few levels to it, similar to Russian nesting dolls:

- The performance of a multi-channel product or brand campaign
- The performance of creative assets within campaigns
- The performance of different channels in each campaign, especially at creating inbound lead generation
- The performance of different products and offers

Attribution gets so much attention because of the challenges faced when reporting on business outcomes that can be tied directly to marketing. In the absence of clear metrics, many lower-level metrics are used as a proxy for marketing ROI.

To break out of this cycle, we need to evolve our thinking to accept the limitations of what attribution data can, and can never, tell us – a reality check as it were.

a. Attribution will always be imperfect. Aim for “roughly right” – a phrase an ex-AT&T boss once explained to me. “The cost, effort and labor needed to achieve 100% is so much more than what can be gained when we hit 90%.” Aim for 100% in attribution, and you will likely fail, because attribution can never be perfect as long as human behavior is involved. Instead, every organization needs to decide what “roughly right” looks like for them. Regardless of what form “roughly right” takes, attribution data

must always answer one fundamental question: “Does this data tell us what to do next?” If not, then don’t bother with it.

b. Attribution calculations centered on tracking people is likely to fail. The most sacred belief marketers have is that you need to be tracking people as a part of an attribution system. This expectation was whipped up by a plethora of promises from data providers describing the perfect, evidence-based targeting and attribution systems. This is one of the most egregious, overblown promises that data platforms ever made to marketers.

The brutal truth is that these platforms fail to connect the key data layers:

- activity outcomes (i.e. clicks) – TO
- “known” and unknown profiles – TO
- a media source (channel) – TO
- a business outcome (sale)

So many points of failure are baked in that it will lead to a total attribution intelligence loss. As we will see later, the data accuracy rates of profile data are far lower than anyone wants. A recent AdAge report found various data providers with 67% error rates when targeting Moms. (Source: <https://adage.com/article/digital-marketing-ad-tech-news/ad-targeting-data-flaws-cause-brands-miss-intended-audiences/2605056/>). This is a non-starter.

c. Re-shift the goal so that it’s about business outcome tracking – not activity nimbleness. We have to come to terms with the fact we can never really untangle all the data needed for the idealized, people-based fantasy of attribution that so many marketers imagine.

It’s easy to track clicks or impressions or CPM. However, the triggers that drive a given conversion, is a mystery wrapped in an enigma. Instead, marketers should relentlessly focus on tracking only what matters in regards to driving sales, cutting out more esoteric measures that confuse the revenue scene.

In practical terms, this means ignoring channel-specific productivity metrics in favor of campaign-level performance across channels, because any conversion journey should be assumed to be a cumulative process, and almost never the result of a single channel.

Channel optimization drives better testing and insights but it is not the attribution “main dish.” Keep focus on the campaign-level performance data first, to understand marketing’s revenue delivery impacts.

d. Simplify attribution measurements. Related to the point above, we should realign our expectations with the reality on the ground. Between first party data, ID resolution solutions, data brokers and testing platforms, conversion clarity collapses under the weight of data complexity.

This is why marketers can streamline data measurement by letting go of the “tracking which people converted.”

[Breathe.]

When looked at objectively, ditching people–conversion tracking solves a lot of issues at once, and is not as radical as it first appears. Let’s remember, PPC metrics focus on keywords that converted – not which person converted.

By adopting an approach that favors campaign–level metrics using topic themes over people–level attribution, marketers can reap many benefits:

- Less adtech costs, as you can prune the number of platforms that contribute data to the ROI measurement.
- Clean data leads to clear intelligence. People tracking data is rarely projectable because it is inherently messy.
- Campaign–level results provide a clearer picture of what happened, and what should happen next. Topic attribution data is like the view you get from a drone with LiDAR, able to strip away the top layers of data complexity to reveal the underlying terrain. That elevated perspective tells marketers where to dig for outcomes – efficiently.

Most important, for this new campaign–centric attribution model to work, brands need to be able to assess, in the aggregate, how a topic–based campaign performed in terms of key behaviors that lead to conversion like time spent on site, impressions or clicks. This level of analytics scales infinitely because topics can scale in infinitum. Reaching real people has a pretty low ceiling with limited scale potential that is profitable and sustainable.

