The data you're missing

9 truths about the new world
of data-informed marketing

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Introduction

Across social media, internet search, video streaming, email, gaming and more, the world is poised to generate an estimated 181 zettabytes of data in 2025, according to Exploding Topics, a Silicon Valley research firm. (To help you wrap your mind around that, a single zettabyte translates to 1 trillion gigabytes — or the equivalent to the solid-state storage capacity of 1.9 billion laptop computers.)

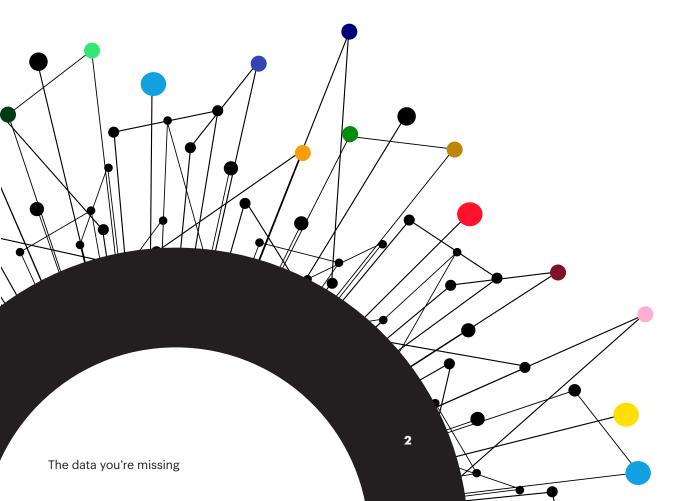It's no wonder a lot of marketers feel like they're drowning in data.

But new approaches to data-informed marketing, along with changes to the ecosystem brought on by developments such as the end of the third-party cookie, are creating the potential for a seismic shift in our craft. That shift promises to enhance our abilities to find the data we're missing — the most relevant, actionable data needed for connecting with customers.

How large is 181 zettabytes?

The human brain has approximately 100 billion neurons.* So 181 zettabytes is about 1.8 trillion times more than the number of neurons in a single human brain, or 18 times more than the total number of neurons in the brains of every human who has ever lived.

*Source: National Institutes of Health

Here, a brief guide to the evolving data landscape in 2024 — and a look at how marketers can engage consumers with unprecedented precision while moving the needle for their brands and campaigns.

The data you're missing

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The old ways of identifying and tracking audiences for marketing purposes are dying. Given changes in privacy regulations, technology platforms and consumer preferences, it's time for a fresh start.
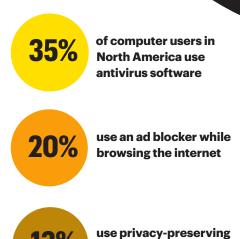
You've been hearing about it forever: The end of the line for the third-party cookie. But the changes shaping the future of data-driven marketing go deeper than those little bits of computer code that nobody ever really liked. In addition to cookies, using email addresses to identify customers and their behaviors is also at risk, as providers develop systems that block tracking pixels in emails and hide locations and IP addresses.

And consumers have been busy figuring out that they also have agency in protecting their privacy. According to eMarketer, more than a third (35%) of computer users in North America use antivirus software; another 20% use an ad blocker while browsing the internet.

Use of privacy-preserving browsers and search engines now stands at 13%.

The steady erosion of the effectiveness of these data-acquisition channels is helping reinforce just how imperfect they really are. For when data increasingly can't be connected and contextualized across the omnichannel spectrum, marketers are working in the dark. It's a recipe for imprecise audience targeting (i.e., addressability), ineffective consumer engagement and challenges to ad measurement and frequency verification — resulting in marketing strategies that fail to realize their full potential.

But, as this era closes, another is opening.

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Choosing a new strategy for obtaining data-informed customer insights is going to look messy for a while.

This will be a profound shift. The most obvious truth in this era is that standing still is not an option — cookies are going away and consumer interest in greater control and privacy is here to stay. So, what are the options?

The most talked-about alternative, of course, is enabling brands to collect their own first-party data (or, zero-party) via their own websites and apps. This approach seems promising, but it also holds risks, as not every brand has a legitimate reason to be asking for personal information.

Others are talking about building on existing IDs (e.g., see The Trade Desk's Unified ID 2.0, Yahoo ConnectID and LiveRamp's RampID), while Meta is promoting the use of conversions APIs. Then there are contextual targeting, data partnerships and clean rooms, Google's Privacy Sandbox APIs — there's a lot to contemplate. The key is to understand that each set of options and toolsets has advantages and disadvantages.

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Mounting uncertainties make this a good time to think differently, and to consider new and stronger foundations for future-proofed, data-informed marketing strategies.

