GA4 for Marketing Reporting

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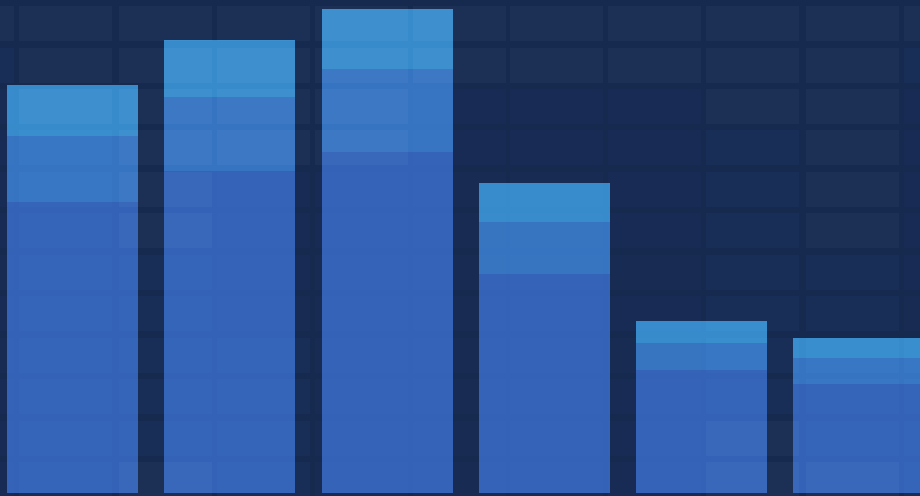
Overview

In a recent survey of marketing professionals, over [43% of respondents chose Google Analytics](#) as their number one choice for reporting.

It's been a core tool for marketers for years without many significant changes. Every day, digital marketers have checked in to the same reports, monitored the same metrics, and reported on the same conversions. That is, until the announcement of the transition from Universal Analytics to Google Analytics 4 (GA4) in 2022.

With GA4, a lot has changed. Change can be frustrating. Change can be hard. Change can also open up new opportunities. In this guide we'll empathize over the frustrating and hard things, and give you the tools to turn roadblocks into opportunities.

Timeline

2005
Urchin from Google

2007
Classic Google Analytics

2012
Universal Analytics

OCTOBER 2020
GA4 transition announcement

JULY 2023
Universal Analytics sunset date

THE FUTURE
Google Analytics 4

Reference: [History of Google Analytics by Luis Franco and Mayra Valdés](#)

Contents

The Difference between Universal Analytics (UA) and GA4

Before 2023, you were using Google Analytics to report on website activity, engagement, and other online metrics.

Post-2023, you'll still be using Google Analytics to report on website activity, engagement, and other online metrics. It's the same end goal, so is GA4 really that different from UA? Absolutely.

There are plenty of new things in GA4 that will feel foreign for Universal Analytics power users. The changes range from cosmetic updates, to foundational definitions of long-used metrics. There are also more lofty, high-level and future-facing adjustments.

> "
>
> *The switch from Universal Analytics (GA3) to GA4 should be compared to the evolution from a gas-powered vehicle to electric-powered. Both vehicles will get you from point A to point B and need fuel to make them go. They accomplish the same goal, but are unique in how they achieve it.*
>
> **Jessica Michaels**
>
> Technical Advisor
> CallTrackingMetrics

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Practical Differences:

Part of the reason Google Analytics 4 now exists is because Universal Analytics has held on to bad data for a long time. Not just bad data, but data that's not compliant with ever-growing privacy laws and regulations. GA4 is built to be privacy-centric and work without relying on cookies. Obviously a focus on privacy is great on its own. But, for Google, shutting down Universal Analytics also means they can worry less about breaching GDPR regulations and start fresh.

