

# Guide To UTM Parameters and Channel Groupings in Google Analytics 4

As part of its expanded offerings for Google Analytics 4, Google has done marketers a favor and expanded their default channels. New GA4 channels such as **Paid Social** and **Cross-Network** can be leveraged by marketers to gain new insights.

As we make the transition to GA4, it's important to understand the Default Channel Groupings and how they are organized. In this document, we will start by defining and reviewing UTM Parameters. Then, we'll outline GA4's Default Channels, and the rules that are used to define them.

**NOTE: Previous versions of this guide stated that GA4 did not yet support Custom Channel Groupings. This is no longer the case. For information on setting up Custom Channel Groups in GA4, please refer to [Analytics Mania](#).**

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## UTM Parameters

Just like in UA, GA4 segments traffic based on **UTM Parameters**. These parameters must be used correctly, or data in your Acquisition reports will start to vary wildly. Let's define the eight types of UTM Parameters:

- **ID** (*utm\_id*): campaign ID as assigned by the advertising platform. This is required for businesses to utilize **GA4's cost data import**.
- **Source** (*utm\_source*): where the traffic came from; e.g. Google, Twitter, etc.
- **Medium** (*utm\_medium*): similar to a channel, e.g. organic, cpc, pcp, paid, etc.
  - The key here is to be consistent. In order to keep your data as clean as possible, choose paid or cpc and stick to it across all campaigns for a particular paid media source. Use the remaining parameters to add granularity to your data.
- **Campaign** (*utm\_campaign*): the name of a campaign.
- **Term** (*utm\_term*): the **keyword**, or term, searched to find the URL.
- **Content** (*utm\_content*): the piece of content that drove the traffic to your site, e.g. video, Facebook ad, etc.
- **Creative Format** (*utm\_creative\_format*): type of creative; e.g. display, native, video, search.
  - **utm\_creative\_format** is not currently reported in GA4 properties.
- **Marketing Tactic** (*utm\_marketing\_tactic*): target criteria applied to a campaign; e.g. remarketing, prospecting.
  - **utm\_marketing\_tactic** is not currently reported in GA4 properties.

How these parameters are configured is dependent on the marketing platform being used. Many platforms utilize **auto-tagging**, and handle this process for you. If you are manually tagging your Ads, we recommend using simple tools such as a **Campaign URL Builder** offered [here](#).

## Best Practices

- **Use Lowercase Letters**
  - UTM Parameters are case sensitive, in order to stay consistent, use lowercase letters in order to avoid any traffic from being mis-grouped. For example, Google defines **twitter** and **Twitter** as two different sources.
- **Use dashes, not underscores**
  - In [this article](#), expert Matt Cutts recommends using dashes rather than underscores as URL separators. For example, use **facebook-ad** rather than **facebook\_ad**. You could also use the plus symbol, **facebook+ad**, but never leave spaces.
- **Use plain language**
  - Anyone can see your UTM Parameters. For this reason it's best to use plain language that's easy to understand and doesn't scare a user from clicking your link. This method also prevents you from giving away any sensitive or proprietary information such as internal IDs used for ads.
- **Avoid Using UTM Parameters For Internal Promotion Linking**
  - When Google Analytics detects any UTM parameter in the page URL, it resets the session and also the attribution for any key event that takes place. Avoid using UTM parameters for any internal promotions and pursue other options such as GA4's *view\_promotion* and *select\_promotion* events instead.
- **Tag Your Landing Page URLs With `utm_id` and `utm_campaign` Parameters**
  - Google Analytics 4 supports importing cost, click, and impression data from non-Google advertising networks to drive data-driven insights and attribution. Adding **`utm_id`** and **`utm_campaign`** is the first step to getting the data you need into GA4 to begin this process.
- **Use Simple Campaign Names**
  - When setting up your campaigns on non-Google platforms, it is important to use simple campaign names that can be easily integrated into your URLs with the `utm_campaign` parameter.
    - For example *summer-sale-remarketing* is better than *Summer Sale | Remarketing*
- **Keep Parameters short and simple**
  - A long tag can be difficult to read and digest. Keeping things simple will help keep your reports organized and user-friendly.
    - For example *utm\_campaign=summer-sale* is better than *utm\_campaign=summer-twenty-percent-off-shirts-and-shoes-sale*
- **Keep track of your UTM Parameters**
  - Track all of your UTM parameters for your campaigns using a spreadsheet as a guide for your team. This allows you to have a reference for running campaign data in Google Analytics, and also can be used as examples for team members constructing UTM terms for a campaign.
- **Test URLs Before & After Deployment**
  - Test your URLs and verify that your UTM-tagged URLs direct traffic to your site correctly and are tracking correctly in GA4. Once your campaigns go live, continue to monitor traffic to confirm data is being recorded accurately.

