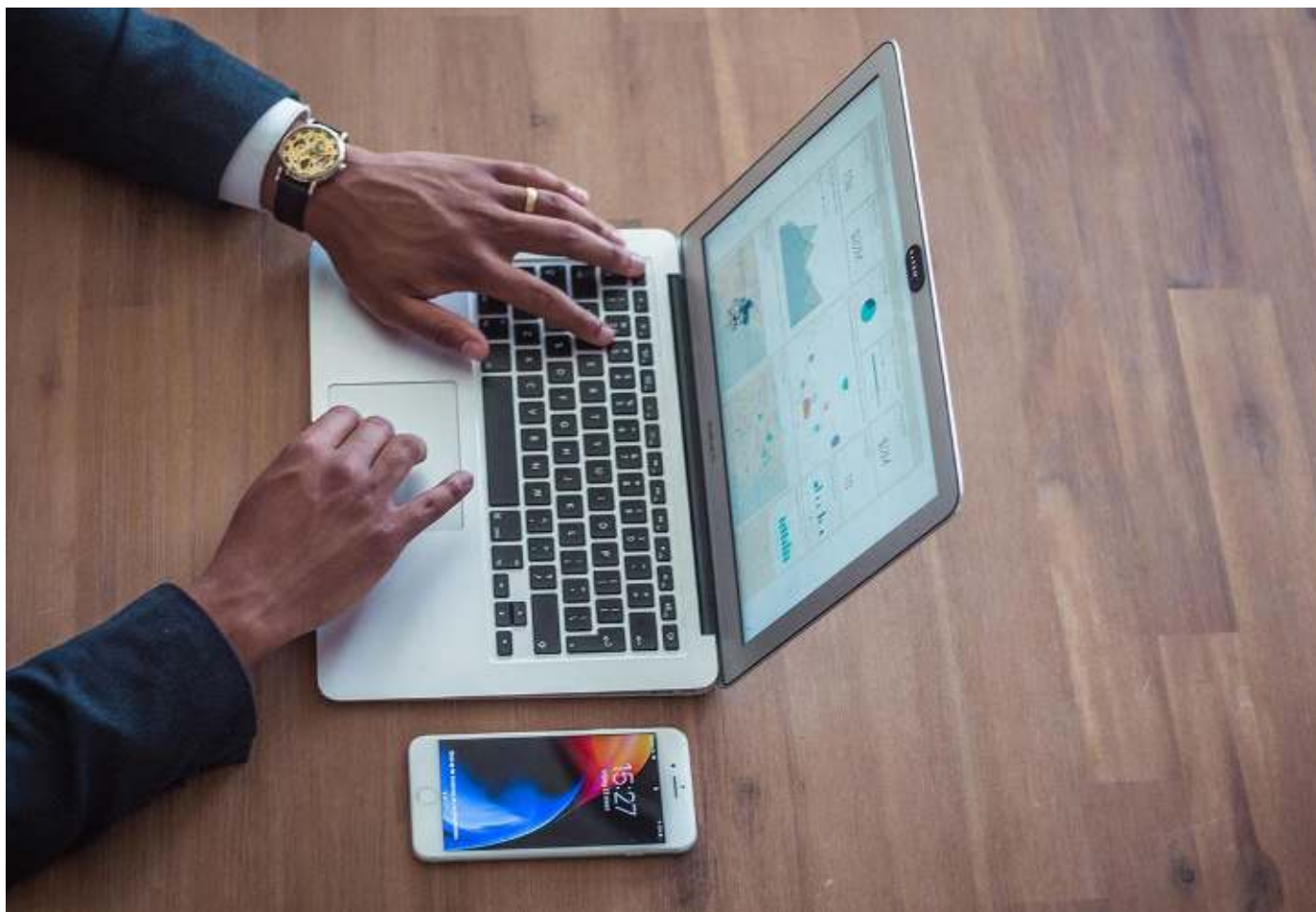# First Touch Attribution vs Last Touch: Which One Works Best?

Designing metrics by which to review your marketing successes and failures can get very complicated.

To figure out where your best ROI on ad spending is, it's tempting to look at either the first or last touchpoint – the moment your customer interacted with your ad. The first touch triggered their awareness of your product, but the last touch triggered their purchase directly. Attributing either of these touchpoints to the success of your sale gives you potentially valuable information about one but ignores the other!

So how do you know which touch is most significant? There are multiple attribution strategies available: First touch, last touch, multi-touch – far too many to cover in their entirety in this article. However, to help your head stop spinning and give you back a sense of direction, we're going to look at the first and last touch; what they are, what they're not, and how they compare.

Attribution

In reviewing the effectiveness of the sales funnel, marketers are looking for what works and what doesn't. Repeatability, cause-and-effect, and customer responsiveness are all valuable elements of reviewing the conversion process with the intention of analyzing and improving it.