The shift in the balance of power and influence in marketing from Madison Avenue to Silicon Valley has produced monumental digital successes over the past two decades. But as consumers reassert control over the use of their data and lawmakers oblige them with tough new privacy protections, and as channels continue to fragment, one new attribute is emerging as a differentiator: resilience.

Marketers need to stop wasting time or money on chasing the ghosts of cookie-based data or email attribution. They need sources of data that can resist preemption, providing reliable insights through disruptions caused by regulation and other vicissitudes of digital technology.

Data resiliency has traditionally been thought of in the context of catastrophe: losing data or control of data through a natural disaster or malicious hacking attack such as ransomware. Moving forward, marketers will gravitate toward data sources that embrace a broader definition of resiliency, enduring other types of unexpected changes — in policy, technology, consumer preference and regulation.

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This is also a good time to challenge conventional wisdom, which seemingly holds that the only solution is a revamped strategy around collecting first-party data from customers.

Succeeding through this transformation is more about quality and transparency than it is about quantity. The marketing world continues to obsess about first-party data, which involves developing website and app features that induce customers to share information, directly or indirectly, providing insights into their preferences and behaviors. Nearly half (49%) of brands believe that activating a first-party data strategy is their best option, according to a 2023 DoubleVerify survey. At the same time, though, consumers are increasingly protective of their information — a 2024 survey from consumer research firm Attest found that more than 8 in 10 are concerned about the sharing of data with brands online.

Collecting data on your own creates additional operational, market and compliance risks. Don't get fixated on the narrative that you absolutely need a lot of first-party data to deal with third-party cookie deprecation — and consider forging partnerships instead, says Joshua Lowcock, President of Quad Media.

"The excitement of collecting first-party data is great, but if you don't know how to use it, all you're doing is setting unrealistic expectations with consumers that you'll be able to offer personalized, relevant and better experiences," Lowcock says. "But if you're not able to, then consumers rightly will wonder, 'What on earth did I share my data with you for?'" he adds.

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5 The new center of gravity for proven data resilience is the household.

Finding your ideal audience is increasingly like the "Where's Waldo?" children's puzzle books. In our device-driven world, computers, mobile phones, connected TVs, digital voice assistants, smartwatches, fitness trackers, e-readers, gaming systems, VR headsets — did we leave anything out? — all generate potentially valuable data streams.

Those streams go from those devices to... somewhere. It's up to you, the marketer, to hunt down the most relevant data, validate it and then guide your brand's marketing decision-making.

In the digital world, data is virtually boundless, sending billions of signals from search queries, website visits, media consumed, purchases completed, purchases abandoned, email interactions, social media engagement, app usage — the list is long. Partly because people have multiple email addresses and carry multiple devices, the challenge of linking those data points to an individual is herculean, and often involves some fancy mathematical guesswork.

But what if you could anchor your strategy to something more familiar and tangible?

Quad believes we are moving into a phase of marketing that will establish the household as the centerpiece for collecting, analyzing, interpreting and acting on information about existing and future customers. Home addresses, it turns out, are one of the few reliable constants in a rapidly changing world.

"You only have one place you call home — and home gives you a real insight into people," Lowcock says. "Your address tells you about people and their passions. It tells you what matters in the community. If you tell me where someone lives, I can tell you a lot about them."

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6 The household works as a resilient data hub largely because it provides a seamless connector between the offline and online worlds.

Most days we come back from our analog-world mailbox with a mixture of catalogs, direct mail marketing letters or postcards, circulars, magazines, bills and — if we are lucky — a letter from a friend or family member.

In that mail mix we see a valuable opportunity to bring together validated information from the offline world and integrate it with corresponding online data sources. For example, someone who subscribes to Runner's World and Trail Runner magazines for home delivery shows where their passions lie. This "passion" can also be thought of as a form of offline contextual advertising.

This offline-to-online link provides an opportunity to break down silos and build more enduring sources of customer marketing data to create more effective campaigns. Focusing on the home makes sense from a statistical perspective: The average consumer spends more than 7½ hours per day consuming media; that figure climbs to greater than 11 hours when factoring in traditional media and multitasking, according to eMarketer. At the same time, research also shows that most in-store purchases take place within a 20-minute radius of your house, per Access Development. Making the household the center of your data world only makes sense.

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Household-generated data helps brands sidestep various risks and vests marketers with more control over reaching and winning audiences.

In the cookie- and email-centric world of digital marketing, brands have always been susceptible to the whims of others, whether platforms such as Google or Facebook, technology providers such as Apple or regulators at the state, federal or international level.

