

# THE COOKIE CRUMBLES

Attribution, Advertising & The End Of The Open Web

**Anything  
is possible**

## How we got here (and why it's time to leave)

How does change on the internet happen? Very slowly.

And then all at once.

We are so used to thinking of the Internet as a place where everything happens instantly, but nothing really matters, that we miss the trends that develop slowly over time – and matter a lot.

That's why it's important to stop and look at the changes to cookie-enabled data tracking in the last 10 years, because privacy consent has started to shape what we have been accustomed to as a free-to-all, free-to-use digital space.

This presents a particular challenge for digital advertising, which evolved hand-in-glove with unexamined assumptions around privacy, and happily joined the circus line while data collection strode into a multi-billion pound industry.

The Cambridge Analytica scandals and arrival of [GDPR](#) in 2018, followed by the [CCPA](#) in January 2020, represent huge landmarks in the reform of privacy concerns. From the standpoint of 2021, they all formed and informed a widespread reappraisal of digital advertising's complex, clouded practices.

These recent developments have been met with dismay from digital marketers across the industry.

The industry has come under uncomfortable scrutiny but – despite loud claims of affirmative action – remains opaque in key areas. None more so than third-party cookies, and how they track and find users across the open web.

The only thing louder than the many industry calls to do better has been the sound of heels scraping on the tarmac.

Cookies have long been the backbone of digital advertising as the key technical elements that make the industry thrive. These little pieces of code enable advertisers to track users across the web as they bounce from page to page and publisher to publisher, targeting people based on their interests and eventually tracking actions back to the initial exposure.

Connecting the dots of this often lengthy and circuitous journey is known as **attribution**.

Attribution is key to the unique power of digital advertising, particularly in a programmatic context which involves consumer journeys that move through a complex ecosystem of actions and reactions, attributions and analysis. Third-party cookies have enabled advertisers to buy media across platforms, through online marketplaces where web publishers make screen space available through an ad exchange.

Cross-publisher targeting via cookies hosted on the user's own web browser allow for highly personalised messaging, making it indispensable for brands who want to invest their marketing efforts into audiences they know are more likely to care.

However, these cookies have exploited our data to the point where users don't know who it's being shared with, where it's going, and what it's being used for.

Let's make one thing abundantly clear. That's **not** okay.

Because of the scandals and responses mentioned above, audiences know their data is being exploited, and even used against their wishes or interest.

This shift in grassroots sentiment has encouraged big players like Apple and Mozilla to be more consumer-centric. An aggressive roll-out of updates from such browser giants have been a response to industry workarounds to cookie targeting, but now, we're facing the end of the cookie-crumbs trail with the biggest change of all.