To achieve and understand them, it's important to know which factors are most responsible for affecting customer decisions. With a funnel that involves multiple channels of marketing, e.g., physical mail, websites, search engines, targeted social media ads, etc, a conversion can take the customer through various points of contact – or "touches" – with multiple media formats before a sale.

This means that being able to attribute the success of a sale to any one of these touches allows marketing departments to improve on their process by figuring out 'what, where, and how' ads are working. This in turn shows which touchpoints are bringing the best ROI for ad spending.

There are numerous methodologies for attribution, and it seems that many don't work as well as we once thought. Still, some are better than others, so let's compare a few.

First Touch Attribution

This attribution model ignores all traffic but the first marketing touchpoint, giving it 100% credit for the sale in a conversion. It's a way of measuring the effectiveness of the top level of the sales funnel, at the awareness stage.

- **Pros** – This model allows marketers to assess the quality of their initial contact media. If there are multiple touchpoints at the beginning of a lead journey, this method can help compare them for effectiveness.

- **Cons** – By ignoring every other touchpoint, it provides no data on the rest of the journey through the funnel. It's possible that the first touch is the least significant factor in the conversion, but with this model, there is no way to compare it with any other data.

First touch attribution is no longer very common, but there are a few cases in which it can be useful. For example, when running multiple online campaigns, customer exposure may not lead directly through clicks to a sale. Instead, first touch may create awareness and the sale comes from the customer making a Google search later. In this instance, attribution to the first touch exposes how the customer became aware of the product and where.

So, first touch attribution is an important technique to use when trying to assess the awareness stage of the sales funnel, but it is extremely limited in terms of what data you can gather from it.

Last Touch Attribution

When looking for precisely what caused a conversion, marketers may use last touch attribution. This gives data on the exact touchpoint that mediated a sale and assigns no credit to any other stage of the funnel.

- **Pros** – This model illuminates the step that directly led to a sale, which makes it great for analyzing conversions. If a company has a lot of offers that create conversions, this method is a good way to compare them.

- **Cons** – Much like the first model, the last touch attribution model ignores the rest of the story. There are many awareness and nurturing stages along the funnel that lead people to the first touch, and with the last touch taking all the credit for the sale, the model misses out on valuable data regarding the impact of these stages.

This method is more reliable when there are fewer touches along the conversion funnel, or when it's useful to compare multiple different last-touches within a narrow conversion window.

Many analysts are moving away from last touch toward more detailed models, but google analytics, while it has the option to switch between models, defaults to this attribution since it's the most useful for people who want simplicity or haven't chosen a specific model.

First Touch Vs Last Touch

The first and last steps of the sales process are both very important and should usually be credited at least partially with contributing to the conversion, but out of the single-touch attribution models, which is better?

The answer depends on your needs. In some niche circumstances, you may want to compare either first or last touch effects on conversions, in which case you would choose the appropriate attribution model, but for an overall sense of the effect of touchpoints on your conversion success rate, ultimately both models are going to leave a lot to be desired.

As such, first or last touch attribution should not be a fixed choice, and switching between both may bring useful insights into different stages of your conversion process.

Multi Touch Attribution

The reality of single-point attribution models is that while both models are attractive due to their simplicity, it is this same simplicity that makes them unreliable and, in many cases, redundant. It's been demonstrated that there can be 56 touchpoints between a customer's awareness and conversion, and any one-point attribution ignores the significance of all of the 55 other points.

For this reason, many companies have developed much more complex and accurate attribution models. Facebook uses position-based attribution, which is weighted equally heavily at first and last touch position, but. 40% of the conversion credit is spread over other touchpoints in-between, with first and last touchpoints being given 30% credit each.

Google Analytics defaults to the *last interaction* (last touch) model, but it's possible to switch between this and the *First Interaction model* which assigns all credit to the first point of contact; or to more complex attribution models such as *linear*, in which every touchpoint gets 25% credit and *Time Decay*, in which later stages of the conversion process get more weighting. It also offers the position-based model, among others.

Why is Attribution so Difficult?

Without context, it's impossible to know what leads a customer to a sale. If a person gets a hole in their shoe and starts looking for a replacement in the same brand, neither first, last, or any touch in between should be credited for that particular sale. For this reason, there will be a significant amount of data points involving immeasurable external factors that skew results and make them inaccurate.

Services like Google Analytics provide a basic overview and simple means to evaluate your touchpoints, but they are limited. More specialist services such as What Converts offer much more in-depth touchpoint analyses, showing exactly where your leads come from and which marketing makes your sales happen.

Conclusion

One touch attribution models, once valued for their simplicity, are losing out to more complex and accurate systems of attribution as data shows that focusing on one touchpoint leaves far too much of the conversion process neglected and misunderstood.

While first touch attribution is useful in some cases where the focus needs to be spent on the awareness end of the funnel, last touch models help identify exactly which touchpoint was responsible for the final sale. Both of these systems can be useful in specific circumstances, but both fall short of providing a generalized overview of the conversion process.

As such, multi touch attribution models are a much more reliable means of analyzing the significance of touchpoints.