Current systems can’t easily detect which programs can scale because they don’t easily support this type of aggregated topic performance reporting, but newer systems do (as we will soon see).

When marketers let go of the expectation that attribution can be perfect, and accept that it’s time to explore alternatives, that’s when we move onto to the next step.

IV. The Courageous Journey

“Almost every significant breakthrough is the result of a courageous break with traditional thinking.”

– Steve Covey



Courage is required when moving from the people-centric/channel attribution system because that is the traditionally understood approach. Yet so much user profile data and channel information that flows through the attribution pipes is wrong making the insights flawed at a deep level.

Here is what's going wrong now with more typical attribution methods and practices.

1) Profile Data Trust Issues

Study after study confirms the high inaccuracy rates of profile targeting data:

“Nearly half the data used for ad targeting is wrong.”

Truthset study spanning across 15 data brokers finds email and postal address matches that underpin ad targeting and audience measurement are only right 51% of the time. “Nearly half the data used for ad targeting is wrong ... One of the major drivers of inaccurate matches appears to be the age of the data... [there are] disconnects [among] people who have moved frequently or have multiple postal addresses or multiple email addresses...”.

https://adage.com/article/measurement/nearly-half-data-used-ad-targeting-wrong-truthset-study/2521136?share-code=17409558404565135-195595b647e&utm_id=gfta-ur-250302

“Ad targeting failures – why brands are missing their intended audiences – New finding shows that 67% of those targeted as parents didn’t have children.”

“When brands run digital ads aimed at parents, they may actually be reaching an audience where 67% don’t even have children... Mismatched ad targeting and faulty data were among the findings of a new survey from ad tech platform Adlook that identified glaring gaps in the programmatic ad landscape, where personalized advertising appears to fall far short of its promise.”

<https://adage.com/article/digital-marketing-ad-tech-news/ad-targeting-data-flaws-cause-brands-miss-intended-audiences/2605056>

It’s easy to see how marketing dollars are wasted in these situations. Consider someone who once owned a car and moved to a new city, no longer needing it. If their profile isn’t updated, they’ll still be targeted as a car owner, resulting in 100% ineffective marketing.

It is sheer madness that billions and billions and billions of marketing dollars rely on highly problematic profile data. This is why the move away from profile-based attribution systems is so important. Without the shift in approach, attribution efforts are likely to be ineffective.

2) Channel Attribution Data Gaps

When it comes to channel attribution data, the veracity is even more imprecise. Channel attribution data is not completely reliable, as it can be significantly impacted by incomplete data, complex customer journeys, privacy concerns, and the specific attribution structure of each adtech platform. The limitations of attribution models is bedeviling because creating reliable models that can link a click from a specific channel to a form fill and then to a sale is very difficult, and ultimately requires a huge investment. Sometimes, the juice is not worth the squeeze. It is understandable that even the best motivated attribution initiatives collapse into a heap of data unreliability.

Given the overall data hurdles of traditional attribution systems, courage is necessary to accept these uncomfortable realities. It takes courage to resist the attribution pitch of adtech vendors who overpromise but underdeliver on attribution intelligence. It is marketers who have experienced frustration (and which marketer hasn’t), that will make the leap to newer attribution models, that are more trustworthy because they aren’t trying to “know” the unknowable.

These marketers are ready to reorient attribution, abandoning a profile and channel-centric system in favor of a much simpler focus; a focus on mission-critical conversion topics and measure topic campaigns that reveal clear outcome metrics. That is a simpler and more cost-effective attribution system.

It is, in fact, an attribution system of a different color. It is the modern attribution system to get the job done well.

V. A Horse of a Different Color

“Well that’s a horse of a different color.”

– The Coachman,
The Wizard of Oz



In the movie “The Wizard of Oz,” this phrase spoken by the Coachman sets up a dramatic shift in the action. It signifies that something entirely different, unexpected, and perhaps even a bit magical is about to happen.