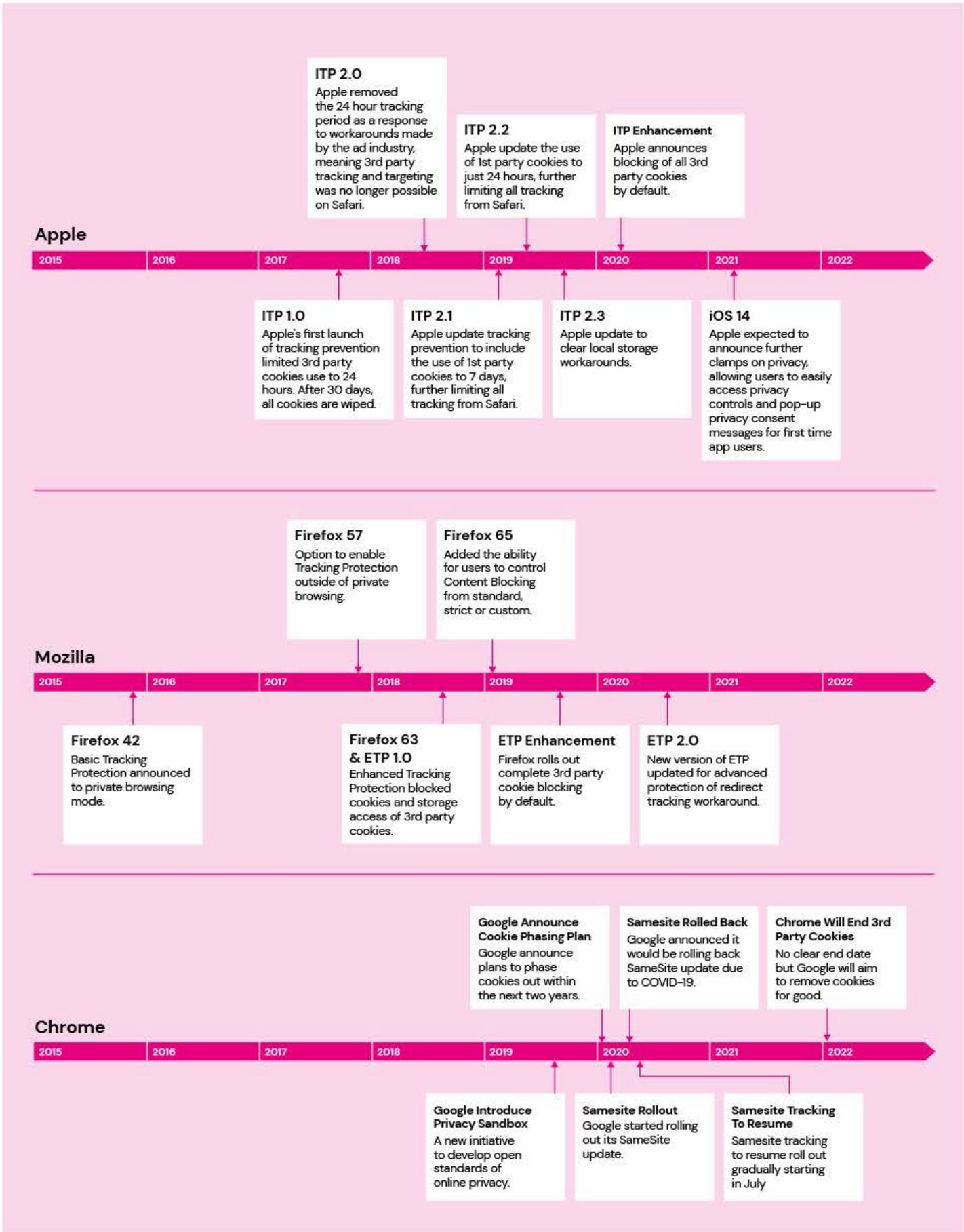
Google Chrome, the world's biggest browser in terms of market share, announced plans to remove third-party cookies by some time in 2022. No exact cut off point has been given, but we are certain this is happening.

This will spark the most significant changes to digital advertising since the birth of the industry. Everyone is confident that the connected web experiences we take for granted will continue – but no-one's quite sure how. It's a big deal.

If this is old news to you, and plans to adapt are already well underway – bravo!

If you are in the other group who have yet to plan for the incoming changes – well, there's no time like the present....

# Cookie Tracking Timeline



## What it means for you

If we extend this timeline forward into the future, and project ourselves into a world without cookies where individuals' data trails vanish behind them like airliner contrails – what does this actually mean to digital advertising as we know it?

Here are some of the key impacts that we can already see manifesting from our current perspective.

### **Attribution: This requires surgery**

Third-party cookies have been used as the stitchwork between an ad interaction (impressions or clicks) and the actions tracked on an advertiser's website.

It's how advertisers gather the necessary information to measure success directly back to the brand's investment in digital advertising.

They provide a simple way to track this complex journey, following users who bounce around the web from publisher-to-publisher, creating a single user measurement solution.

Removing them is like taking away the sutures of an open wound: technical surgery will be required to patch that user journey back together.

What is the solution, you ask? There are some interesting and non-intrusive ways to map a user journey back to an end result, using things like device IDs and publishers' first-party data as indicators that trace back to the initial ad interaction, effectively attributing ad platforms in a cookieless way.