Philosophical Differences:

Another significant difference between UA and GA4 is the amount of control given to marketers inside the tool. We've all loved UA for a long time, but the truth is it constrained marketers and wanted to fit everyone into the same box. Google Analytics 4 has opened the doors to the idea that no two marketers are going to use analytics in the same way. GA4 allows you to customize the reports in your main navigation, rename charts, and define custom events within the interface.

GA4 is:

- ✓ Privacy-centric
- ✓ Flexible
- ✓ Automatic & Intelligent
- ✓ Event-based

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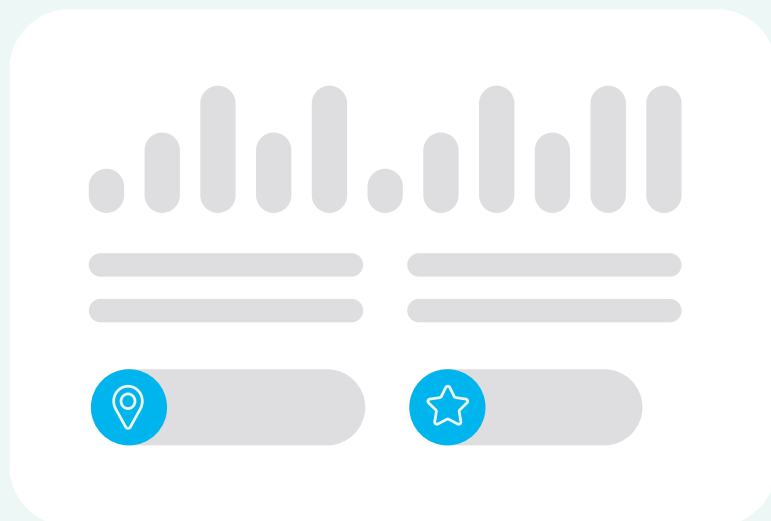
Purposeful Differences:

One of the biggest differences is how each tool handles events. Universal Analytics is largely based on sessions and pageviews. Events in UA are all custom and require configuration. In GA4, events are king. In fact, sessions and pageviews become an event in the new world of GA4. There are still customizations to make, but one huge difference (and benefit!) to events in GA4 are that some are automatically collected.

And not to be outdone by all the new flashy artificial intelligence (AI) tools out there, Google Analytics 4 has implemented machine learning into their insights engine. While Universal Analytics contained automated insights, GA4 promises to go much further. Machine learning will help drive insights, recommendations, and even fill in data gaps in a cookieless future. GA4 bills itself as built for the long-term, ready to adapt as analytics collection changes.

What's in a name? Defining common metrics.

	UNIVERSAL ANALYTICS	GOOGLE ANALYTICS 4
SESSION	Period of active use on the site. Times out at 30 minutes on inactivity, at midnight, or when new parameters are added.	"session_start" event, tracks active (engaged) use on the site. Times out at 30 minutes of inactivity.
BOUNCE RATE	Percentage of single page sessions in which there was no interaction with the page, regardless of length of time on page.	Percentage of sessions that were not engaged sessions. Engaged sessions last more than 10 seconds, have a conversion event, or 2 or more pageviews.
USERS	Total count of users who visit your site.	Distinct count of active users; those who trigger an engaged session or a first_visit event.
CONVERSION	Goals, defined by things like event parameters, destination urls, or session duration. Only one per session is counted.	Events marked as conversions, counting every instance.

Reference: Comparing metrics: Google Analytics 4 vs Universal Analytics

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Event Tracking in GA4

We mentioned above that events in GA4 are king. There are no longer multiple hit types for metrics. Everything is tracked through events. Since the foundation of the platform is events, it's going to be crucial to get comfortable with how they're set up and reported on in the GA4 interface.

To start off, gone is the old structure of an event:

— Event category
— Event action
— Event label

Instead, GA4 offers you an event_name and 25 slots to add parameters instead of the three we've been used to. 25 ways to slice and dice your events for analysis and reporting. This type of flexibility didn't exist in Universal Analytics and now gives marketers the opportunity to truly tailor their measurement strategy.

