

# Buyer's Guide to Mobile Attribution



## Attribution providers run a highly competitive race...

...to deliver the best product on the market, and each offer a variety of different features to match. The differences, even in the names of respective features, can be quite confusing, and we wanted to address some misconceptions often spread within our corner of mobile marketing to help create a better understanding of what potential buyers should be looking for.

You could be well into your research of attribution vendors, and reaching a point where you're set on finding a solution that can give you data on your promotional performance, and more besides. You probably know the fundamentals of mobile attribution, but less about the different services that offer it. You might have already concluded that you need a mobile attribution solution, but you might not know exactly what you want out of one.

With this guide, you'll be able to make a clear and informed decision on which attribution service could be best for you. We do this by breaking down everything you need to know about different platforms, and giving you questions and ideas to take with you to the table when talking to attribution companies about working with them.

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# A look at the mobile measurement marketplace

The app marketplace is becoming increasingly competitive. Businesses well into the game are consolidating their share of the market while others look at apps as the next best way to reach consumers. As interest grows, the marketplace develops and becomes increasingly sophisticated. Because of this, the demands on attribution services grow too.

According to the [GMSA](#), there were 4.8bn unique mobile subscriptions in 2016, a figure projected to reach 5.7bn in 2020 (or 73 percent penetration of the world's population). Of those 4.8bn unique users, almost 900bn hours of time were spent on mobile apps.

In monetary terms, the GMSA figures put mobile contributions to global GDP at \$3.3tn.

All of this runs on data. Mobile measurement allows businesses to track app performance and see the revenue generated by advertising, in-app transactions and other forms of income. Not only do companies use data to see how well they're doing, but they also use it to inform optimization and help developers create new apps that can repeat the same success.



# What is attribution really?

In mobile marketing, attribution applies to the relation between an app install and what triggered it. One example of a trigger is an interaction with an advertisement.

Attribution matches installs to ads and the sources of those ads. So, if a mobile user installs an app because of an ad they interacted with on Facebook, the source (Facebook) would be attributed to the install.

The definition of attribution goes much more in-depth beyond that, and we've written a detailed explanation of attribution in our 'Essentials of mobile app attribution' guide. [Click here](#) to be taken to the download page to get much more in-depth with mobile app attribution before proceeding with the Buyer's Guide if you'd like to know more.



# Why every app needs attribution

Maybe it's not best just to take our word for it. During Mobile Spree Berlin 2017, Adjust's mobile marketing conference, we spoke to dozens of marketers about the need for an attribution provider. Dora Nikalova, Growth Marketing Manager at HERE, gave us a great answer. If you'd like to see the entire panel on the topic, [click here](#).

"You need a tracking provider because you need to understand what's going on after the install. It's not enough to know how many installs are there, but you have to understand what's going on afterwards."

Attribution goes beyond the install, allowing you to understand in-app behavior, re-engage users, and helps you with various issues from running retargeting campaigns to preventing mobile ad fraud.

Here's a list of just some of the things that attribution can do:

**Understanding** – With attribution you can find out which ads work well, which users provide a great return, and which of your marketing channels perform best overall.

**Measurement** – With accurate measurement you gain a better understanding of your key performance metrics, such as retention rates and lifetime value for different cohorts of users, the average amount of revenue for paying users, and the users who convert from freemium to premium, among many others.