Ensuring this process is scalable, robust and doesn't over-rely on a highly probabilistic approach, where we shrug and say Brand X's advert *probably* worked, is the key challenge for industry attribution models.

Statistical significance is a necessity here.

## Targeting – Resetting the scope

Much like attribution, cookies help advertisers target audiences with relevant ads based on initial behavioural signals that fit target audience profiles. A lack of cookies for targeting means that advertisers will find targeting that single user across all ad exchanges a real challenge.

Third-party cookies have been used to maintain single identity across publishers and exchanges for some time, making personalisation and frequency control possible: you get the right ads, at the right time, and the right *amount* of times to encourage a desired action.

The good news is – this is still possible. Advertisers can still tap into other powerful ways of finding audiences using first-party, context-based and location-based data for targeting, but this does limit targeting strategies, especially when audience identity is paramount to the advertiser’s media strategy.

For example, University brands wouldn’t want to target an older generation with minimal interest in education, which is where using audience signals ensure scale and relevancy.

Removing third-party cookie targeting capabilities will clearly hurt the open web industry in the short term. Diminishing volumes of identifiable users who deny cookie consent will make programmatic buying troublesome on a large scale – which was one of it’s biggest selling points.

However, as we know, a scattergun/frequency bombing approach from some large scale advertisers has taken away the perceived effectiveness of programmatic. Quality over quantity is a move we embrace, which is where more premium buying options to bring scale back upwards are re-introduced, without sacrificing standards.

### And don’t forget the giants...

It’s widely known that walled garden giants, such as Google, Amazon and Facebook won’t feel the impact as much because they combine global reach with a wealth of existing data identifiers.

Most of their users are permanently logged-in to their platforms and hand over behavioural data every time they use those services provided. They all have a clear self-interest in safeguarding their own product offerings, but it’s important that abusing their position of power does not cloud this monumental shift into cookieless advertising.

From a publisher's perspective, be it someone like The Financial Times or a smaller niche publication, their bespoke targeting and offering can be just as powerful as the walled gardens for your strategic media planning. Deciding to band together and combat the walled gardens with a unified ID solution is the desired approach, but this faces many obstacles.

Going alone to create lots of mini-walled gardens has certain tempting USPs, such as unique targeting and data exclusivity – but will fragment the whole programmatic ecosystem even more than it already is, and making effective negotiation impractical.

## The way ahead

By public consent, everyone involved in the ecosystem has been tasked to do better.

This discussion primarily involves vendors of demand-side platforms (DSPs), the main piece of software used to buy inventory, and supply-side platforms (SSPs), the software used to provide publishers the marketplace to sell their available ad inventory.

But it can't be forgotten that advertisers, agencies and ad tech partners alike must also be held accountable for redesigning the infrastructure for a sustainable and privacy-safe world.

Regulation is needed. But so are leading industry voices committed to these positions for reasons of transparency, ethics, and from a belief that cookies, as useful as they have been, may have made the industry lazy...

Simply put, cookies made advertising over-emphasise technology and targeting, and forget the *other* core strengths of our industry:

Connection.

Storytelling.

Bringing brands and audiences together into meaningful relationships with resonant experiences.

We're here to change that with an approach that doesn't over-rely on either direction but balances media, creative and technology.

Bringing the industry into a cohesive position and standardising the various independent identity solutions which we have started to see develop is essential.

With that in mind, let's take a look at some of the eye-catching moves to cookieless advertising that have been kickstarted by industry regulators and tech giants.

These initiatives are part-resolving this problem before the looming end of cookies hits the industry like a meteor hitting a biscuit. All of them are interesting and producing clues to the way ahead, but none of them are the *end* of the conversation.

## Project Rearch

**The Internet Advertising Board (IAB)'s Project Rearch** is leading an initiative to create ('rearchitect') new accountability and addressability standards within the industry, specifically towards online user-privacy.

Most notably, the IAB are focused on developing the technology used to target addressable and authenticated users across the programmatic supply chain, advocating solutions such as **The Trade Desks Unified ID 2.0** (recently handed over to **Prebid.org** for independent operation) as an open-source industry approach to identification.