How do you choose the best parameters? Ask yourself "What questions am I often asked about this event?" You'll automatically get the page_location and page_title to answer where the events happen. But maybe you need to know how many times the event is triggered by customers. You could include a customer_id or other indicator. Or you need to know how many users began checkouts broken out by product type? You could include product details like item_category and price.

If that sounds like a lot of work, there's some more good news about GA4. Some events get collected automatically. There are over 40 automatic events to help monitor the engagement across your websites and apps in GA4. There's no need to worry about setting up specific event tracking for things like page views, file downloads, clicks to external sites, and even form submissions.

The only step required to begin tracking these events is to install the base tag for GA4. If your data stream is pulling in data, you've got some events to start analyzing. There's also a quick toggle to switch on for enhanced event measurement.

Enhanced measurement

- Page views
- Scrolls
- Site search
- File downloads
- Video engagement
- Outbound clicks

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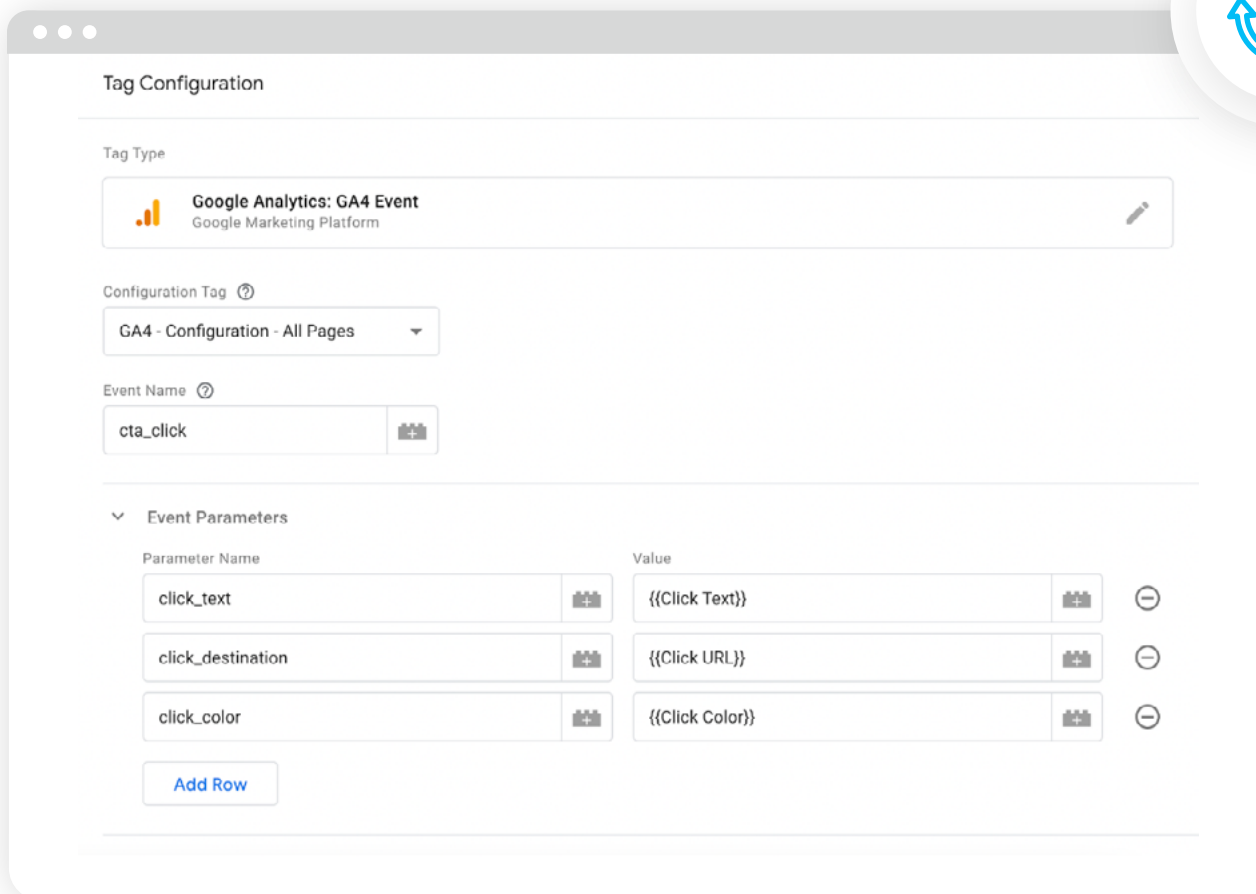
Setting up Custom Events in Google Analytics 4

