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Tracking AI Traffic in GA4

Setup, measurement, attribution and funnel analysis — a practical guide

UPDATE — JUNE 2026

Since this guide was first published, Google has added a native AI Assistant channel to GA4's Default Channel Group (confirmed 13 May 2026), automatically classifying traffic from ChatGPT, Gemini, Deepseek, Copilot and Grok with no configuration required. If your property has received the rollout, you will see it in Reports > Acquisition > Traffic Acquisition.

The custom channel group approach in this guide remains worth implementing for three reasons: it covers sources the native channel misses (Perplexity, Meta AI, and a broad .ai domain pattern); it applies retroactively to data before May 2026; and it gives you session-level source granularity the native channel does not expose. Run both in parallel.

Why AI traffic matters now

AI platforms are becoming a meaningful source of referral traffic, and that traffic does not behave like anything that came before it. ChatGPT has announced paid advertising. Perplexity is running shopping and answer experiences with cited sources. These platforms are not sitting alongside the web — they are increasingly mediating access to it.

The question is not whether AI platforms will divert meaningful traffic. That is already happening. The question is whether you will be able to see it, understand what it is worth, and make decisions accordingly.

Most GA4 setups are not configured to answer that question. This guide fixes that. It covers setup, the structural limits of the data, attribution modelling, and the funnel and path analysis that turns raw numbers into a defensible argument.

The guide is in four parts:

— Part One: Setting up AI traffic tracking in GA4 — the channel group, the regex, the configuration

— Part Two: Why the numbers will be lower than you expect — referrer stripping, consent gaps, the native channel update

— Part Three: Attribution modelling — model comparison, first-click vs last-click, what the delta tells you

— Part Four: Path exploration and assisted conversions — real journey sequences, funnel analysis, presenting findings

Prerequisites: a GA4 property with conversion events configured and Editor or Administrator access. Nothing here requires GA4 360.

PART ONE

Setting up AI traffic tracking in GA4

The channel group, the regex, the configuration

Why the default GA4 channels miss AI traffic

Out of the box, GA4's default channel group includes Organic Search, Direct, Referral, Paid Search and others. AI-referred traffic — visits that arrive after a user clicks a link in ChatGPT, Perplexity, Claude, Gemini or similar — gets dropped into Referral by default, if it gets attributed at all. There is no way to isolate it, track its trend, or evaluate its quality without creating a dedicated channel.

The native AI Assistant channel added in May 2026 covers five sources automatically. The custom approach below covers significantly more, applies to historical data, and gives you granular source visibility. The two approaches complement each other.

Step 1: Create a new Channel Group

In GA4, go to Admin (cog icon, bottom left), then navigate to Data Display > Channel Groups. Click the three dots next to Default channel group and select Copy to create new. Name the new group Channel Group AI and add a short description.

Step 2: Add the AI Traffic channel

Inside your new channel group, click Add new channel and configure:

— Channel name: AI Traffic

— Condition type: Source — Matches regex

Paste the following regex into the condition field:

```
^.*\.openai.*|.*copilot.*|.*\.ai\b.*|.*chatgpt.*|.*gemini.*|.*gpt.*|.*neeva.*
|.*writesonic.*|.*nimble.*|.*perplexity.*|.*google.*bard.*|.*bard.*google.*
|.*bard.*|.*edgeservices.*|.*bnngpt.*|.*gemini.*google.*|.*claude\.ai.*
|.*deepseek.*|.*meta\.ai.*|.*grok\.com.*$
```

This regex covers sources the native GA4 channel does not: Perplexity, Meta AI, Writesonic, and a broad .ai domain pattern that catches AI-named domains generically. Review your sources periodically as new platforms emerge.

Click Save.

This step is critical and frequently missed. GA4 assigns sessions to channels in order from top to bottom. If Referral sits above AI Traffic in the list, AI-referred sessions will be attributed to Referral instead of your new channel. Click Reorder, move AI Traffic above Referral, then click Save group and Apply.

> *Custom channel groups apply retroactively in GA4. Once saved, past sessions matching your regex will be reclassified. You do not need to wait for new data.*

Step 4: Find your report

Navigate to Acquisition > Traffic Acquisition, then change the primary dimension to the channel group you have just created. Scroll to find AI Traffic in the list. Add secondary dimensions — landing page, device, country — to slice the data further.

