GA4: The New Google Analytics

GA4 is becoming the only Google Analytics product for website tracking, changing how consumer data is collected, stored and moved. Here's what you need to know.

2009	2013	2017	2019	2020	2023
GOOGLE ANALYTICS	UNIVERSAL ANALYTICS (GA3)	FIRESIDE ANALYTICS (APPS ONLY)	APPS+WEB (BETA)	GOOGLE ANALYTICS 4	JULY UNIVERSAL ANALYTICS SUNSET

You've probably already heard the news: as of July 1, 2023, GA4 will become the only Google Analytics product available for website tracking.

The much-anticipated tool was primarily created for the future of GDPR-compliant measurement—effectively changing how data is collected, stored and moved. In addition, GA4 is also designed to track user activity across websites, apps and devices for clearer vision into how consumers engage with companies.

Whether you're a marketer or a business executive, here's what you need to keep in mind as you navigate the transition from Universal Analytics to GA4.

What You Should Know About GA4

▶ **Privacy** - As consumer perception around privacy continues to evolve, GA4 will offer multiple elements directly addressing privacy concerns and regulations.

  ▷ The reliance on first and third party cookies will be reduced by discarding IP addresses and leveraging anonymized user data through signal detection and machine learning to predict future behavior.

  ▷ User consent will be recognized under "Consent Mode" by dynamically adjusting tracking based on user requests and preferences.

  ▷ GA4 will also offer flexibility in data retention.

The new version will default to 2 months but can be adjusted for up to 14 months. Campaign measurement and attribution windows should be evaluated to select the most appropriate retention window.

  ▷ For businesses that operate in geographies with strict privacy regulations, GA4 will have localized controls built-in to respect these varying regulations.

▶ **Website and App Event-Based Model** - The previous model used session-based data with varying website and app data sources. GA4 will track both website and app and uses an event-based model with deduplication allowing for a unified cross-device and cross-platform consumer journey view. GA4 will allow for a higher volume of events to be tracked allowing for more customized mapping throughout the consumer journey.

  ▷ Currently established conversions will not transfer and will need to be set up in GA4.

▶ **Granular Measurement** - GA4 has the capability to enable granular measures, such as time, to better understand the behaviors of website visitors (i.e. time taken from homepage visit to form submission).

- ▶ **Custom Audiences** - Audiences created in GA4 can easily publish to other Google products, such as Google Ads.
- ▶ **Third-Party Tools** (such as call tracking or form builders) - These may need to be updated by their parent companies to be compatible with GA4.
- ▶ **Previous Analytics Data and Data Retention** - UA will stop collecting data 7/1/23, while GA360 will cease collecting data 10/1/23. Data from previous analytics tools can be exported.
  - ▷ Based on these data changes, companies may want to consider utilization of a data warehouse.
- ▶ **Google Product Connection** - GA4 will not automatically connect to other Google products (Google Ads, Google Business Profile, etc.). To avoid tracking issues, GA4 should be linked to other Google products once ready to use GA4 full-time.

How GA4 Affects Healthcare Marketing

In addition to analytics advancements GA4 will offer, there are many privacy enhancements that support online privacy. GA4 will reduce the reliance on first and third party cookies by discarding IP addresses and leveraging anonymized user data through signal detection and machine learning. Google will also introduce Consent Mode as part of this transition, which respects user cookie consent decisions, and models and populates data accordingly.

Though this change in Google Analytics is a significant step in the right direction, it's also worth noting that Google currently will not sign a Business Associate Agreement (BAA). *For full protection and HIPAA compliance related to data storage and transfer, healthcare organizations can also choose to take a more conservative approach by working with a third-party company under a BAA to de-identify data gathered through pixels prior to sending the data back to Google.*

For more detail on how this affects the healthcare industry, see our blog here.

How GA4 Affects Financial Marketing

Along with planning for external data storage, financial marketers should also ensure that their ability to filter out returning customers and their online banking activity from their data will not be impacted during the GA4 transition. GA4 offers a similar solution to UA through segmentation. A segment can filter a specific combination of event name and parameter values to exclude users who have triggered an event that is only accessible by existing customers, such as signing into an account.

When analyzing site traffic, online banking actions (i.e. users checking their account balance) may still be configured to filter out certain URL values. Once configured, segments can be applied directly to outgoing data exports to ensure all data streams remain consistent. Segments may also be applied in numerous third-party visualization applications. This method allows for the flexibility to view the entirety of a data set while also quickly and accurately filtering down to potential new customers for marketing efforts.

For more detail on how this affects the financial industry, see our blog here.

At Lewis, these new insights and applications for various industries are at the forefront of our planning and optimization efforts. GA4 is positioned to benefit companies and marketing performance, but transitions can be challenging. If you have questions or concerns related to GA4, feel free to contact us at measurement@lewiscommunications.com.