Both initiatives have been scrutinised with Google's March 2021 **update** confirming that cookie workarounds will not be supported. This Google-esque move took a thinly veiled stab at other solutions being developed by their rivals, labelling the use of email data as an insufficiently safe privacy identifier. But, it should be noted that email is just one of many identifiers being talked about.

However, the premise is clear. Independent bodies should be responsible for the implementation of any new ID solution with a framework for the industry to use as standard. And this is going ahead.

## Privacy sandbox & FLoC

Google's Privacy Sandbox is an open environment to experiment with the proposed functionalities of cookieless tracking. These sets of standards can be trialed by all in the online community, who are encouraged to provide feedback and more detail on the needs that should be addressed.

**Three distinct issues** to be resolved are:

- Replacing cross-site tracking responsibly.
- Deprecating third-party cookies (responsibly).
- Mitigating any workarounds that stray from the proposed alternative to third-party tracking – such as, for example, fingerprinting.

Because after all, the principle here is to be *less* personally invasive – not more!

This initiative has been under closer scrutiny by [regulators CMA](#) to ensure there is no foul play. Linking back to abusing their position of power, Google needs to be held accountable for any solutions they provide, especially as they have their finger in almost every pie, digitally speaking.

Aside from the skepticism, Google has declared early success from the solution that has been worked on behind the scenes, coined the [Federated Learning of Cohorts](#) (FLoC).

Effectively, FLoC works as a replacement to cookies by removing the individual identifiers and putting users into groups based on common interests that are shared for advertising purposes.

It's reported that conversion tracking accuracy is delivering similar results to the current cookie-based solution, and could be ready for testing in Q2 2021.

## Adform ID

Adform are also leading the way by providing a proprietary ID solution within their full suite of products. On the tracking side, Adform released their Cookieless Insights tool to accurately identify and measure conversions through stringent probabilistic identification where cookies are no longer apparent (via Safari and Firefox).

These enhanced reporting features respect the IAB's user content guidelines while opening the possibility of tracking on such browsers. Adform also launched the first DSP solution to first party IDs last year so already have strong foundations in place.

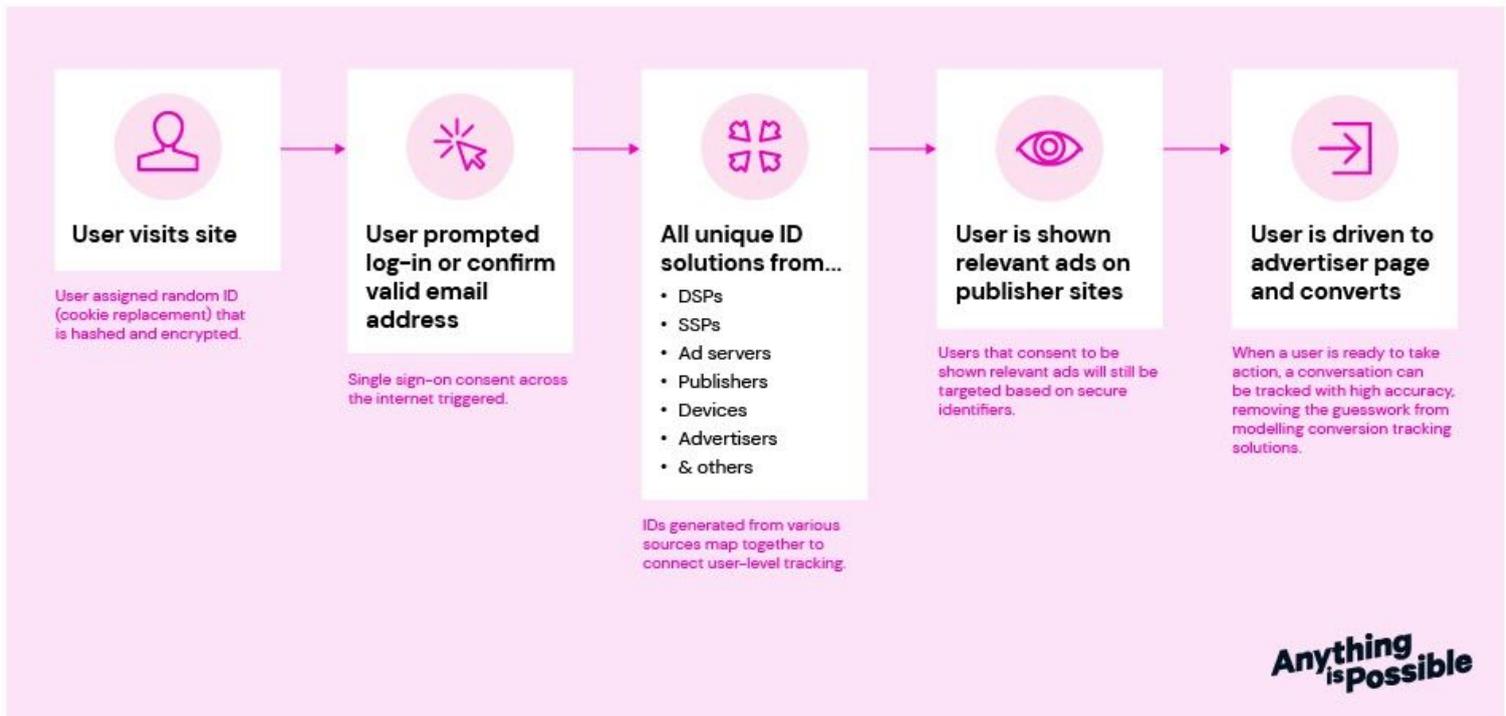
Whilst these initiatives and many more are pioneering the transition towards a cookieless world, and prove that innovation is going to be forced by these new ways of thinking, these measures alone are not enough to combat the challenges we face in the near future.