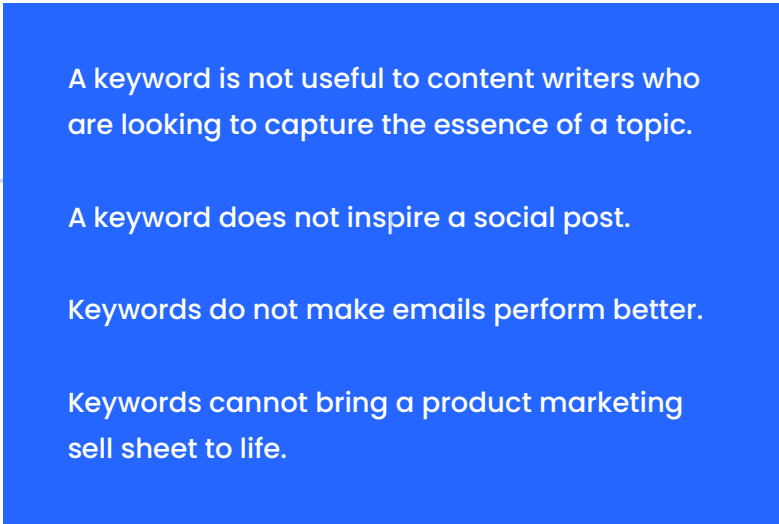
In the context of our discourse on attribution, it represents the freedom people feel once they are released from the disappointment that our existing attribution systems repeatedly deliver.

The horse of a different color we can ride is tracking and activating **topic journeys to conversion**. This is not a new concept but what is new is this system relies on topic data that can determine outcomes. Instead of tracking individuals to acquire leads, tracking topics that drive conversions will result in better attribution insights. Topic data can be expressed as integrated campaigns so attribution is about

understanding which topic-themed campaigns drove desired behaviors. In a topic-centric attribution system the topic data is clean and thus far more actionable than people-centric attribution that is often messy and inaccurate.

This concept is not nearly as radical as it sounds. Most brands are already familiar with Google's Pay per Click (PPC) platform - a proven method to drive acquisition by reporting on the keywords that got the conversion, rather than "who" that was converted.

As powerful as PPC is, using keywords to drive outcomes outside of PPC has limitations as keywords can be "flat"; binary words with narrow meanings that lack strong intent signals. In fact, the use of keywords in other marketing functions presents huge challenges for marketers:



A keyword is not useful to content writers who are looking to capture the essence of a topic.

A keyword does not inspire a social post.

Keywords do not make emails perform better.

Keywords cannot bring a product marketing sell sheet to life.

Keywords have little use when building a highly productive ecommerce website. While keywords are vital for PPC and SEO, their limited application has restricted marketers from using topics to generate outcomes beyond SEM. Where keywords are one-dimensional, topics represent more complex concepts and deeper meanings which are better suited to pinpoint the true intent of the user. Intent-targeting using topic data in diverse marketing functions is highly productive in lead generation.

If topic-centric data and attribution are so productive, why are they a blind spot in adtech?

This is a reasonable question and a few reasons account for the colossal topic innovation gap.

1. Adtech firms pivoted to track profile because technically, it's easy to track "profiles" with cookies and with unified IDs. Even better, "profiles" can be offered in a virtually endless quantity because none of these profiles are verifiable. Profile tracking launched the "scale media business" we know today and the road to easy money. Adtech CEOs had no incentive to offer topic targeting capabilities that would throttle scale media buys. A hard pass for most adtech firms.
2. VCs played a role in the lack of innovation in the topic data and attribution space because they simply did not believe anyone could challenge Google's position and win. As a result, any venture looking to encroach on Google's dominance in the keyword/topic ad business was met with polite smiles and hard no's.
3. Developing technology that understands web content in human language is a significant technical challenge requiring substantial resources. This demands a long-term commitment from leadership to develop a semantic, contextual engine. This runs counter to the quick exit that so many startups seek. Another hard no from founders and VCs.

Collectively, these reasons explain adtech's general blind spot when it comes to options in topic-based data and analytics. As a result, significant downstream casualty of the dominant people-tracking attribution is the extra cost, complexity and ultimate confusion in realizing meaningful insights from attribution metrics. Between impressions delivered that were not necessarily real people and channel-traffic metrics that were untrustworthy, the level of data inaccuracy and complexity became a Gordian knot that doomed even the most committed of marketers.