If you need additional help with configuring your UTM Parameters, contact your BFO Account Manager.

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## Default Channel Definitions

Now that we understand the different types of parameters. Let's start to break down the **Default Channels** in GA4 and how they are defined. In a number of cases, Google simply defines its rules to match **Source** and

**Category** by saying the source must match a list of search sites or social sites. In this document, we will not be breaking down all the sites that are used in these instances. Instead, please refer to [this spreadsheet](#) offered by Google which defines channel grouping sources and categories.

Many of these definitions also use **Regular Expressions**, or **RegEx**, in their definitions. RegEx is a sequence of characters that specifies a search pattern in text. To learn more about RegEx, BFO recommends visiting [Regular Expressions 101](#) or [RegExR](#). For additional support with Regular Expressions, contact your BFO Account Manager.

Some channels listed will only be available to users of Google's Display & Video 360 users. For additional information about DV360, contact your BFO Account Manager.

## Direct

**WHAT IT IS:** Direct traffic results from users manually entering a URL into their browser or using a bookmark to access a webpage directly. If a user clicks a link found in a document or PDF, that traffic is also considered direct. In any other instance, if the **medium** in the URL is *not set* or *none*, the traffic is defined as direct traffic.

**RULES:**

- **SOURCE:** Exactly matches *direct*
- **MEDIUM:** Exactly matches (*not set*) **OR** exactly matches (*none*)

## Paid Search

**WHAT IT IS:** Paid search traffic results from paid ads that appear on search engines. Paid search traffic excludes traffic coming from display ads.

**RULES:**

- **SOURCE:** Matches Google's list of search sites
- **MEDIUM:** Matches RegEx `^(.*cp.*|ppc/paid.*)$`

## Organic Search

**WHAT IT IS:** Organic search traffic comes directly from a search engine, and does not result from any paid media. This traffic is the direct result of a user conducting a search using a search engine such as Google or Bing.

**RULES:**

- **SOURCE:** Matches Google's list of search sites
- **MEDIUM:** Exactly matches *organic*

## Paid Social

**WHAT IT IS:** This new channel grouping contains traffic arriving on a landing page using a link from a paid social campaign. For example, if your business runs a Facebook campaign, users arriving from that campaign will be grouped here.

**RULES:**

- **SOURCE:** Matches Google's list of social networks
- **MEDIUM:** Matches RegEx `^(.*cp.*|ppc/paid.*)$`

## Organic Social

**WHAT IT IS:** Organic social traffic contains users who arrive on your site using a link generated by organic, or non-paid, social media posts. For example users coming from a general Facebook post.

**RULES:**

- **SOURCE:** Matches Google's list of social networks
  - **OR**
- **MEDIUM:** Is one of the following: "social", "social-network", "social-media", "sm", "social network", "social media"

## Email

**WHAT IT IS:** When a user clicks on a link from an email campaign, follow-up email, or even email signatures.

**RULES:**

- **SOURCE:** Matches RegEx `email|e-mail|e_mail|e mail`
  - **OR**
- **MEDIUM:** Matches RegEx `email|e-mail|e_mail|e mail`

## Affiliates

**WHAT IT IS:** The Affiliate channel indicates traffic from affiliate marketing. You could ask your affiliates to include definitions in landing page URLs to ensure traffic is grouped in this category.

