

Dealers – Take a New Look at Call Tracking

It doesn't stop just with ad effectiveness

Call tracking collects valuable information about prospects and the phone calls themselves that make your dealership more efficient and more profitable. Are you ready to buy? Well as you go down the path with potential provider, be sure to ask the following questions to ensure a pleasant technology vendor experience.

1. Who owns the numbers?

Some providers maintain ownership of the telephone numbers that are being tracked. Advertisers become hostages to the call measurement company that is leasing the numbers because they can't switch to another provider without forfeiting all of the calls that their number generates. When we sell a call measurement number, the customer becomes the owner of that line. If we're not doing a good job, the advertiser can port the number to another company without any interruption in service.

2. Who owns the data?

Since you are paying for the ad that generates the leads, you should be the only party that can use the collected data. Make sure your provider isn't planning on selling your customers' names, phone numbers and addresses. It's also a good idea to make sure you'll have total control of the information that gets collected (i.e., Can the data be easily exported? Are there any limitations to how I can use the data?)

3. Can my minutes be pooled?

If a provider offers a package that includes 200 minutes per month, find out if you're allowed to aggregate the minutes of multiple numbers. Example: If you're paying for 10 numbers, make sure your monthly minute total is a combined 2,000 minutes that can be distributed across all numbers (you may have a few numbers that generate a majority of the traffic).

4. What steps are involved to ensure clean numbers?

When you're trying to track all the calls that respond to your advertisements, it's frustrating to deal with "wrong number" callers. Often times a telephone number is recycled from a previous advertiser, so people who are using last year's phone book or looking at an old ad will call the number and disrupt the statistics of the campaign you are try to track. Ask your provider how long numbers are decompressed before they get redistributed - most vendors require at least 12 months.

5. What's the contingency plan for misprinted numbers?

No matter how careful a publisher might be, there will inevitably be situations where an ad gets messed up. We've worked with phone book publishers who accidentally printed the same telephone number for three different companies. We inserted an automated greeting that asked callers to select which company they wished to connect with...it wasn't perfect, but it minimized the damage.

6. What's the turnaround time for new numbers?

If a customer needs numbers in a market that's in our existing inventory, the provisioning process takes about 3 minutes. If we don't have the market covered, we order lines from multiple vendors in the requested market. In the past, it's taken about 5 to 7 business days for those numbers to be delivered - that seems to be the industry standard. We just formalized a partnership with a new vendor that will be able to provide numbers within 12 hours; I imagine this will quickly become the new standard for everyone.

7. Can the call reports be fully customized?

Every provider claims that its reports are customizable. Make sure this means that you can control what data is included and how the information is formatted; often times "customizable" just means your logo gets slapped onto the top of the page.

Call tracking service fees should be fully inclusive. If a proposal contains things like gateway fees, private labeling fees, programming fees, API usage fees, etc., ask for allowances in the service rates. Some add-on costs are acceptable because they're simply pass-through costs of third party vendors. Examples would be reverse phone address lookups and porting charges for existing numbers.

Moreover, "monthly minimum requirements" and "fixed monthly fees" are the same thing. Every call tracking provider incurs costs for carrying a number each month (whether local or toll-free) - this is a cost that comes from the telephone companies that provide the lines. We cover this cost by passing along a \$2 monthly fixed fee for each number that is being used. Other providers charge \$0 as a fixed fee but then require a minimum of x minutes per month on each line (charged at a per-minute rate). This serves the same function. If a provider claims to have no charges associated with carrying a number, check the fine print for minimum requirements elsewhere in the contract.

We appreciate it when a savvy prospective client solicits bids from multiple providers and makes everyone compete. This is a great way to force the providers to be upfront and clear with their offers - if you're requiring an apples-to-apples comparison, everything gets simplified and you greatly decrease the risk of getting trapped in a misleading contract.

Stephen Cravens, Head of Marketing, [Century Interactive](http://CenturyInteractive.com), can be reached at sc@centuryinteractive.com.