PART TWO

Why the numbers will be lower than you expect

Referrer stripping, consent gaps, and what the native channel misses

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Why the numbers will be lower than you expect

Referrer stripping, consent gaps, and what the native channel misses

Even with your custom channel group correctly configured, your AI traffic figures will undercount actual AI-referred visits. This is not a configuration problem — it is a structural one. Understanding the causes makes your analysis more credible, not less.

Referrer stripping

When a user clicks a link from within a native app — the ChatGPT iOS app, the Gemini Android app, Perplexity on mobile — the operating system frequently strips the referrer header before the request reaches your server. GA4 receives no source information and the session is recorded as Direct.

This is the single largest gap. Estimates vary, but somewhere between 60 and 70 percent of actual AI sessions are thought to arrive without referrer data. Your AI Traffic channel captures the floor — clicks from web browser sessions where the referrer survives. The ceiling is considerably higher.

The native GA4 channel — what it covers and what it does not

The May 2026 native AI Assistant channel tags sessions with medium = ai-assistant and campaign = (ai-assistant) automatically. This is useful for properties that have not set up a custom group. However it has two notable gaps:

— It covers only five sources at launch: ChatGPT, Gemini, Deepseek, Copilot and Grok. Perplexity and Meta AI are absent.

— Google's own AI Overviews and AI Mode are explicitly excluded — they count as Organic Search. This is likely the highest-volume AI surface and it is invisible as AI in standard reports.

The referrer stripping problem affects both the native channel and your custom group equally. Neither can recover sessions where the header was stripped before GA4 received the request.

Cookie-based tracking and consent gaps

GA4 relies on first-party cookies. Where users decline consent via a cookie banner, GA4 receives no data for those sessions. GA4 attempts to fill gaps using modelled conversions, but this creates a blurry line between observed data and inferred data. In markets with high consent decline rates — Germany and France in particular — this can represent a meaningful proportion of total traffic.

Safari ITP

Safari's Intelligent Tracking Prevention limits first-party cookie duration to seven days. A returning user who last visited eight days ago looks like a new user in GA4. Multi-session journeys spanning more than a week are routinely broken in Safari — significant for any site with a longer consideration cycle.

Without User ID implementation, GA4 cannot stitch sessions across devices. A user who discovers your site via an AI chatbot on mobile and converts on desktop is recorded as two unconnected users. AI-referred traffic is disproportionately mobile, which makes this gap particularly relevant for this channel.

Server-side logging as a complementary source

Your hosting provider records every request at server level, independent of consent and JavaScript execution. Server logs can validate what GA4 is and is not seeing — a useful cross-check when consent decline rates are high or when cookie issues are suspected. They cannot tell you about sessions or conversions, and referrer stripping affects them in exactly the same way as GA4. Treat them as a floor validator, not an alternative.

PART THREE

Attribution modelling

Model comparison, first-click vs last-click, what the delta tells you

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Attribution modelling

Model comparison, first-click vs last-click, what the delta tells you — and how to run period comparisons

Attribution modelling determines which channel gets credit for a conversion. For AI traffic, this matters a great deal — AI-referred sessions are often early in the journey, introducing users to a brand or product they then research and convert through a different channel. Under last-click attribution, the AI visit disappears entirely.

The same problem applies across all channels. Last-click is the GA4 default and the most widely reported model. It is also the one most likely to misrepresent what is actually driving conversions.

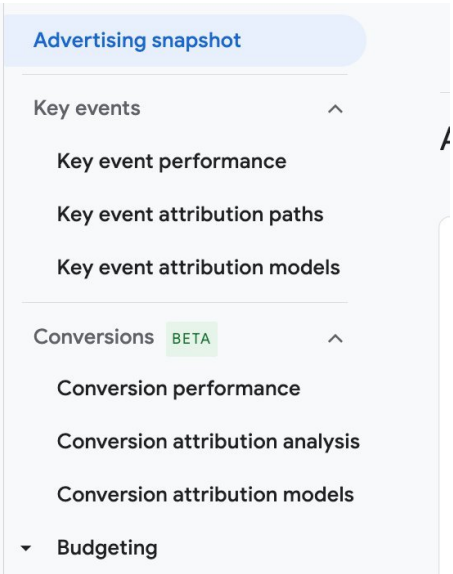
Where to find it — the updated navigation