For those events not lucky enough to be collected automatically, or for those unique to your team's strategy, there are options. There are a few ways to add your spin to events in GA4:

Set them up directly in the GA4 interface:

To create your event within GA4, navigate to "Configure" in the left hand navigation, then "Events", and finally click on the "Create Event" button. Enter your chosen event_name, and then start adding parameters you'd like to associate with your event.

Use Google Tag Manager (GTM):

In GTM, you'll need to set up a "tag" for each custom event you'd like to track, a trigger to determine when to send that event, and any variables necessary to populate your parameters. An example tag that might be used to track button clicks across your site:

Then, once the tag is set, you need a "trigger" to determine when to send the event. You can choose between page views, clicks, user engagements, or other custom triggers–all of which can be customized. For our example, we'll choose clicks as our trigger type, and then tailor it to only fire on CTA buttons on the site.

Trigger Configuration

Trigger Type

🔗 Click - Just Links   ✏️

☐ Wait for Tags ⊘
☐ Check Validation ⊘

This trigger fires on

○ All Link Clicks   ◉ Some Link Clicks

Fire this trigger when an Event occurs and all of these conditions are true
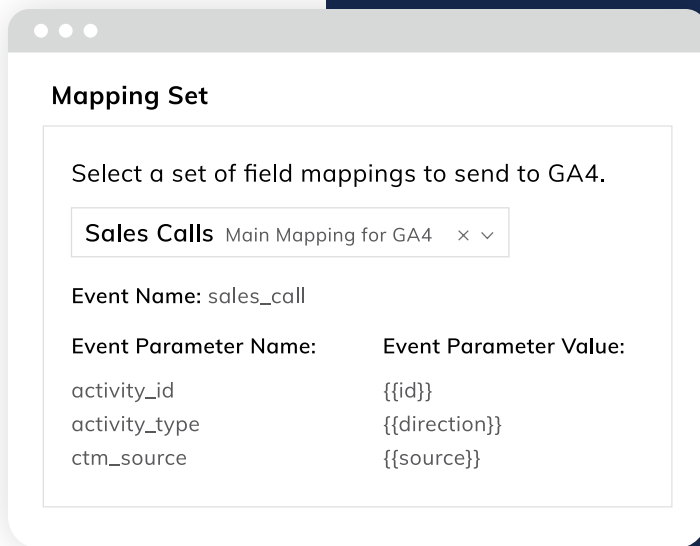
| Click Classes ▾ | contains ▾ | cta | − + |

Sync third-party tools through integrations:

Every integration will have their own process for setting up events in GA4. The common denominator will be that events are sent using Google's API. For a vendor like CallTrackingMetrics, the process is very similar, and offers the same level of flexibility as Google Tag Manager. You'll set a trigger to define when the event is sent to GA4 and map CallTrackingMetrics fields to corresponding parameters in GA4. An example trigger and mapping set could look like this in CTM:

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If **all** of the following rules match:

If	Tags ▾	includes any ▾	× sales	🗑
And ▾	Score ▾	is greater than ▾	★ ▾	🗑
And ▾	Transcription ▾	contains ▾	demo	🗑
And ▾	First-time contact ▾	is ▾	Yes ▾	🗑

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Mapping Set

Select a set of field mappings to send to GA4.