Our horse of a different color concentrates on the topic journey to conversion in the aggregate — at a campaign level, and at a sales level.

This is a horse that can go the distance. Let's see how.

VI. Simplicity is The Key to Successful Attribution Schemas

“Life is simple but we insist on making it complicated.”

– Confucious



Marketers could not fully appreciate the bargain they were making with adtech’s emphasis on people tracking. Some folks may have felt a bit queasy about privacy when tracking profiles, but most “got over it once everyone was doing it.” As more companies went down every variation of people tracking, buoyed by VC funding and often outlandish promises, there was little room for any alternative. Once the profile data fever hit adtech, marketers went along with it because they hoped “data” was the magic pixie dust that could redeem them.

It was a false prophet that cost people time, money and effort all to achieve very little. Complexity replaced cognition.

The piece to unlock the attribution puzzle, therefore, is simplicity.

Simplicity is what makes the topic attribution strategy both trustworthy and operationally efficient — because junk data is worse than no data at all. Junk data gives marketers a false sense of confidence. Like building a skyscraper on quicksand, it looks great until it collapses.

Embracing simplicity first demands a clear framework (see Figure A) that links business needs on the left side of the framework with the programs and data being generated on the right side. This framework measures outcomes as data flows from individual platforms into core metrics.

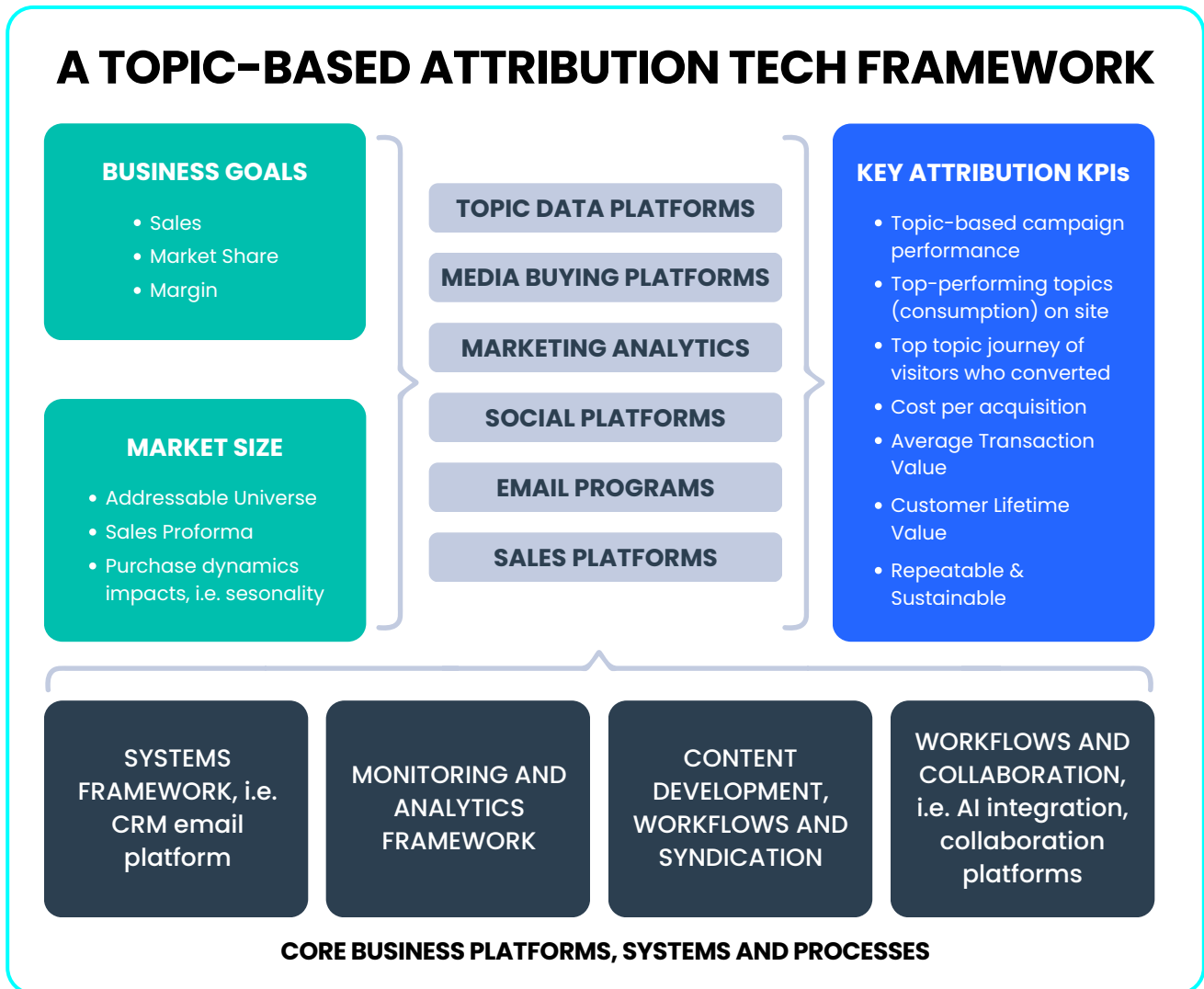


Figure A

While much of this framework includes familiar elements, it is reinterpreted through a topic lens:

What stays:

- The basic overall business and marketing metrics: sales, market share, and profitability
- Core functional platforms, CRM, Sales Automation etc.