The Advertising section in GA4 has been reorganised. The model comparison no longer lives under a single Attribution menu. The current structure is:

— Advertising > Key events > Key event attribution models — use this for most GA4 setups

— Advertising > Conversions (Beta) > Conversion attribution models — relevant if Google Ads conversion actions are flowing into GA4

— Advertising > Key events > Key event attribution paths — shows touchpoint sequences across the journey (covered below)



The current GA4 Advertising navigation. Attribution models now sit under Key events and Conversions separately.

If you have Google Ads linked and conversion actions imported, check both views — Key event attribution models and Conversion attribution models may show different channel distributions depending on which conversion actions are included.

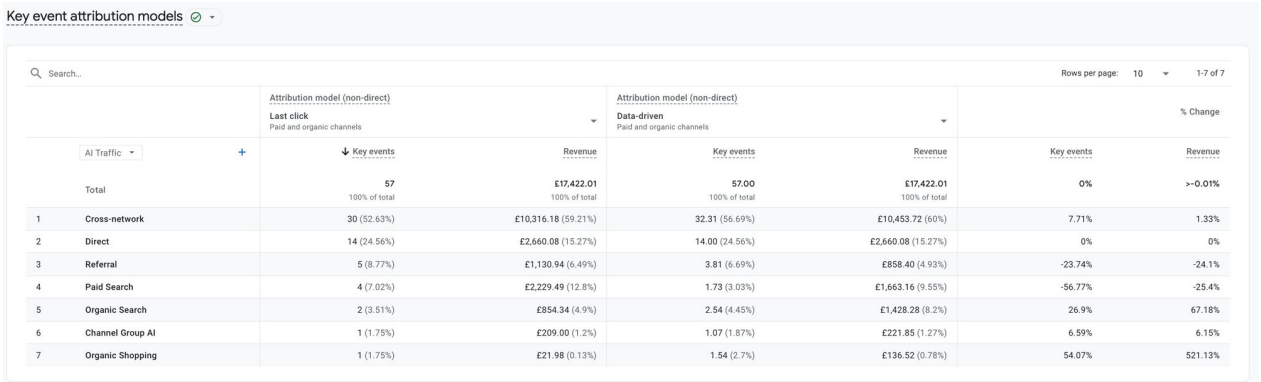
GA4 shows two models side by side in the comparison view. The left column defaults to Last click; the right defaults to Data-driven. Both dropdowns are changeable.

Model	What it does
Last click	Gives 100% credit to the final channel before conversion. Simple and auditable but systematically undersells discovery and awareness channels. GA4 default.
First click	Gives 100% credit to the first channel in the journey. Useful for understanding where users enter the funnel but ignores everything that nudges them to convert.
Linear	Divides credit equally across every touchpoint. Feels fair but dilutes the genuine impact of channels that drove the decision.
Time decay	Weights credit toward touchpoints closer to conversion. Better for short consideration cycles.
Data-driven	GA4's machine learning model. Distributes credit based on observed conversion probability at each touchpoint. Most accurate for accounts with sufficient conversion volume (roughly 300+ per month).

> *Data-driven attribution is the most accurate model if your property qualifies. Check Advertising > Attribution > Attribution settings to see which models are available. Properties below the conversion threshold will not see data-driven as an option.*

Reading the model comparison report

The default view shows channels by primary channel group with Last click and Data-driven side by side. Add Source / medium as a secondary dimension using the + button next to the primary dimension dropdown — this reveals which specific sources within a channel are being over or under credited.


Key event attribution models

Search...