Sales Calls Main Mapping for GA4 × ∨

Event Name: sales_call

Event Parameter Name:	Event Parameter Value:
activity_id	{{id}}
activity_type	{{direction}}
ctm_source	{{source}}

Limits to keep in mind!

— Event names cannot be longer than 40 characters
— 25 parameters per event
— 50 custom dimensions
— 50 custom metrics
— Unlimited distinctly named events

More limitations to know from Google support.

Choosing the Right Conversions for your Measurement Strategy

The number of events you can send to GA4 is unlimited.
So go wild.
Include everything under the sun if you'd like.

There's no data quite like more data. But, for conversions it's a different story. While you're likely already used to restrictions on conversions (aka goals) in Universal Analytics, GA4 continues the tradition and limits you to 30 conversions.

What does this mean? It means you have more to work with than before (30 conversions vs. 20 goals), but you still need to think strategically about how you'll work within the guidelines. You want to make sure you're covering all your bases, and capturing the data that accurately reflects what success looks like for your team and organization.

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## Is my website doing its job, and how can it be doing its job better?

Those questions are at the heart of any web analytics platform, including Google Analytics 4. For a lot of customers we work with, the role of the website is to drive leads and/or sales. If your website's job is to drive leads and sales, your conversion strategy needs to define what leads and sales are.

Examples of lead conversions might be:

— Form submissions
— Phone calls
— Email submission through live chat
— A text message
— Starting a free trial

Example of sale conversions might be:

— eCommerce transaction
— Converted phone call

522
↑ 26,9%
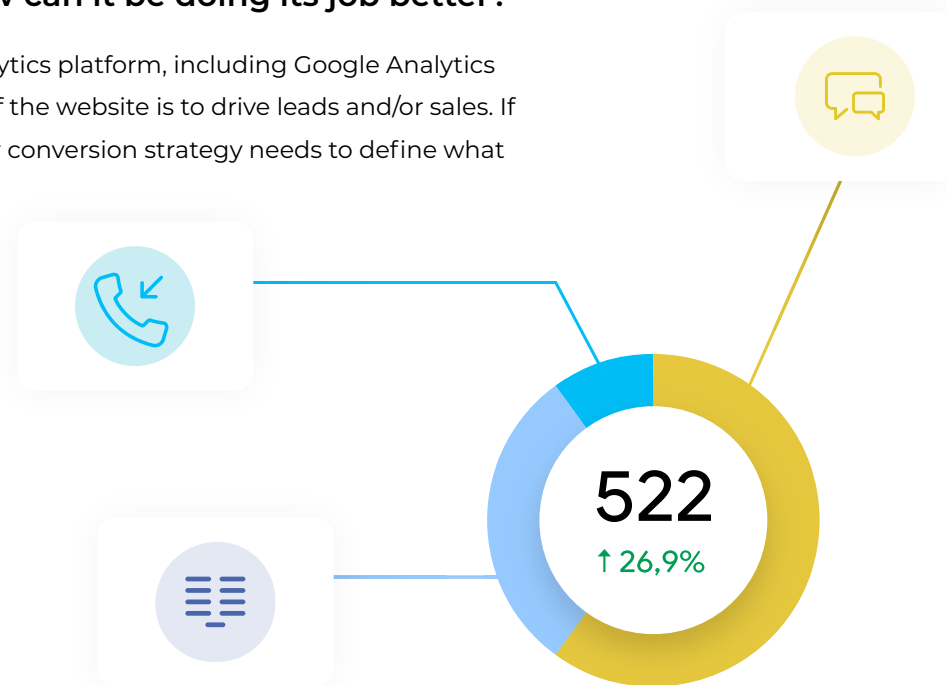
You will likely need to customize and segment each of these to suit your own site. Not all form submissions likely qualify as "leads" for your team. When setting up your conversions in GA4, get specific. You might want to track all "form submissions" as an event, but you'll also want to set up a separate event for demo requests or requests for contact if there's a variety of forms across your properties.
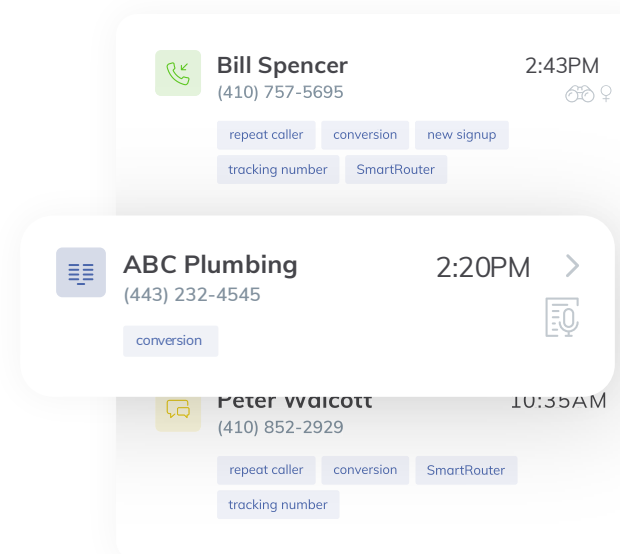
How do you track a phone call in Google Analytics?