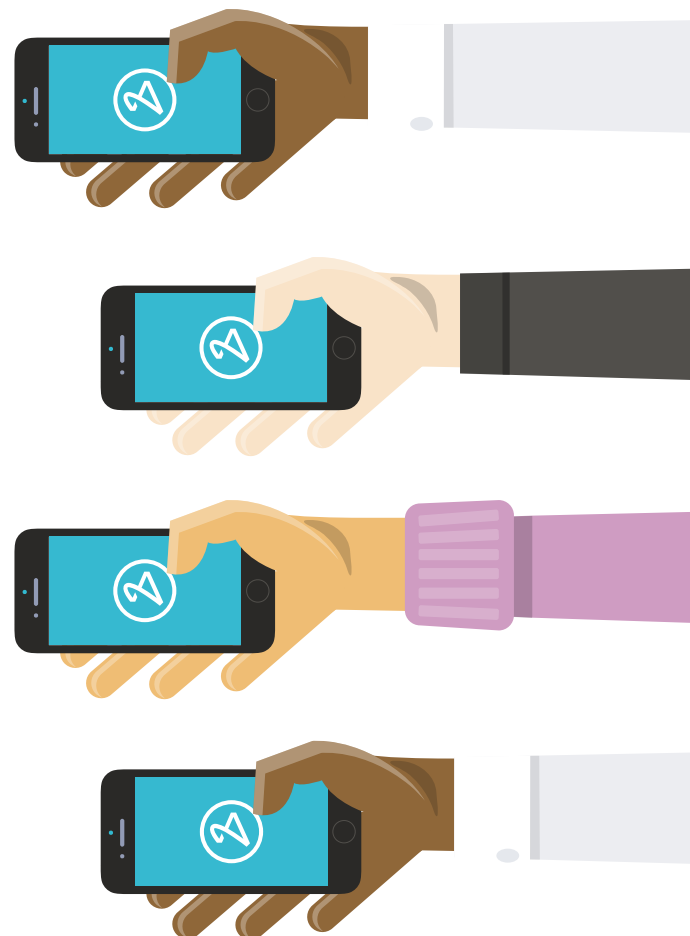
**Optimization** – Data helps you to stop spending on failing campaigns, and tweak the good ones to improve them.

**Retargeting & re-engagement** – With attribution, you can re-engage with customers who've already converted but haven't returned since.

**Accuracy** – Ad networks count users differently. Attribution makes sure that the same user isn't claimed multiple times by different channels, ensuring only the legitimate instance takes credit.

**Network tracking** – Each ad network has different rules (such as length of a standard attribution window). An attribution provider standardizes the communication between you and your networks to ensure you're working from the same playbook.

**Testing** – You can test your app's performance, campaign performance and more, with reliable data.





## Isn't analytics enough?

For some businesses, analytics could be thought of as the only requirement. Increasingly, this isn't the case.

Compared to analytics, attribution is a relatively new player in the marketing ecosystem, and so some may not yet understand why it's become such a vital part of a stack. As with most new technologies it might take some convincing throughout an organization to bring on attribution, but it's becoming increasingly necessary.

One argument that stays true is that paid advertising is one of the surest means of getting installs. So, matching paid installs to an initial action, like a click or a view - or attributing them - requires a service which tracks them with accuracy. Beyond this, retargeting, and identifying users which could be more valuable to the business, are all important parts of an attribution platform that can't be done through analytics.

Attribution providers with business ties and technical integrations with hundreds of networks also provide app developers with the means to reach more audiences, and sophisticated technology allows further integration between publisher, advertiser and network.

Further to this, attribution providers create an independent platform between those who buy

ad space, and those who sell it. There are major analytics providers who also sell ads, which might be seen to be blurring the lines between a neutral platform and one which profits from its own products.

Such a mix doesn't work well when considering the importance of neutrality when reporting on ad spend. Attribution should be a neutral part of an advertising transaction, ensuring that the rules an advertiser makes are being followed, and that users are being attributed correctly to their original source.

When attribution providers start selling ad space, or have a non-transparent way of promoting third party products, it muddies the waters and creates mistrust.

Today, most attribution providers are a neutral side, whereas popular analytics solutions are often tied to large ad selling platforms, and so don't naturally sit in the same position. That said, some attribution providers could be viewed to have non-partisan business practices, such as those who publicly rank networks, or host their own ad server platforms.

Besides all that, a good attribution provider will also usually offer analytics as part of their package. We certainly do.

# Starting to look: How do you find the best attribution provider?

With the basics out of the way, we'll focus on what a buyer's perspective should be, by looking at what a prospective buyer should know when they're looking for a provider. Going beyond price, a clued-in buyer would have some expectations of what a solution can do.