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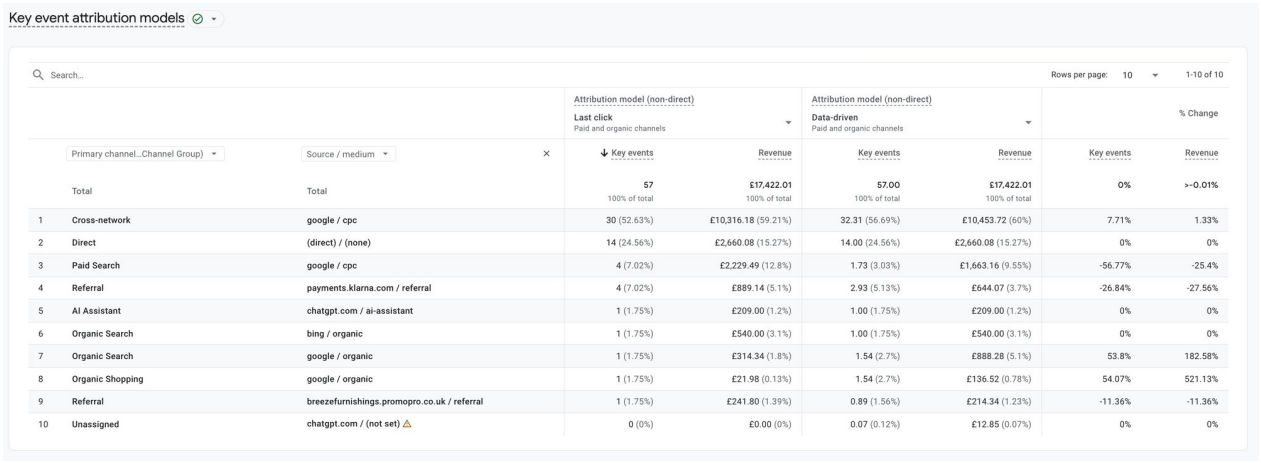
	AI Traffic	Attribution model (non-direct) Last click Paid and organic channels ↓ Key events	Revenue	Attribution model (non-direct) Data-driven Paid and organic channels Key events	Revenue	% Change Key events	Revenue
	Total	57 100% of total	£17,422.01 100% of total	57.00 100% of total	£17,422.01 100% of total	0%	>-0.01%
1	Cross-network	30 (52.63%)	£10,316.18 (59.21%)	32.31 (56.69%)	£10,453.72 (60%)	7.71%	1.33%
2	Direct	14 (24.56%)	£2,660.08 (15.27%)	14.00 (24.56%)	£2,660.08 (15.27%)	0%	0%
3	Referral	5 (8.77%)	£1,130.94 (6.49%)	3.81 (6.69%)	£858.40 (4.93%)	-23.74%	-24.1%
4	Paid Search	4 (7.02%)	£2,229.49 (12.8%)	1.73 (3.03%)	£1,663.16 (9.55%)	-56.77%	-25.4%
5	Organic Search	2 (3.51%)	£854.34 (4.9%)	2.54 (4.45%)	£1,428.28 (8.2%)	26.9%	67.18%
6	Channel Group AI	1 (1.75%)	£209.00 (1.2%)	1.07 (1.87%)	£221.85 (1.27%)	6.59%	6.15%
7	Organic Shopping	1 (1.75%)	£21.98 (0.13%)	1.54 (2.7%)	£136.52 (0.78%)	54.07%	521.13%

Key event attribution models for a furniture e-commerce account using a custom Channel Group AI. Last-click overcredits Paid Search by over 50% on key events and obscures significant Organic Search revenue. Channel Group AI shows modest assisted uplift under data-driven attribution.



Key event attribution models

Search...