What goes:

- Channel specific data for attribution:
 - In our new approach, channel-specific performance analytics are replaced with topic-centric campaign performance. However, channel-specific optimization remains important for program refinement – it's just not a key data input for topic-centric attribution models.
- Offsite profile tracking, ie – unified ID solutions
- Profile or audience segmentation is to be replaced by topic segmentation, along with the topic journeys to conversion

What's being added:

- New data class to identify topic themes with the highest potential to impact sales
- Analytics with site-wide, topic data at an aggregate level in terms of impressions, clicks, conversions and time spent on site
- Insights into top content journeys, so that topic journeys can be optimized quickly

This simplified approach to topic segmentation and tracking requires only campaign-level topic data that measures conversion. The topics that generate outcomes are the winners. It's a simple construct with clear benefits:

- Less is more in reducing data noise and misdirects
- Less contradictory data means less guessing and chasing meanings
- Less concern about specific channel performance, allowing marketers to focus on the metrics that C suite care about most – performance
 - It is worth noting, most CEOs never care about channel performance but they latch onto channel-level metrics, because they aren't getting a clear read on the big-picture ROI story

- Less management, expense and headaches reconciling data profiles

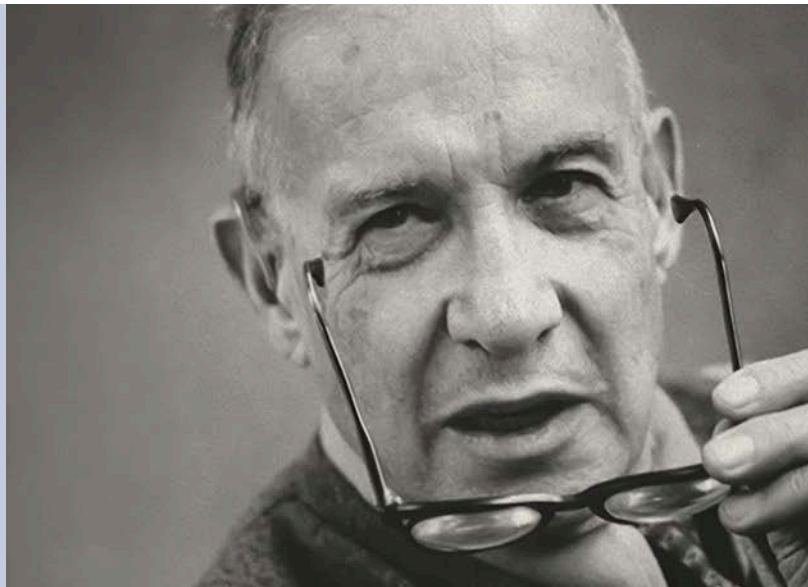
At this point, you must be itching to be introduced to this topic-centric performance platform you knew you needed, but didn't know existed.

It's time you met.

VII. Topic Intelligence: The Topic-Centric Performance Platform that Simplifies Attribution Measurement

"The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence – it is to act with yesterday's logic."