## ID matching in programmatic delivery

There are some key events that must happen to deliver an even more robust programmatic system than we currently have. Developments have broken the ice in solving programmatic buying with the power of first party cookies, but there still needs to be considerable buy-in from publishers and ad tech companies to link these unique IDs together and bond the ecosystem back together again.

In theory, the below user journey is how the unified ID solution's user journey should look a bit like this:

### User Journey



Work towards regulating how IDs communicate and are matched together will be the connecting piece to a scaled, first party world.

Looking at this from a **Possiblist** perspective, the fundamental changes will bring higher consumer confidence in advertising practices, with people consenting to more relevant and personalised ads.

Those who don't will be free and empowered to opt-out, somewhat cleaning the pipes for programmatic accuracy.

Although it's still unclear what kind of drop off the industry will see in terms of tracking audiences, the argument for quality will be boosted by user-consented audiences who want personalisation and will respond with strong engagement.

Continued education for consumers about cookie changes will familiarise less tech-literate audiences about privacy and who their data is being shared with, bringing more acceptance and even advocacy when strong personalisation is delivered over boring, wasteful ads.

This will ease the minds of doubtful advertisers who fear they're wasting valuable spend when personalised ads are not delivered accurately.

## Protected personalisation

More interestingly, developments of opt-in consent solutions is another promising route to connect advertisers with people who willingly accept relevant adverts online.

One exciting app that's adding value already by challenging how we think of data and ownership is [Into-it](#) – a service which allows users to opt-in and choose categories of adverts they'd be interested in, creating a whole new layer of intent and consent from end users.

Whilst this is still in the early stages of development, it's certainly a fresh and exciting idea that the industry needs right now.

In the short term, advertisers have a few old tricks to rely on for creating a personalised and relevant experience with ads:

### Contextual targeting

This method of targeting is making a comeback and has been accelerated by the rapid loss of audience-based touchpoints, with obvious room for development.

There is still great power in targeting a user based on what content they are consuming online. Simple approaches could be targeting a list of publishers, or partnering directly with hyper-relevant publications to your brands can yield strong results.

Advances in technology have helped advertisers connect with providers, such as [Grapeshot](#) and [Semasio](#), who offer bespoke targeting for brands using a semantic approach to keyword targeting for channels like display. More advancements in this field could help ease the loss of audience data.