Rows per page: 10 | 1-10 of 10

	Primary channel...Channel Group)	Source / medium	Attribution model (non-direct) Last click Paid and organic channels: ↓ Key events	Revenue	Attribution model (non-direct) Data-driven Paid and organic channels: Key events	Revenue	% Change: Key events	Revenue
	Total	Total	57 100% of total	£17,422.01 100% of total	57.00 100% of total	£17,422.01 100% of total	0%	>-0.01%
1	Cross-network	google / cpc	30 (52.63%)	£10,316.18 (59.21%)	32.31 (56.69%)	£10,453.72 (60%)	7.71%	1.33%
2	Direct	(direct) / (none)	14 (24.56%)	£2,660.08 (15.27%)	14.00 (24.56%)	£2,660.08 (15.27%)	0%	0%
3	Paid Search	google / cpc	4 (7.02%)	£2,229.49 (12.8%)	1.73 (3.03%)	£1,663.16 (9.55%)	-56.77%	-25.4%
4	Referral	payments.klarna.com / referral	4 (7.02%)	£889.14 (5.1%)	2.93 (5.13%)	£644.07 (3.7%)	-26.84%	-27.56%
5	AI Assistant	chatgpt.com / ai-assistant	1 (1.75%)	£209.00 (1.2%)	1.00 (1.75%)	£209.00 (1.2%)	0%	0%
6	Organic Search	bing / organic	1 (1.75%)	£540.00 (3.1%)	1.00 (1.75%)	£540.00 (3.1%)	0%	0%
7	Organic Search	google / organic	1 (1.75%)	£314.34 (1.8%)	1.54 (2.7%)	£888.28 (5.1%)	53.8%	182.58%
8	Organic Shopping	google / organic	1 (1.75%)	£21.98 (0.13%)	1.54 (2.7%)	£136.52 (0.78%)	54.07%	521.13%
9	Referral	breezefurnishings.promopro.co.uk / referral	1 (1.75%)	£241.80 (1.39%)	0.89 (1.56%)	£214.34 (1.23%)	-11.36%	-11.36%
10	Unassigned	chatgpt.com / (not set) ⚠	0 (0%)	£0.00 (0%)	0.07 (0.12%)	£12.85 (0.07%)	0%	0%

The same report with Source / medium added as a secondary dimension. Row 5 shows AI Assistant traffic attributed to chatgpt.com / ai-assistant. Row 10 shows chatgpt.com sessions in Unassigned with no medium set — a warning triangle indicates incomplete attribution data.

What the delta tells you

The gap between last-click and data-driven attribution is your reattribution argument. The pattern to look for in each channel:

— Paid Search consistently overcredited under last-click — it tends to be the last click before purchase, capturing credit for journeys that started elsewhere

— Organic Search and Organic Shopping tend to be undercredited — they assist early in the journey but rarely close

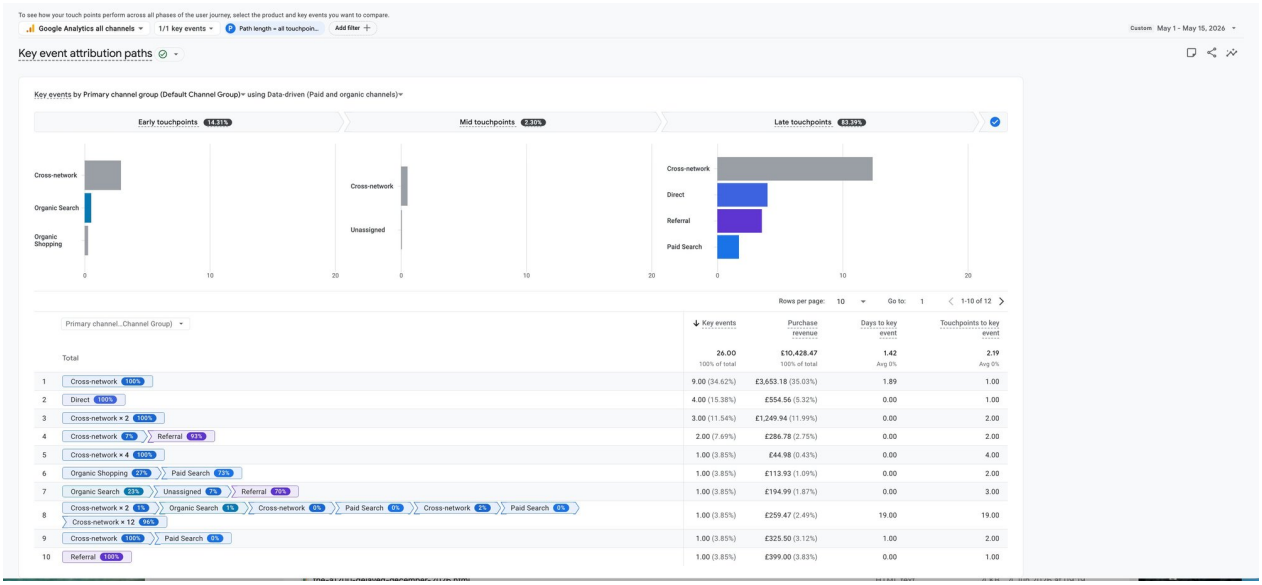
— Direct is neutral — data-driven rarely moves it significantly because Direct sessions often genuinely are the deciding touchpoint

— AI traffic modest but positive — a small uplift in data-driven vs last-click reflects its role as an early discovery channel

Present the delta as: "Last-click attributes X conversions to Paid Search. Data-driven attributes Y. The difference represents conversions where Paid Search was the final click but not the primary driver — the journey started in Organic Search or via an AI referral."

