Acceleration PARTNERS®



THE INCREMENTALITY PLAYBOOK

HOW TO STOP PAYING FOR CONVERSIONS YOU ALREADY OWN

ACCELERATIONPARTNERS.COM



Your affiliate platform says one thing. Your internal data says something different. And when leadership asks what the channel is worth, your answer is less confident than it should be.

This playbook draws directly from the frameworks and real-client experience of AP's strategy, analytics, and account management teams. Everything here is based on observations from inside hundreds of affiliate programs - what goes wrong, what the data actually reveals, and what happens when you build measurement around truth rather than dashboards.

CHAPTER 01

THE NUMBER THAT'S PROBABLY WRONG



Acceleration Partners' own incrementality testing found most affiliate programs run on attribution logic that inaccurately states the channel's contribution. Most commissions are going toward conversions that were happening anyway, or worse, they're not tracking conversions that should be attributed to that channel.

Commissions are being paid on conversions that were going to happen anyway.

The challenge is not just financial but organizational. When a CMO or CFO reads a P&L and cannot reconcile the affiliate cost line with what they believe the channel is delivering, trust erodes. Budget conversations become harder. The affiliate team is left defending numbers with data that does not match anything leadership sees internally.

This is one of the most consistent dynamics we see across the market: the person managing the affiliate program day to day has a completely different picture of value than the people signing off the budget. The gap between those two views is where affiliate programs get cut.

> **The person on the ground looking at the affiliate channel day-to-day might have a very different perspective of value in the channel than their senior leadership - because there's just such a large gap in that data.**
>
> **JON CLAYDON** CHIEF STRATEGIST, ACCELERATION PARTNERS

CHAPTER 02

WHY ATTRIBUTION MODELS CAN'T SEE WHAT AFFILIATE DOES

The gap between platform data and internal data is not random. It is built into the measurement infrastructure most brands use.

Mixed Media Models (MMM) - the tools that enterprise marketing teams rely on to allocate budget across channels - require impression-based data. Paid search, display, and social all generate impressions that flow naturally into these models. Affiliate, by its nature, does not work that way. Content partners, review sites, and creators are driving value- introducing brands at the top of the funnel, building consideration, influencing decisions. But because that activity does not generate the impression signals that MMMs are built to read, it goes uncounted in the models that leadership trusts most.

The result is systematic undercounting.

> **The affiliate channel is doing that work in large quantities. And we actually do not get credit for that.**

JON CLAYDON

CHIEF STRATEGIST,
ACCELERATION PARTNERS



Then there is the bias question. Attribution logic inside affiliate platforms does not arrive neutral. It reflects the priorities, assumptions, and workarounds of whoever configured it, often years ago, often without the affiliate team in the room. What we consistently find when we open a client's data is years of different people, with different goals and different aspirations, building systems designed to tell the story they wanted to see. The result is usually two or three internal platforms that commonly disagree with each other.

THREE REASONS THE NUMBERS DON'T MATCH

1. MMM platforms require impression data. Affiliate clicks and transactions are not the same as impressions, so affiliate contribution is structurally undercounted in most mixed media models.

2. Attribution logic inside affiliate platforms was configured to serve whoever set it up - not to produce an objective view of channel value.

3. If any other channel touches a transaction, affiliates commonly get no credit. The results is a system where affiliate is the last plate to get served.

CHAPTER 03

DEFINING INCREMENTALITY

When a client comes to AP saying that leadership believes the affiliate channel is not incremental, we start by asking one question: what does incremental mean to you?

Often nobody within the client organization has actually agreed on a definition. Budget is being allocated, commissions are being paid, programs are being managed, and the word incremental is used in leadership conversations without anyone agreeing on what it actually means for that specific business.

Incrementality is not a standard metric; it's a measurement framework that has to be built around the questions that matter to each individual business. A brand focused on new customer acquisition will define incrementality differently from one optimizing for efficient return on ad spend. A business tracking solo touchpoints in the customer journey will score partners differently from one that cares most about high-value transactions.

The incrementality framework only works when it is anchored to the right definition. And that definition has to come from the client's leadership - the people reading the P&L, not just the people managing the program.

WHAT DOES INCREMENTAL MEAN TO YOU?

Before you measure incrementality, you need to define it for your business. That definition starts with three questions:

1. What customer behavior are we trying to drive? (New customers, return visits, high-value transactions, something else?)

2. What would have happened to that conversion without affiliate involvement?

3. Are leadership, the affiliate team, and internal analytics all working from the same definition of success - or three different ones?

CHAPTER 04

YOUR INCREMENTALITY FRAMEWORK



AP's incrementality framework has four steps, and they build on each other: audit, define, plan, and track. Each phase feeds the next, creating a measurement system a CMO and CFO can both trust.

AUDIT

The audit phase is discovery. What data exists, where does it live, and who controls access to it? What KPIs does leadership actually care about versus what the affiliate team is optimizing for? And what biases are already baked into the current measurement setup?

DEFINE

Once the audit surfaces a clear picture, AP works with clients to create a measurement framework specific to their business - one that can be explained to a CMO, defended to a CFO, and updated as strategic priorities shift. The definition of incrementality is different for every client. What is incremental to one brand may be non-incremental to another.

PLAN

With a shared definition in place, AP designs the measurement approach: how partners will be classified, what the scoring model will look at, and how the data pipeline will be set up to make the model run reliably.

TRACK

This is where the scorecard is built - not as a one-time report but as the ongoing mechanism for measuring program incrementality. Commission decisions, partner recruitment, partner optimization and budget allocation all flow from what the scorecard shows.