**RULE:**

- **MEDIUM:** Equals `affiliate`

## Referral

**WHAT IT IS:** Referral traffic contains users coming from other sites that are not otherwise defined in channels such as search or social. For example, when a user clicks a link on a site that navigates to your domain, GA4 will track the link as a *referral* to your web page, and the original page will be considered the *referrer*.

**RULE:**

- **MEDIUM:** Equals `referral`

## Paid Video

**WHAT IT IS:** The paid video channel contains traffic coming from paid video ads running on video sites. This may include Google Ads or Display & Video 360 Traffic.

**RULES:**

- **SOURCE:** Matches Google's list of video sites
- **MEDIUM:** Matches RegEx `^(.*cp.*|ppc/paid.*)$`

## Organic Video

**WHAT IT IS:** The organic video channel contains traffic coming from video sites.

**RULES:**

- **SOURCE:** Matches Google's list of video sites

- OR
- **MEDIUM:** Matches RegEx `^(.*video.*)$`

## Display

**WHAT IT IS:** Traffic coming from display ads.

**RULE:**

- **MEDIUM:** Is one of the following: “display”, “banner”, “expandable”, “interstitial”, “cpm”

## Cross-network

**WHAT IT IS:** This new channel contains traffic attributed to Google Ads new Performance Max Ads and Smart Shopping campaigns.

**RULE:** **Campaign name** contains *cross-network*

## Audio

**WHAT IT IS:** Exclusive to Display & Video 360 (DV360) users, this channel contains traffic attributed to the audio placement within DV360.

**RULE:** **Traffic** is *DV360* **AND** DV360 creative format is *Audio*

## Paid Other

**WHAT IT IS:** Paid Other is the channel by which users arrive at your site/app via ads, but not through an ad identified as Search, Social, Shopping, or Video.

**RULES:**

- **MEDIUM:** Matches RegEx `^(.*cp.*|ppc|retargeting|paid.*)$`
  - OR
- **Traffic** is *DV360* **AND** DV360 creative format is one of the following: “Publisher hosted”, “Tracking”, “Unknown”

## Paid Shopping

**WHAT IT IS:** The new paid shopping channel contains traffic sources from paid advertising on shopping websites.

**RULES:**

- **SOURCE:** Matches Google’s list of shopping sites
  - OR
- **CAMPAIGN NAME:** Matches RegEx `^(.*(?:[a-df-z]|^)shop|shopping).*$`
  - AND
- **MEDIUM:** Matches RegEx `^(.*cp.*|ppc|paid.*)$`

## Organic Shopping

**WHAT IT IS:** Organic Shopping is the channel by which users arrive at your site/app via non-ad links on shopping sites like Amazon or ebay.

**RULES:**

- **For Google Merchant Center Traffic:** Source platform is "Shopping Free Listings"
  - OR
- **SOURCE:** Matches Google's list of shopping sites
  - OR
- **CAMPAIGN NAME:** Matches RegEx `^.*(?:[a-df-z]|^)shop/shopping.*)$`

## SMS

**WHAT IT IS:** Contains traffic originating from text message based marketing

**RULE:** **Medium** exactly matches *sms*

## Mobile Push Notifications

**WHAT IT IS:** For GA4 Properties with App Data Streams, this channel is used to attribute traffic from push notifications

**RULES:**

- **MEDIUM:** Ends with *push*
  - OR
- **MEDIUM:** Contains "mobile" or "notification"

## Resources

- [\[GA4\] Default channel grouping](#) - Analytics Help, Google
- [Understanding Channel Groupings in Google Analytics 4 \(GA4\)](#) - Optimize Smart
- [Campaign URL Builder](#) - GA Demos & Tools
- [Dashes vs. underscores](#) - Matt Cutts: Gadgets, Google, and SEO
- [GA4 Default Channel Grouping Sources and Categories \(Spreadsheet Download\)](#) - Google
- [Regular Expressions 101](#)
- [RegExR](#)