You want to paint the full picture of how marketing, and your website, are impacting the business which means including non-obvious conversions like a text message generated from a site session. How do you do that?!

— Basic call tracking by setting up an event to track how many site visitors click on your phone number
— With a call tracking provider like CallTrackingMetrics who has an integration with GA4

When working with a call tracking provider, you're getting much more context and insights from your calls beyond simple volume metrics. Modern call tracking, with dynamic number insertion, is used by agencies and their clients to attribute offline conversions to their online sources for more informed reporting.

Bill Spencer 2:43PM
(410) 757-5695

repeat caller   conversion   new signup

tracking number   SmartRouter

ABC Plumbing 2:20PM
(443) 232-4545

conversion

Peter Walcott 10:35AM
(410) 852-2929

repeat caller   conversion   SmartRouter

tracking number

CHECKLIST

Are you ready for GA4?

Create a new GA4 property by July 2023

Keep Universal Analytics properties active

Connect at least one data stream

Define your site goals

Map your site goals to key site events

Define event triggers

Define event parameters

Set up key events in GA4

(optional) Set up Google Tag Manager

(optional) Set up CallTrackingMetrics integration

Mark business impacting events as conversions

Create audiences to use for filtering

(optional) Use Universal Analytics migration tool

Monitor differences between GA4 and Universal Analytics' numbers

***Take a deep breath***

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Ongoing Reporting and Analysis

After everything is finally set up in Google Analytics, the marketer's real work begins. We set up all the events and conversions so we could collect data, analyze, and implement changes to our marketing strategy.

If you've been using the reports in Universal Analytics for years, you'll want to login to GA4 regularly and just explore the interface. Run through each report and figure out what's already there, before ultimately diving in and customizing everything to your liking.

Out of the box, you'll see:

— **Realtime** - What it sounds like, which is a glance at what's happening on your site right now (in the last 30 minutes).

— **Life cycle reports**

 — **Acquisition reports** - Mostly similar to what you're used to seeing in Universal Analytics, find out where your customer journey begins, broken out by traffic and user acquisition.

 — **Engagement reports** - Closely resembles the behavior reports of UA, but, now that everything is event-based, navigating how to surface insights will take some getting used to.

 — **Monetization reports** - Where you'll find your ecommerce reporting.

 — **Retention reports** - Designed to show you how returning users interact with your site.