### First party data

Advertisers, publishers and ad tech providers alike have already been preparing and shaping their owned-data since the inception of the cookieless advertising news first broke.

This is something everyone should be aware of. Building clean, scalable first party data sets will put you in a better position now and put you ahead for when cookies are finally cancelled.

As an advertiser, if you are in a position to onboard a Customer Data Platform Platform (CDP) you can start to cleanse data segments today and build audience match rates through data modelling capabilities ready for the new world. Publishers must do the same to strengthen the buy-and-supply chains of programmatic.

There are many ways you can still be innovative to grow audience pools whilst being responsible, as outlined in this [BCG article](#).

The fact is, every organisation is a first-party data organisation now. The benefits of having your own micro-stack of actionable information goes way beyond marketing, and is only going to grow.

Every business with an eye on the future should be shaping their first-party strategy ***right now***.

## The way ahead

There's no getting away and time is ticking. Cookies have been used and abused for years and it's now become a burden on the industry. Moving away from them is a positive for everyone.

But as long as third-party cookies are still available, the implications are still yet to be felt by the industry. The new normal can be planned for, but until it arrives we can't tell what it looks like.

But ripples of concern are spreading through the industry, and we suggest our clients prepare for the changes **now**.

Anything is Possible are taking a proactive approach with a roadmap which incorporates these following steps:

1. We are reviewing our digital media with a view to highlight any over-reliance on third-party cookies, including platforms, partners and suppliers.
2. In Q3 2021, we aim to completely remove all third-party cookie practices with safe and robust, cookieless solutions.
3. We are raising awareness (like with this report), staying up to date on news and research that comes online and ensuring clients are kept informed with clear and transparent communication.
4. Testing and onboarding appropriate new solutions as and when they come available on the market, to ensure our clients have the best possible solutions in place before Chrome removes cookies completely.

Understanding your customers on a more personal level has never been more prevalent in marketing than now.

Working harder to find out where your customers are, what they're interested in and other identifiers can help narrowing the contextual map for more precise targeting while the audience ID mapping solution is fleshed out.

It's also a no-brainer partnering with innovative ad tech suppliers who are leading the way in cookieless solutions.

## The Anything is Possible perspective

Anything is Possible are self-invested in making our digital media buying ethical and sustainable. From our founding, Anything is Possible have signed up to the Conscious Advertising Network's coalition, pledging our beliefs that as an industry we must uphold ethical standards around the [six manifestos](#) for greater practices.

Not only that, Anything is Possible was the [first agency to partner with Fenestra](#) using blockchain to develop a healthier supply path for more effective media buying.

These beliefs also apply to creating a healthier and privacy-safe experience with advertising and a cookieless world, in our opinion, is welcomed with open arms.

We're testing developments in ID matching and first-party data solutions, which will help us through this unprecedented transition. Partnering with Adform has already put us ahead of the curve in our contextual targeting capabilities, and our use of advanced tracking solutions through Cookieless Insights has reduced our reliance on lazy, third-party cookie practices.

These are just a handful of examples of what Anything is Possible have been doing recently, and we intend to keep on testing new solutions to put our clients in the best position for 2022, any beyond.

Many advertisers feel that Google could extend their deadline.

But we are not hanging around to find out.

## What you need to do about it

It's simple.

We have the experts, the solutions and the roadmap to get your organisation ready for a cookie-free world.

To have the new world of first-party data and open attribution at your fingertips, all you need to do...

**...is get in touch.**

### Author

#### Louis Schermuly

As Digital Media Manager and Programmatic Lead at Anything is Possible, Louis is at the forefront of developing the digital media industries' response to the end of third-party tracking. Louis embodies the Possiblist ethic, and is excited about creating meaningful, data-led ad experiences that resonate with consumers while respecting their right to privacy and ownership of their own online life.



When he's not mapping out first-party data strategies, Louis is probably thinking about Mexican food or Liverpool FC.

To chat with Louis about tacos, football or your plan to become a first-party data organisation, just email [hello@aip.media](mailto:hello@aip.media).