CHAPTER 05

YOUR DATA IS ALREADY THERE

For brands feeling daunted about the size of the data project ahead of them, in most cases, you've already done ninety percent of the work.

The data that AP needs to build an incrementality model, granular, transaction-level data from your internal systems, is already in your organization. The only step that is missing is giving AP visibility to this data.

What matters is not whether the data is perfect. It is whether it is consistent and detailed enough to build from. Regular access to granular transaction data allows AP to run the model, validate it across time periods, and produce results that both the affiliate team and leadership can trust.

The bigger barrier is almost never technical. It is organizational. Internal teams are siloed. Channel teams are competing for budget. Data teams have other priorities. The affiliate team is trying to make the case for resources without the data to back it up. That is where AP's crawl-walk-run approach matters: start with what you can access, show what is possible with limited data, and build the internal case for the full pipeline.

WHAT GOOD DATA ACCESS LOOKS LIKE

- Transaction-level data, not aggregated reports or weekly summaries
- A regular, reliable pipeline - not manual email attachments
- Access to the same data your internal teams use as their source of truth
- A data contact willing to set up a connection and stay in communication

If you can access your internal data consistently and grant AP visibility into it, the analysis and modeling that follows is much more of an engineering project than an analysis project.

CHAPTER 06

THE SCORECARD IN ACTION

Partners are plotted on two axes: incremental value score and volume. Partners who score well but drive low volume represent a growth opportunity and partners with high volume but poor incremental scores are the ones to rethink.

WHAT IT REVEALS AT FIRST

When the data is in place and the incrementality model runs for the first time, the results are rarely what anyone expected.

It surfaces value that was hiding in plain sight.

Most clients start with a confident view of which partners drive the most incremental value, and that view shapes how the scoring system gets built. When the model runs, publishers nobody had been watching closely often score just as well as the obvious ones. That is the first indication the model is working.

It challenges the partners everyone trusted most.

The second indication is more direct. When the partner that everyone assumed was the most incremental turns out to be among the least, and the data shows it clearly in a framework, the entire running of the program opens up for question.

It becomes the tool for running the program, not just a one-time finding.

Once the scorecard is built and running, it is the backbone of everything: commission rate changes, partner recruitment decisions, media buy allocations, and budget defense when a new CMO or CFO redefines the KPIs. The framework stays consistent. The inputs and priorities adapt as the business changes.

The scorecard is not a one-time deliverable. As soon as you build these models, the very next step is adjusting them. It could be as simple as an internal strategic shift. You could be pushing for volume, or you could be trying to stay under budget. The best part about the methodology and the scoring is its ability to change and change constantly.



CHELSEY HOLT

VP OF ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT,
ACCELERATION PARTNERS

CASE STUDY vistaprint.

VISTAPRINT CUT COSTS BY 23% WHILE MAINTAINING REVENUE

After AP and VistaPrint built and deployed an incrementality scorecard, they identified significant commission spend on VistaPrint partners delivering little genuine incremental value.

By reoptimizing the program based on the scorecard findings, VistaPrint cut commission costs by 23% and reduced average cost per action by 33% while revenue still grew by 2%.

The program got smarter about where the money went.

CHAPTER 07

THE PROGRAM THAT EARNS ITS PLACE



An incrementality-first program is not just better-managed. It is competitively positioned in a way that programs without it simply are not.

Brands that know what their channel is genuinely worth can make a choice that most programs never get to make: they can pull investment from partners who are capturing demand they were already going to get, and reinvest it in partners who are actually creating it. That changes the shape of the program. It changes the partnership strategy. And it changes how the channel is perceived at the top of the organization.

There is a newer dimension to this as well: the growing role of AI-driven search and GEO, how brands are now showing up in AI-generated results on competitive search terms through their affiliate and content partners. The brands investing in content partners who appear in those results are building share of voice and brand affinity at the very top of the customer journey. That value is not captured by standard attribution. It is exactly the kind of incremental contribution that only becomes visible once you build the right measurement framework.

THE INCREMENTALITY-FIRST PROGRAM DOES THREE THINGS DIFFERENTLY



01

It invests in partners who create demand, not partners who show up at the end of a journey the customer was already on.



02

It gives the affiliate team a clear, data-backed answer when leadership asks whether the channel is earning its budget.



03

It treats the scorecard as a live tool, not a one-time report - evolving as KPIs change, as the market changes, and as the partnership mix changes with it.

CHAPTER 08

THREE THINGS TO DO THIS WEEK



You don't need a full overhaul immediately. Try to start with these:

- [ ] **AUDIT YOUR DATA ACCESS.**

  Find out what your team can actually pull on a regular basis and test pulling it consistently for a week. If you can access it on demand, you already have what you need to start measuring incrementality.

- [ ] **ALIGN ON A DEFINITION.**

  Get your team and leadership to write down what "incremental" actually means to your organization. Align on that definition.

- [ ] **BUILD YOUR INCREMENTALITY SCORECARD.**

  With AP, it's free and doesn't take long to put together an initial blueprint. From there, use it to decide where to keep investing and where not to.



WORK WITH ACCELERATION PARTNERS

Book a complimentary 30-minute program diagnostic with AP's strategy team

- If you're a VP of Marketing or affiliate program lead who can't confidently answer what your channel is actually worth.
- If you're a performance marketing director who suspects you're over-paying for conversions that were already going to happen.
- If you're heading into a budget conversation and need to defend the affiliate channel with data rather than dashboards.

BOOK A COMPLIMENTARY 30-MINUTE DIAGNOSTIC CALL →