When you're in the purchase cycle, having an understanding of what every solution must include as a minimum, as well as a few extra questions to show your own awareness can remove some uncertainty. It could also help you avoid using a solution which doesn't fulfill your needs, or which doesn't work at all. To get a sense of these, here's a short list of the key takeaways we'll be looking at in more detail:

- A mobile measurement solution must let you compare present and past campaigns within the platform
- The right provider needs to access data on all of your campaigns, and therefore should be integrated with your most important ad partners
- A tool should consistently measure your user base without missing key information
- Measurement should be fair to all of your partners, and should be independent from ad networks or media buying
- Measurement needs to be deeply integrated into your platform, so ease of integration is important

If you can cross these points off, then your solution will be the best of all. But let's look in a little more detail.





# What do switched-on buyers tend to look for?

## Infinite data storage

A good attribution solution won't delete certain kinds of data, no matter how long it's existed within a database. Your data is yours, and shouldn't be lost because of data limitations or cost restrictions from the vendor's end.

Switched-on buyers tend to reject solutions where data disappears after a certain time - for them, a lot of future decisions rely on having past data to support their actions.

If attribution providers delete data, this means that they are essentially 'forgetting' your app users, as well as any subsequent engagement. This leads to double counting, double paying, and analytics that aren't accurate. Try to avoid solutions that can't hold onto such data.

### Questions to ask:

How long do you store data for? Do you delete data past a certain point?  
Are there limitations on how long a user stays dormant before they can be retargeted?

## Connection to the big publishers

Google, Facebook and Twitter make up a large majority of the digital ad marketplace, and in order to access their data your attribution provider needs to be a part of their partner programs. By being a member, your chosen attribution provider will have access to critical data from some of the best performing publishers in the world.

If a provider does not have access to such programs, it's impossible to receive fully accurate data from these networks. Some attempt workarounds, but these won't work as well as the full solution (for example, [take a look at Facebook's view of using deep links for measurement](#)). This becomes a critical point when you're working with others. For instance, we rely on our own attribution models despite the already established internal systems of larger partners. This means that we're able to attribute with the same accuracy regardless of where an install is coming from. With solutions outside of partner programs you could be paying twice for the same engagement if you aren't using an official API.

If a solution is not part of a partnership program then buyers should consider why that may be, what that might mean about their software, and what roadblocks this could present for working with different networks.

### Questions to ask:

Are you a Facebook Mobile Marketing Partner?  
How integrated with Google is your solution?

## The type of data which they can get back

For many buyers, the type of data that they could receive back to their own systems (such as CRM or in-house databases) is critical to success. Whether this be product SKU numbers, customer IDs, purchase information, or any number of other kinds, per their use cases, knowing the kinds of data you can receive is crucial.

Smart buyers also care about how they receive it. Rate limiting (the process of artificially slowing transfer of data) is a common part in the industry, and providers often 'throttle' the number of queries you can make on a daily or monthly basis. This might come as a surprise if you're keen to download reports frequently. If you're looking at solutions, ensure to check each provider's policy on this, particularly regarding APIs.

Adjust provides data on an hourly basis, not just daily. You can also receive reports for different timezones, accurately reporting your app data across the world.

When it comes to raw data, callbacks (to some known as postbacks) have been a key focus, and our clients can utilize them in a variety of deeply technical ways, to receive in-depth information on click. If you want to get the most data you can, utilizing callbacks is a great way of doing so. In our case, via callbacks you can receive data straight to Amazon S3 buckets. [Clients like Blinkist utilize this feature often, in order to combine data sets from multiple places.](#)

### Questions to ask:

What kinds of data can I receive/download from your platform?  
How often can I make requests for data, and for how long is it available?

# What every solution must have

Here are three more points to consider, looking at key features that every good attribution solution should have implemented as part of their stack.

## An open-source approach

Open-source software is code that everyone has access to; not only to use, but to analyze, alter, and improve. Since open-source lets you see the code, you know what you're installing (as with SDKs). On the other hand, there are no advantages for buyers to integrate closed-source code into their app. Companies who don't make their source code available may be hiding bad code, or something that you wouldn't necessarily want on your own application. [We've gone into great detail about the importance of open-source, so don't miss out on why with this article.](#)

One common misconception about open-source that's frequently spread is that it's a security risk, due to the fact that it's free to view. However, there's as much risk in closed as open-source code, as the former can be reverse-engineered in order to expose vulnerabilities. The advantage of open is that developers on both sides can view the code, find potential issues, and also tailor the code to fit better when it's eventually installed.