Key event attribution paths

Alongside the model comparison, Key event attribution paths shows the actual touchpoint sequences that led to conversions. Navigate to Advertising > Key events > Key event attribution paths.



Key event attribution paths showing early, mid and late touchpoints. Most conversions are single-touchpoint (Cross-network direct to purchase) but multi-step journeys reveal the assisted role of organic and referral channels. Days to key event and touchpoints to key event columns confirm journey complexity.

The paths view is useful for identifying journey complexity by revenue band. Higher value orders in this account show more touchpoints and longer days-to-conversion — consistent with considered purchase behaviour where AI-assisted research is more likely to occur before the final click.

Running period comparisons

The model comparison view applies both models to the same date range simultaneously. It does not allow you to compare how a channel performed under different models across different time periods in a single view.

To build a period comparison — for example, to see whether the attribution gap for a channel has grown or shrunk year on year — you need to run separate exports and compare manually:

— Set your date range to Period A. Export the model comparison as a CSV using the download icon top right.

— Change the date range to Period B. Export again.

— Open both in a spreadsheet. Compare last-click vs data-driven for each channel across both periods.

— The delta between periods tells you whether a channel's assisted role is growing, shrinking, or stable.

> *This is the only way to answer the question "is AI traffic becoming more or less important as an assisted channel over time?" There is no built-in trend view for attribution model comparison in GA4.*

The following findings are drawn from a year-on-year comparison for a furniture e-commerce account, comparing the same five-month window across two consecutive years. Numbers have been generalised.

Paid Search over-credit worsened as spend scaled

In year one, last-click overcredited Paid Search by roughly 27% compared to data-driven. In year two, with increased spend and more campaigns active, that gap widened to over 50%. Last-click reporting was making Paid Search look increasingly effective at exactly the point where data-driven suggested its independent contribution was declining relative to its cost.

This is the core risk of last-click attribution in paid channels: as spend grows, the overcredit grows with it. Budget decisions made on last-click data will consistently overinvest in the closing channel and underinvest in the channels that start the journey.

Organic channel direction can reverse

In year one, Organic Shopping received less credit under data-driven than under last-click — it was being overcredited. In year two, the position reversed: data-driven gave it more credit than last-click, indicating it had shifted from a closing channel to an assisting one. Running this comparison once and treating it as fixed would have produced the wrong conclusion in year two.

Known issues corrupt baselines

One comparison in this dataset showed a significant year-on-year decline in Organic Search events. Taken at face value this looks like deteriorating organic performance. In context, a known channel-level issue affected the baseline period — making the comparison unreliable as a benchmark.

> *Keep a change log. Any significant technical or configuration change — a migration, a consent setup reset, a tagging change, a period of agency access, a GTM container update — should be recorded with a date. When you come to read attribution data six or twelve months later, you need to know what was happening to the data at the time. Without a log, a corrupted baseline looks the same as a genuine trend.*

Tag testing artefacts in attribution data

If you see tagassistant.google.com appearing as a referral source in your attribution reports, it means a Google Tag Assistant session was active while a real transaction completed. The conversion gets attributed to Tag Assistant rather than the actual acquisition channel.

> *Tag testing artefacts inflate referral conversion counts and corrupt revenue figures. Exclude tagassistant.google.com as a filter in your attribution reports and flag the conversion to whoever manages the PPC or GTM configuration. Add tag testing windows to your change log.*

Data-driven attribution and dark AI traffic

One finding from the period comparison is worth highlighting specifically for AI traffic measurement. Sessions that showed zero conversions under last-click attribution — because the referrer was stripped

and the session appeared as Unassigned — were partially recovered by the data-driven model as assisted touchpoints, with a small revenue attribution.

