

# Setting up conversion tracking correctly

You can throw a pile of cash at Google Ads, Facebook, or any other platform. If you aren't **setting up conversion tracking correctly**, you're flying blind. It's that simple. You'll optimize for clicks, not revenue. You'll scale campaigns that are actually hemorrhaging money. I've seen it a hundred times: a client celebrating a 5x ROAS, only to discover their tracking counted every page visit as a sale. The horror. This isn't about theory. It's about the hard, boring work of making sure your data doesn't lie.

## Why your current setup is probably lying to you

Most people slap a pixel on a "thank you" page and call it a day. That's a trap. A standard page load event doesn't tell you if the purchase actually went through, if the form was submitted with valid data, or if the user hit an error page instead of a confirmation. You're measuring a view, not a conversion. The gap between what you think is happening and what is actually happening can be enormous. Think of it like a gas gauge in your car that always reads "full." You'll keep driving until you're stranded on the side of the road.

Another common lie: relying solely on last-click attribution. It oversimplifies the customer journey. A user might see your display ad, click a retargeting email, and then search for your brand before finally buying. If your conversion tracking only credits the last search click, you'll kill the display campaign that started the whole thing. You need a setup that can handle multiple touchpoints, or at least one that doesn't actively mislead you.

## The three pillars of a non-broken tracking system

To get this right, you need to anchor your setup on three things: event accuracy, data hygiene, and cross-platform sanity. Ignore any one of these, and you're back to guessing.

### Event accuracy: Don't just fire the tag, validate the data

Your tag should fire only when the specific action is confirmed. For a purchase, pass the transaction ID, value, and currency. For a lead form, pass the form ID or a lead value. Use server-side tracking or Google Tag Manager's built-in variable validation to prevent the tag from firing on page refreshes or back-button clicks. A simple example: if you're using

Google Ads, use the `conversion_linker` tag and a custom JavaScript variable that checks for a unique order ID in the DOM before firing the conversion tag.

## Data hygiene: Garbage in, garbage out

You need a consistent naming convention. Don't call one conversion "Purchase" and another "Sale" in different platforms. Standardize your conversion names, values, and categories. Use a single source of truth, like a spreadsheet or a data layer specification. This is boring but it's the difference between a report you trust and a report you argue about in meetings.

## Cross-platform sanity: Stop the echo chamber

If you run ads on Google, Meta, and LinkedIn, you need a way to deduplicate conversions. A single purchase should not be counted three times. Use UTM parameters, a customer data platform (CDP), or a server-side integration that sends a single conversion event with a unique ID to all platforms. Otherwise, you're celebrating fake volume.

## Where most setups fail: The silent killers

There are a few specific failure modes that are almost invisible until you dig into the raw data. Here they are, in order of how often I see them.

- **Cross-domain tracking broken:** If a user goes from your main site to a checkout subdomain (e.g., `shop.example.com`), and your tracking isn't configured to pass the `_ga` cookie or a similar identifier, you lose the session. The conversion appears as a direct visit. Fix this with Google Tag Manager's cross-domain linking or by configuring the linker parameter manually.
- **Form submission vs. form success:** Tracking a form submission button click is not the same as tracking a successful submission. The form might fail server-side validation. Track the server-side confirmation page or an AJAX success callback, not the button click.
- **View-through conversions:** These are often inflated. A user sees your ad, doesn't click, and then buys a week later via a branded search. The platform credits the view-through. You need to decide if you want to count these, and if so, set a reasonable attribution window (e.g., 1-day click-through, 0-day view-through).

## How to verify your setup without trusting the platform

Don't trust the "Tag is firing" status in your ad platform. It's a liar. You need to verify from the outside in. Here's a practical workflow.

**Step 1: Use a real browser.** Open your site in an incognito window. Use the browser's developer tools (Network tab) to see if the conversion pixel fires. For Google Ads, look for a request to [googleadservices.com/pagead/conversion/](https://googleadservices.com/pagead/conversion/). For Meta, look for a request to [facebook.com/tr/](https://facebook.com/tr/). Check that the parameters (value, currency, transaction ID) are correct.

**Step 2: Use a testing tool.** Google Tag Manager has a Preview mode that shows you exactly which tags fire and what data they pass. Facebook has the Pixel Helper Chrome extension. Use them. Run a test purchase with a known coupon code or a test user account. Then check the platform's real-time reports to see if the conversion appears.

**Step 3: Compare with your backend.** This is the real test. Pull your actual sales data from your CRM or e-commerce platform. Compare it to the conversions reported by your ad platform. If the numbers don't match within a reasonable margin (say, 5-10% for view-through and cross-device discrepancies), your setup is broken. Fix it before you spend another dollar.

## When to use server-side tracking vs. client-side

Client-side tracking (the pixel in the browser) is easier to set up but is increasingly unreliable due to ad blockers, browser privacy restrictions (ITP, ETP), and cookie deprecation. Server-side tracking sends conversion data directly from your server to the ad platform, bypassing the browser entirely. It's more complex but more accurate.

Here's a simple decision rule: If you are spending more than \$10,000 per month on ads, or if your conversion rate is below 1%, you need server-side tracking. The cost of inaccurate data is too high. If you're a small local business with a simple funnel, client-side might be fine for now, but plan to migrate within the next year.

Rule of thumb: If you can't pull a report that shows the exact transaction IDs for each conversion in the last 7 days, your tracking is not set up correctly. Fix that first.

## Common questions from people who've been burned

### How do I track phone call conversions?

Use a call tracking service like CallRail or WhatConverts. They provide a dynamic phone number that logs the call and sends a conversion event back to your ad platform. Don't rely on "click to call" tracking alone; it doesn't tell you if the call actually happened or lasted long enough to be a lead.

## **My conversions doubled overnight. Is that good?**

Probably not. It usually means your tag is now firing incorrectly, or you accidentally duplicated a tag in Google Tag Manager. Check your real-time reports and compare with your backend data immediately.

## **Should I use Google Ads' auto-tagging?**

Yes, always. Manual tagging with UTM parameters is fine for reporting, but auto-tagging (the gclid parameter) is required for accurate conversion tracking in Google Ads. Without it, you lose the ability to attribute conversions to specific campaigns and keywords.

## **What about offline conversions?**

If you close deals over the phone or in person, you need to upload offline conversion data. Google Ads and Meta both support this via CSV uploads or API. You need a unique identifier (like a phone number or email) that ties the online lead to the offline sale. This is a separate, complex setup, but it's the only way to measure the full funnel.

## **Stop optimizing for fake wins**

You have a choice. You can keep using a setup that makes you feel good about your ad spend, or you can do the unglamorous work of verifying every event, every parameter, and every platform. The first option is easier. The second option is the only one that leads to real growth. Go check your tracking right now. I'll wait.