— **User reports**

 — Demographics

 — Tech

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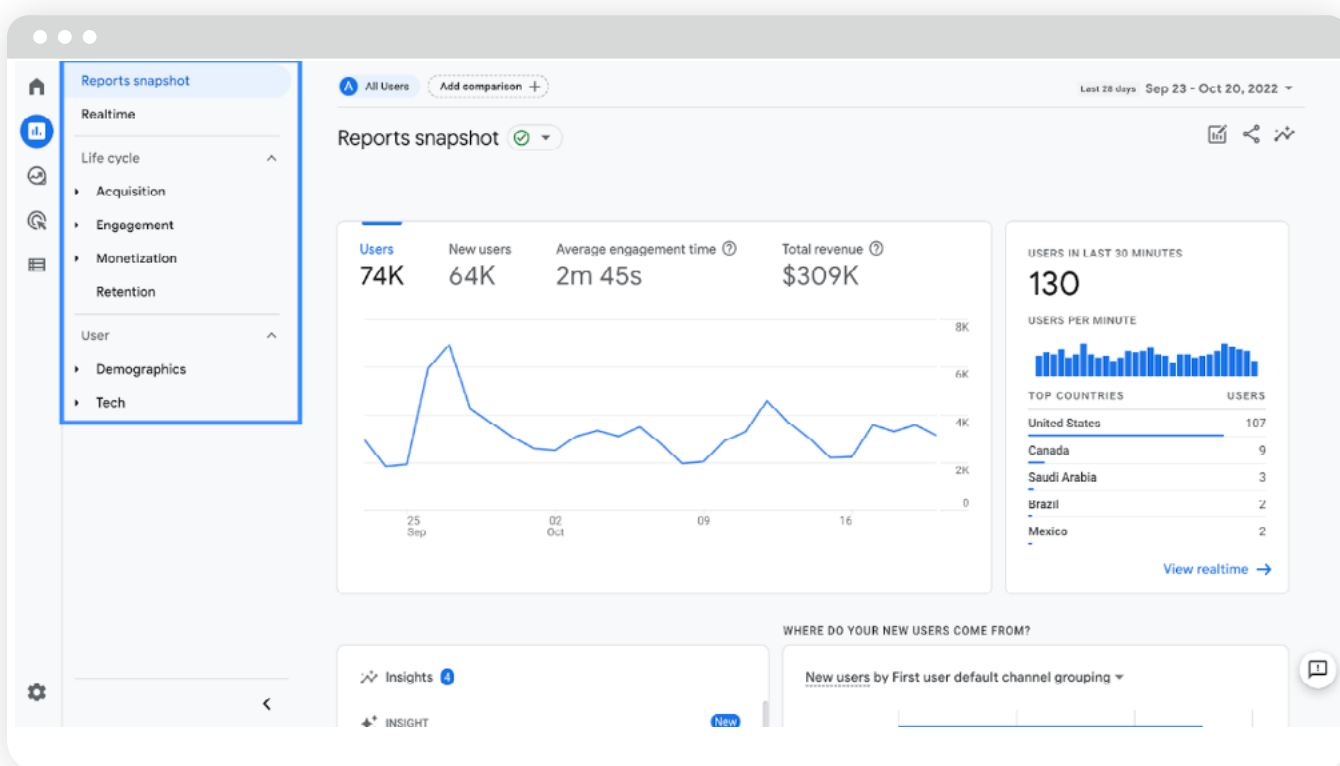
Customizing your Report Experience

The frustrating part of GA4 is that it's largely a blank slate. The best part of GA4? It's a blank slate. There's so much room for marketers to put their spin on their measurement strategy and tailor the experience to the burning questions they regularly face.

The standard, out of the box reporting is just a starting point waiting for customization and tweaks. Don't like the name "Monetization"? You can change it. Demographics not important to your every day analysis? Remove it from the navigation.

There's a "Library" link at the bottom of the reports column where you can build, modify, and remove collections of reports. Those collections appear in the navigation, and the reports appear in the collections. You're able to modify names, dimensions, metrics, and more to give you and your team as much value as possible at a glance.