Think of it this way: if everyone has access to the source code, then more experts are able to examine that code and determine if it really is secure.

There are many attribution providers which claim to be transparent, but this cannot be the case without open-source at the core of the product.

### Questions to ask:

Is your SDK open-source?  
If not, why not?

## Real-time fraud prevention

Mobile ad fraud is a persistent and hard to beat problem, and while most providers claim to offer some kind of anti-fraud product, many of them don't prevent fraud, but only provide you with information on whether it's happened, which you then have to use yourself.

This means that you still could lose revenue, as the onus is on you to speak to networks asking for a refund. This could also potentially create problems between you and networks as well. Without active prevention, your data becomes skewed, and rendered practically redundant by the presence of fraudulent activity, which you will have to deal with.

Preventing fraud can only be accomplished through denying attribution of installs to fraudulent sources, cutting cash flow to fraudulent parties. Solutions that only provide reporting of fraud (leading to chargebacks) may result in only a portion of a return, instead of all of the lost spend. This means missed KPIs, goals, and lost money.

Tied with data retention, some vendors may let you down on the retention of fraud data, meaning they may delete user records after a certain timeframe, which results in lost fraud data, and further wasted revenue.

Just remember, a fraud product is only viable if it stops fraud in its tracks, keeping data clean and spend intact.

### Questions to ask:

Does your fraud solution stop fraud, or only track when it happens?  
If not, what am I supposed to do if my campaign is hit by ad fraud?  
Do you postback a denial of attribution to networks and also potentially to our systems?

## Privacy compliance

Privacy is a big deal. It should be a prime concern for businesses to get right, and as such, potential buyers need to ensure that a chosen attribution solution is compliant with the highest standards of privacy laws.

One such assurance of privacy compliance is to be certified by either the ePrivacy group in the EU or the Privacy Shield group in the US. Often the location of attribution services lends itself to which group of privacy certification a vendor will attempt to be covered by. European laws are some of the strictest when it comes to a user's online privacy, so solutions that have received an ePrivacy seal could be thought of as having the highest standards of privacy protection.

### Questions to ask:

Are you privacy certified? By which group?  
How seriously do you take user privacy? How does your solution safeguard it?  
Is there any kind of data that you allow me to download in conflict with ePrivacy laws?

## How does attribution pricing work?

There's no single pricing model which each vendor follows. In fact, pricing models can be quite different for each provider. For instance, Adjust's pricing is based on install volume, with features included in different price packages. A competitor might price their service based on daily active users (or DAUs), and a different vendor may base themselves on features, both from the service and the platform (so, for instance, you would have to pay up to a certain threshold to receive dedicated support).

There are pros and cons to each approach. Pricing by active users could mean an order of magnitude in the increase of your bill as you scale. It's perhaps good for small accounts, or big ones, but if you intend to grow then you might be in for a rough ride.

For many who are looking for a solution, pricing is a main point, and there are cheap solutions on the market which sell on their value. However, such solutions may let you down, and often they do, not just on features, but on support and also on reliability. An enterprise solution focused on quality of products, and of service, will pay much larger dividends over time.

