**Why does the Striker always get the credit?**

The world of digital advertising and football might not at first glance overlap. It’s unlikely that many digital marketers at 3pm on a Saturday afternoon recognise the link between the sport and the evaluation of their digital strategy.

In reality though, when analysing performance, the comparisons are stark. The romantic notion that the goalscorer is the most valuable component of the team, as evidenced by their sky-high transfer fees (Mario Ballotelli anyone!), is based purely on goals. They are only the finisher – the best goals can involve moves that the whole team play a part in - think Brazil in the final of the 1970 World Cup. In this case, is it really fair that the goalscorer (Carlos Alberto for those still following) gets all the credit? The rest of the team have all played their part, some more so than others.

This same issue is relevant for any digital marketing campaigns that use Last Touch to evaluate performance. Giving credit to the last touchpoint before conversion doesn’t account for all the other interactions that have assisted in driving that person to convert. Any optimisation therefore, is based on incomplete information. This can have significant commercial impacts, potentially disregarding other channels that have assisted conversion but weren’t the final click or impression in the journey.

**Attribution is a fundamental part of a comprehensive analytics strategy**

While the historic evaluation method of digital performance is flawed, we firmly believe that attribution holds the key to smartening our measurement surrounding online performance. Using the right technique, we are able to understand the true value of our digital media channels providing a viewpoint by channel, media partner and placement.

This means the creation of better digital media plans as it enables system planning as opposed to silo thinking. By measuring the flow through the whole system, it quantifies interactions between paid, and non-paid channels and how these influence their methods of response.

This output provides insight for in-depth scenario planning and can be connected to channel specialist technologies partners for real-time optimisation.

Don’t just think of this in terms of online only – the focus may well be on digital now but increasingly offline channels such as TV are being captured on an individual level. Before long we will be able to attribute the importance of a particular display placement vs. a TV spot in influencing a conversion.

Be aware that attribution is purely a bottom-up measure of success. For a true understanding of overall performance and how digital sits alongside offline media and macro factors (seasonality, wider market dynamics, brand health), econometric modelling is crucial.

**The ‘Right Solution’**

Agreeing attribution is the way forward is one thing, understanding which approach to adopt and which vendor to use is quite another. The market is very complex and evolving very quickly. There are a number of processes and decisions that need to be evaluated and considered before making a choice.

***Data is King***

Where possible **always use 100% or as close as possible, of your digital data** within your attribution solution. Data is the fuel behind all your insight so maximising this is crucial for accuracy and granular analysis (such as understanding search performance at a keyword level) and robustness of recommendations. This approach can produce longer computing times with the associated cost premium but its benefits outweigh a sampled approach. This must make assumptions when aggregating up to build a full picture and can generally only look at performance at a macro campaign or channel level.

***Digital media isn’t the only thing that drives digital sales***

A lot of simple attribution solutions are based on ‘gross’ attribution – in other words, because they only model digital data they reattribute 100% of digital conversions to digital media. This measurement clearly has limitations as we know that other factors are significant drivers of digital sales, such as brand equity, weather and above-the-line media channels**. Integrating top-down econometric modelling into your analytics work-stack is crucial** as it provides a read of how these factors affect digital performance and influence your decision making.

***Different models = different results***

Methodology is perhaps the key factor when making decisions surrounding your attribution approach. These can be aggregated into two different types: **rules based and statistical**.

Rules based can be cut into 4 individual techniques:

* Last Touch – the last touch point gets all the credit
* First Touch – the first touch point gets all the credit
* Even Weighted – all touch points get equal credit
* Custom Rules – user specified custom model

The same problem runs through any rules based approach – you are manually stipulating your definition as to how you evaluate performance. It is therefore impossible to account for dynamic changes in the campaign. And even if you could, it’s simply not possible to create individual rules for each one of the thousands and thousands of paths.

That’s not to say Rules Based should be completely ignored – for very small campaign spends or as the first small step into digital attribution this technique can be viable. However, we do not believe this approach can offer success over a medium to longer-term period.

**Our opinion is that statistical attribution, either through a Game Theory or an Algorithmic approach, offers the most complete solution**. These techniques process all relevant digital data including non-convertors, building out propensity to convert models. These models incorporate a constant learning machine that can adapt to changes in the media plan in real-time.

***Digital media is always on – ideally so should analysis and optimisation***

Digital media is always on and constantly evolving and therefore ideally attribution solutions need to cater their measurement for this. Solutions that require one-off data collections rather than automated data collection take time and can be prone to errors, preventing immediate analysis and insight. On the other hand, solutions that automate data enable real-time analysis and optimisation as well as allowing direct connection with individual channel technology partners.

As with any piece of analytics though, the scope of attribution has to be tailored for the individual brand. ‘Always on’ attribution might be ideal but due to the costs involved (symptomatic with an immature market) might not always be achievable. A cost/benefit analysis is important for any business that investigates using attribution.

**The role of the Media Agency**

Even with this knowledge, like any industry that is new and evolving with lots of different and competing vendors, education on attribution is confusing for businesses coming to this fresh.

As digital experts and with our in-depth knowledge of our clients we are perfectly placed to help simplify this attribution process. We should sit at the heart of attribution modelling from assisting in vendor choice, data management, running the analytics process, all the way through to optimisation and implementation.

We make sure, as with any piece of analytics, that the scope of attribution is tailored specifically for each individual client. ‘Always on’ and 100% data driven attribution might be ideal but due to the costs, it might not always be relevant or deliver enough return.

We also understand that the market overall requires greater objectivity. For this reason we have built an evaluation report to understand vendor performance against a number of KPIs including methodology, data management, UI, and most crucially the implementation of learning and the comparable payback.

This could offer one optimal tech solution, or more likely a set of recommendations that enables us to understand which partners are best suited. The results of the evaluation are available to share with our clients.

**The Future**

The attribution market is consistently evolving – improved methodologies, greater data capture and new vendor launches means the next 12 months will see significant advances. We are most excited by 3 key developments:

1. **Viewability**

Less than 50% of display impressions are viewable – most attribution vendors argue that their approaches discount anything that isn’t viewed. Intuitively this feels like a valid argument – most models measure the incremental uplift of an impression/click in delivering a conversion, therefore if it isn’t viewed then it shouldn’t deliver any benefit. We are currently working with one vendor to understand whether this holds in practice.

1. **Cross Device**

It’s been spoken about for a while but 2016/7 should spell the roll-out of cross-device. Not only has mobile tracking improved – just incorporating this correctly, can improve our measurement accuracy by 15% - but the increased availability of both probabilistic and deterministic offerings is increasing viability.

1. **Audience**

The way we target our digital display advertising is changing – it used to be about cookies, now with the explosion of data, we can target actual individuals reducing wastage and relevancy for consumers. Attribution is crucial to evaluate this step-change – the coming 12 months will be critical in defining how this practically happens.