I'm not seeing it in my reports!

When you set up custom events, you'll need to create a "custom dimension" for any brand new parameters you'll want included in permanent reports. Keep in mind there's a limit of 50 custom dimensions.

TROUBLESHOOTING TIPS:

— Check real-time reports, or the debug report in admin, to view the parameters as they're being sent.
— Account for lag in the data. Many GA4 users experience longer delays in data appearing in reports. It's not there the same day? Try again tomorrow.

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Use "Explore" for Deeper Analysis

If completely personalized standard reports weren't enough, the "Explore" tab opens up even more possibilities for your ongoing and ad hoc analysis. Need to see the data sliced and diced in a lot of different ways? Building in Explore is likely where you'll want to be.

Standard reports will give you your consistent reporting, the things you monitor on a daily, weekly, monthly basis. Explore allows you to dig deeper to troubleshoot, test hypotheses, or just have fun wading through your data.

If that's not enough flexibility, or you want to consolidate your web analytics with other marketing data sources, GA4 is compatible with Google's Looker Studio (formerly Data Studio). Looker has even more functionality and ability to customize a dashboard great for internal reporting to leadership or external reporting for clients.

Download: Guide to Marketing Reporting with Looker Studio

PART 5

Preparing for the Future with GA4

Just like Universal Analytics before it, GA4 is not a set it and forget it tool. It's one piece in reporting on the success of your marketing efforts. Your online measurement should reflect the goals of your organization, which aren't static. Think through what you need now, what you think you'll need soon, and brainstorm what kinds of metrics you'll need in 3, 5, 10 years.

You'll want a mostly complete GA4 property by July 2023 to hit the ground running, but you'll also be adjusting as you go. There's no pressure to be a Google Analytics 4 expert on day one. Even Google continues to make changes to GA4 based on critical feedback from us users.

To do today, if you haven't yet:

— Start collecting data in a GA4 property

To do next:

— Start mapping your company's goals to events, conversions, and audiences
— Brainstorm all the new things you can accomplish with GA4's flexibility
— Impress your leadership and clients with improved reporting

Want More GA4 Resources?

As you continue to get more and more comfortable with Google Analytics 4, we've got resources of all lengths and types to reference when building your strategy. Check out our GA4 hub to keep up to date on everything GA4, including how call tracking helps create a more informed analytics strategy.

GA4 Resource Hub
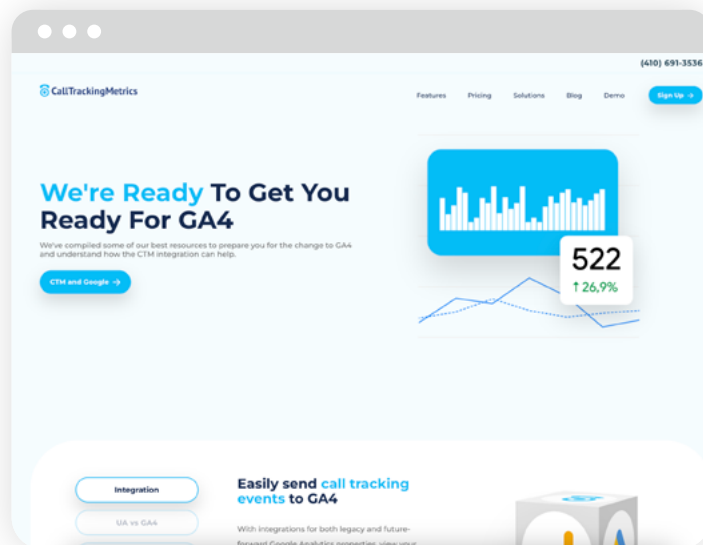
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To learn more about CallTrackingMetrics and how we can support the growth of your home service business, request a custom product demo today.

Book a Demo

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E: sales@calltrackingmetrics.com