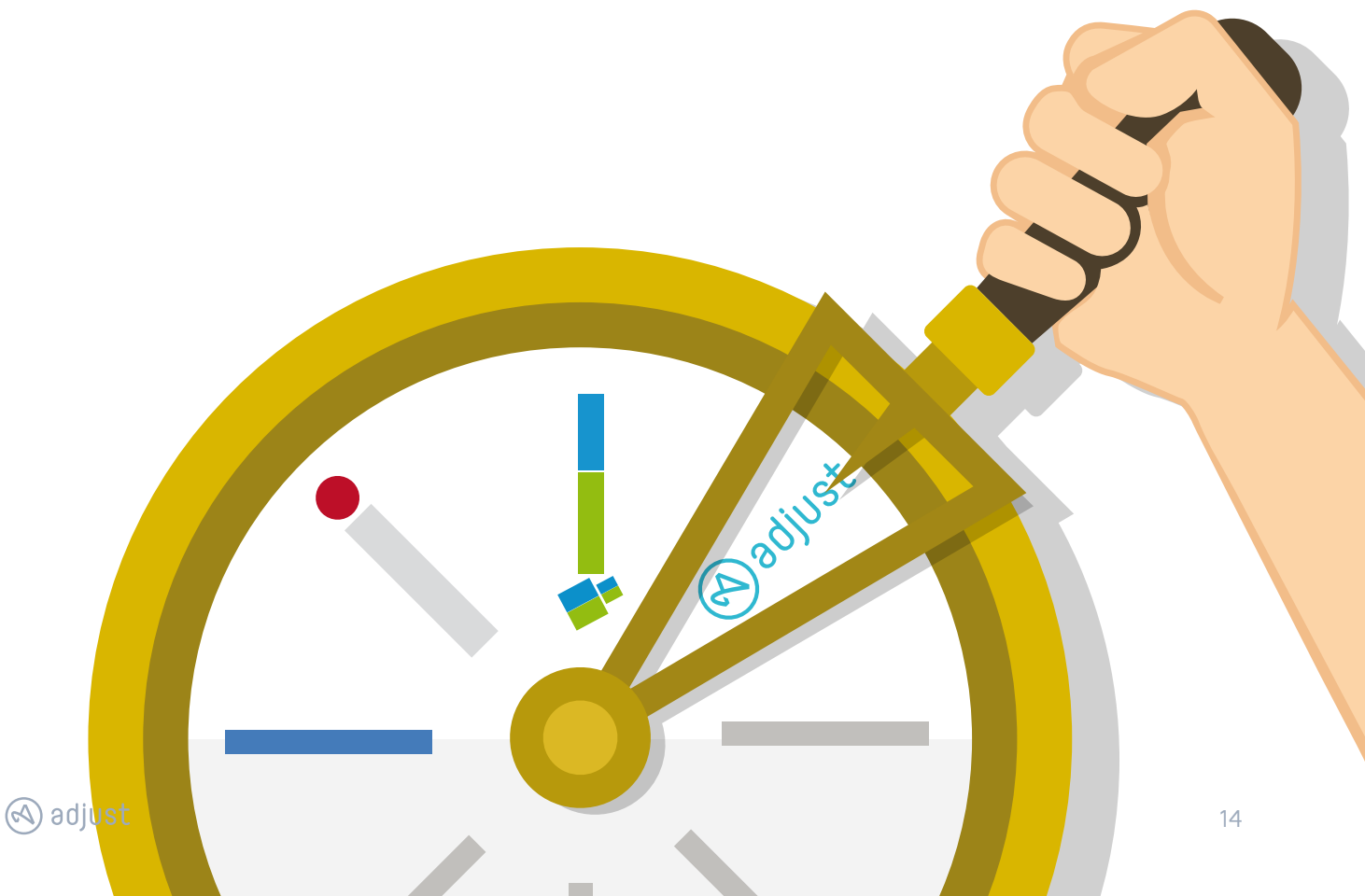


# How hard is it to switch attribution providers?

In theory, switching between attribution providers is quite simple.

As long as your current solution has the ability to download raw data, and your new solution can receive it, there shouldn't be hiccups in the exchange, and your data would be populated within a new dashboard as soon as it's finished importing.

Meanwhile, actually installing an SDK can be technical, but with an open-source SDK (and clear documentation), the process is made much easier. Equally, the best attribution providers will always provide dedicated support for a switch - for both account teams and developers.



# How easy is it to switch to Adjust?

Find out for yourself. [Click here](#) to request a demo today, and you can try out our platform for free.

With features like Audience Builder and the Fraud Prevention Suite combined with incredibly accurate attribution, Adjust is the measurement provider of choice for thousands of apps around the world.





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