– Peter Drucker



Topic Intelligence – the Modern Approach to Marketing Programs Attribution Measurement

Once you accept that marketing outcomes like clicks or CPMs are irrelevant in isolation, you are well on the road to a simpler and more effective attribution system.

The new, modern approach to attribution activates intent-rich topics that is both more efficient at driving revenue than profile targeting, and simpler in execution

because brands can follow the topic journey to customer conversion. Rinse and repeat.

By contrast, measuring people is fraught with ambiguities especially when about 50% of all profile data is wrong. The huge data failure rate is compounded when channel-level attribution data is layered on top. Double messy.

The alternative, “topic journey to conversion,” is **simpler to understand, more trusted** and **repeatable**.

Simpler To Understand:

Philosophically, we all understand what I mean when I say “topic journey to conversion.” Technically however, this is challenging because most systems lack analytics that show how specific topics, or groups of topics across a site, contribute to conversions.

Too often, considerable effort is spent in the minutiae which muddies the attribution picture considerably.

Too often we confuse data integration with attribution intelligence to answer the foundational question; how much revenue did marketing contribute?

Too often, far too much time is spent sorting data instead of answering the big ROI question.

This happens because existing systems, standard analytics platforms, do not provide aggregate metrics about how many impressions or clicks or conversions a topic successfully generated across the site. Topic Intelligence is different in that in a single supply chain – from the data it generates to the intelligence the analytics provides – ensuring that there is a minimum of data noise and a maximum of actionable intelligence.

More Trusted:

The Topic Intelligence performance platform is engineered to operate on two interconnected pillars. First, **topic data** identifies the most effective subjects for brands to leverage to drive conversions. Second, **topic analytics** provide insights into which topic journeys actually delivered the best results. These two components act as bookends, each essential and completing the other: the data identifies promising topics, and the analytics validate which topics truly performed, creating a single supply chain system for optimizing marketing attribution measurements. There is no

flawed profile data or stand-alone channel data metrics. It all comes together to inform optimum topics and topic journeys that drive outcomes.

Repeatable:

All the data needed in order to understand how to craft campaigns and measure them lies in this one platform.

- No fuzzy people data needed. In a topic-centric model, you know they're human because bots don't make content journeys, only people do. By tracking topic journeys you're tracking real people who can be real prospects.
- No messy integration between six or seven platforms. No more painfully knitting together a clear story from "page level" views to understand aggregated topic performance metrics conversions, clicks, impressions, time spent on site – all at a site level.
- No more complicated channel-specific performance data because campaign attribution is at a topic level – across channels.
- More insights into conversion and cross-sell/upsell opportunities through the new topics that can drive conversion.
- Better development of creative and ad placement because you know where success happened and what works through the topics that drive engagement.
- Reduce risk by reducing waste with predictive topic data to drive revenue
- instead of targeting individuals who may not even be in your addressable universe to convert.

Topic campaigns measured holistically across channels and against clear evidence-based sales data is a streamlined approach, one that delivers real intelligence about what topics worked in the past so it can be optimized for the future. This is how the Topic Intelligence Performance Platform powers a modern marketing attribution infrastructure built for efficiency, simplicity and transparency.

Once you adopt a new topic-centric attribution strategy, some tactics change too.

1) Plan in advance the number of topic touches required to convert.

This mundane yet often overlooked step is vital in order to understand the budget needed to achieve specific conversion goals. There is no one-size-fits-all model here, but data will help you understand how many topic touches a person needs before they convert. Once the parameters have been identified, then the brand can create

the topic journey to conversion campaigns using multiple tactics, such as email, web content and advertising.

2) Landing Pages – the unsung hero of attribution measurement

It is maddeningly frustrating to see brands invest lots of time and money in media only to see that the landing pages used are a distant afterthought. They are often autogenerated by mega platforms so that while they are efficient to produce, they don't work very well to capture all potential demand. This is a colossal lead leak that decreases overall conversion. It's easy to address if you start with the landing pages and then reverse-engineer the topic journey. No people tracking data required.

3) Do not fall into the channel-specific attribution trap.