This means data-driven attribution sees further into the journey than direct channel reporting. Some AI traffic that is invisible in your channel group report is still influencing the data-driven model's conversion probability calculations. It is not a complete recovery of dark traffic — but it is evidence that the floor figure in your AI channel report understates actual AI influence on conversions.

Presenting Part Three findings

When presenting attribution modelling to a client or stakeholder, the sequence that works:

— Start with the default view: "This is what GA4 reports under last-click — the model most people are looking at."

— Switch to data-driven: "This is what the data actually suggests when all touchpoints are weighted. Here is where the numbers change."

— Identify the over-credited channel: "Paid Search is being overcredited by roughly X%. That means budget decisions based on last-click are likely overinvesting in closing clicks and underinvesting in the channels that start the journey."

— Name the under-credited channels: "Organic Search and AI traffic are doing more than last-click suggests. They are not appearing in last-click conversion reports but they are showing up in data-driven attribution."

— Add the limitation acknowledgement: "These figures represent what GA4 can see. Referrer stripping means actual AI influence on journeys is higher than the channel report shows — data-driven attribution partially recovers this but does not fully account for it."

PART FOUR

Path exploration and assisted conversions

Real journey sequences, funnel analysis, custom reports, presenting findings

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Real journey sequences, funnel analysis, custom reports, presenting findings

Attribution modelling tells you which channels get credit for conversions. Path and funnel exploration tells you how users actually move through your site — where they enter, what they do next, and where they drop off. For AI traffic, the path analysis is often the most compelling evidence of value.

Funnel Exploration

In GA4, go to Explore > Funnel Exploration. This tool lets you define a sequence of steps and see how many users complete each one, where they drop off, and how completion rates vary by segment.

To build a funnel for AI traffic:

— Add a Segment at the top of the exploration — filter by Session source matching your AI regex, or by the AI Traffic channel if using your custom group.

— Define your funnel steps: typically Landing page > Key content page > Conversion event (contact form, purchase, sign-up).

— Compare the AI Traffic segment against your overall average or against Organic Search to see whether AI-referred users behave differently.

Common finding: AI-referred users often have higher engagement rates and longer session durations than average referral traffic, but lower volume. This reflects the intent quality of users who have already been researching a topic in an AI tool before clicking through to your site.

Path Exploration

Go to Explore > Path Exploration. This shows the sequence of pages or events a user moves through after a starting point. To analyse AI traffic journeys:

— Set the starting point to Session source (filtered to your AI sources) or to a specific landing page that receives disproportionate AI traffic.

— Expand the path forward to see which pages users visit next and where they exit.

— Look for patterns: do AI-referred users disproportionately visit specific product or service pages? Do they exit at the same point as other traffic or at a different stage?

Note: Session default channel group is not available as a node type in Path Exploration. Use session source/medium or a segment instead.

Custom reports in GA4

The Reports Library in GA4 (Admin > Reports > Report Library) lets you build saved custom reports. For ongoing AI traffic monitoring, a useful setup is:

— Primary dimension: Session source/medium

— Secondary dimension: Landing page

— Metrics: Sessions, Engaged sessions, Engagement rate, Key events, Session key event rate

— Filter: Channel group = AI Traffic (using your custom group)

Save this as a shared report so anyone with access to the property can view it. Add it to a custom reporting collection under the Acquisition section for easy access.

Presenting findings

When presenting AI traffic analysis, lead with the assisted conversion argument rather than raw session counts. The sequence that works:

— Volume: AI Traffic is sending X sessions per month, up/down Y% over the period.

— Quality: Engaged session rate is Z%, compared to W% site average. Average engagement time is higher/lower.

— Attribution gap: Under last-click, AI Traffic is credited with N conversions. Under first-click, that rises to M — meaning AI assisted P additional conversions that were attributed elsewhere.

— Journey evidence: Path exploration shows AI-referred users disproportionately visit [specific pages], indicating intent alignment with [product/service category].

— Limitation acknowledgement: These figures represent a floor. Referrer stripping from native apps means actual AI-influenced traffic is likely 2–3x the measured figure.

The limitation acknowledgement is not a weakness in the argument — it is credibility. Clients and stakeholders trust analysts who explain what the data cannot show as clearly as what it can.