This trips up a lot of marketers because it's tempting to add more money to a channel that seems to be working. An amateur's mistake is to assume that if one adds 40% more budget to a "productive" channel it will deliver 40% more in outcomes. It most likely won't because the gap between channel performance data and people conversion data is too far to make any meaningful attribution predictions. Many a marketer have sacrificed budget dollars to a channel that seems to be effective when, in fact, the data is skewing the measurement. Too often, marketers forget a core principle of outcomes marketing... all channels matter!

4) Reinvigorate Organic Discoverability (SEO and AI Search) via a Topic Lens.

SEM (SEO and PPC) is dramatically changing in 2025 (see details here: [2025 – The year of the great search unraveling](#)). This tactic worked the same way for decades and now the game is totally different.

- **Out** – keywords. **In** – topics/themes.
- **Out** – ranking in organic SEO. **In** – appearing in AI results.
- **Out** – generic content "push" engine. **In** – a resource-level content "pull" system.

Translating these principles into practice means developing a clear content-centric framework so tactics can be coordinated and optimized. The best approach is to pretend you just landed in the world from an alien planet. You don't know much about attribution systems that existed but you do know what a content journey to conversion should mean. Once that becomes the goal, the systems needed to deliver that fall right into place.

VIII. The Intelligence System Drives a High-Performance Attribution System

“Believe you can and you’re halfway there.”

– Theodore Roosevelt



Topic Intelligence Powers a Modern Approach to Marketing Measurement

Sometimes to go forward you have to go backwards. In our case, let’s go back to 2001. Before digital dominated the marketing landscape, targeting was intent-rich because it was topic based. Advertisers created content like shows or picked the magazine they believed would appeal to their target market. In this system, people tracking was not even possible and advertisers did just fine.

When digital entered the scene, brands were seduced into believing that the voracity of digital tracking capabilities would solve their ROI attribution problem.

25 years in and now we know better.

The people-tracking data hose simply churned out behavior data – not intent data. Despite all the data, brands are feeling more parched than ever for acquisition intelligence. By slimming down the inputs of the attribution model and doubling down on the real, critical topic measures, brands will be able to do more campaigns, understand outcomes data better and optimize campaigns faster than ever before.

This simplicity appreciates the reality that the success or failure of programs to deliver sales rides on the rails of topic-centric data, programs, and analytics. These are the measurement adaptations that make it all work:

- Brands should be trained to measure campaign-level effectiveness versus channel-specific attribution. While channel optimization is important, it should be demoted in terms of its importance in the attribution metrics realm.
- Attribution models cannot be the judge or jury of what makes great advertising work. Like, NEVER. Attribution models are a compass telling us which direction is “North,” but attribution, like a compass, cannot tell us if North is the right way to go. There is always a need to assess campaign effectiveness in human terms because a bad campaign will not deliver no matter how accurate the attribution data is.
- Standard attribution models are too complex to manage and are even more complex to decipher. Instead, when marketers shift their mindset and lean into Internet’s DNA as the content serving engine, the central attribution schema rests with understanding the content journey to conversion.
- Launch multi-channel, topic-centric campaigns for an integrated approach to attribution. With topics, you can link blog posts with SEM and digital media with ROI at a campaign level. This holistic simplicity allows for much better analysis of topic campaigns’ ability to deliver higher quality leads, better revenue conversion and even greater transaction values.

Attribution was always the process of identifying the productivity of marketing spend. There has been an unrelenting hunt for the perfect attribution picture, despite the on-the-ground reality that traditional attribution methods, models and mechanisms often result in marketer confusion and/or capitulation.

With the stakes so high, attribution engines of the past are less suited to an AI-driven marketing future. Soon, many marketing functions will be driven and measured by Artificial Intelligence. In this context, topic data needs to be deep, rich and functional for AI to activate. Keywords won’t do it. Interest classifications can’t do it because they lack all contextual intelligence.

Attribution should empower marketers – not drown the soul of marketing teams. Attribution success depends on two forces: the proven power of topics to drive conversions and AI’s ability to transform nearly every marketing function.

As technology grows more complex with AI development and integration, marketers

can win the attribution war with a simple, achievable strategy: focus on the topic journey to conversion. Everything else is noise.

Attribution Without Chaos

A Topic-Centric Framework
for Modern Marketing