A household-centered data strategy changes the rules and puts marketers, for the most part, back in control of their own destinies. It leans on verified or verifiable sources from materials that households are already receiving in the mail, building around already known audiences.

Those lists provide insights at scale. The U.S. Postal Service in 2022 delivered more than 127 billion pieces of mail to more than 164 million locations across the country. Quad is one of the Postal Service's largest customers,

with products that reach up to 89% of households in any given ZIP Code through direct mail, catalog and periodical print and logistics solutions.

With a household data strategy, the information comes to the marketer ready to be integrated with other verifiable data from digital sources and activated across channels, potentially incorporating CRM data, website visitor data, platform behavior, regional demographic data and more.

What this creates is the possibility for more seamless omnichannel campaigns that start with a mailing address but can extend much farther, to include social media, online display, connected TV, digital out-of-home and other emerging technologies.

Insights at scale

The contents of your mailbox provide macro-signals of the passions in your life.

127B pieces of mail delivered in the United States each year

164M business and household mail delivery points

Source: U.S. Postal Service

The shift away from cookies to more resilient, household-centric data enables marketers to deliver big wins with greater efficiency.

Working with a more targeted, reliable and accurate data profile opens the door to greater creativity across the marketing ecosystem with greater effectiveness. And already we're seeing the signs of how a household-centric data approach can make an impact.

Long-time partner SiriusXM approached Quad about a new campaign that would be rooted in direct mail but incorporate other methods for engaging with prospective customers. One specific element involved exploring whether adding personalized Flowcodes to the outside of a mail package would increase response rates.

Quad's data and analytics, direct mail and creative teams worked together to produce a turnkey multichannel direct marketing campaign featuring direct mail, targeted social and digital ads, together

with data from USPS Informed Delivery and status updates about incoming and outbound packages. The targeted social and digital touches were orchestrated around the mail in-home dates.

Quad also provided measurement, which included an A/B test of direct mail envelopes with personalized Flowcodes against those without them. That experiment alone lifted the scan rate by 30% versus packages with the codes only on materials inside the envelopes.

The benefits to a unified, household-centric approach are reflected downstream. It provides for improved customer service, streamlined sales and marketing, more precise insights into customer behavior and smarter campaigns and measurement.
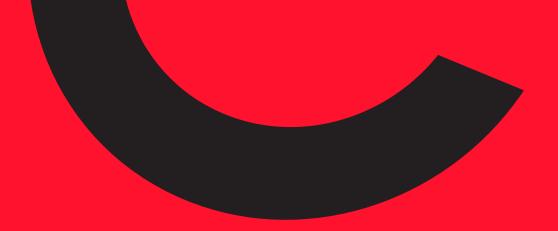
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The evolving landscape for marketing data will always have some risk. As brands move forward into a cookieless future, consider these questions in developing your strategy:

- **How, and from whom, is your data sourced?** Don't assume partners are compliant; ask for proof.

- **Are you compliant with both the spirit and letter of the laws?** A total of 18 states currently have [consumer privacy regulations](#), with others considering legislation. The U.S. Congress is also discussing a nationwide privacy bill. (More aggressive non-U.S. regulators, such as the European Union, will also remain factors for brands whose businesses cross international borders.)

- **Can your organization manage compliance requirements?** Tracking and adjusting to the ever-changing regulatory landscape is a major challenge. Consider whether you have the legal and public affairs support to stay a step ahead, and that your teams internally are coordinated.

- **Is it enough?** The whole idea of creating a data strategy is to drive results for your organization. Build a data strategy to scale with the size of the opportunity and the capabilities of your team — and leverage partnerships and external expertise as needed.

- **Will history repeat itself?** When marketers shift their data strategies, there's the risk that a new set of solutions could inadvertently repeat the shortcomings of the past — such as ceding too much control to external platforms. Don't plant the seeds of your data strategy in quicksand.

The answers to these questions, at this time of transformation, should put you on a path to resiliency, where transparency and openness are consistently prioritized. Don't put your fate in the hands of a single approach and avoid the temptation to chase the next big thing. "Work hard to stay on top of industry changes," Lowcock says, "because what I tell you today is guaranteed to change tomorrow."

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About Quad

Quad (NYSE: QUAD) is a global marketing experience company that helps brands make direct consumer connections, from household to in-store to online. Supported by state-of-the-art technology and data-driven intelligence, Quad uses its suite of media, creative and production solutions to streamline the complexities of marketing and remove friction from wherever it occurs in the marketing journey. Quad tailors its uniquely flexible, scalable and connected solutions to clients' objectives, driving cost efficiencies, improving speed to market, strengthening marketing effectiveness, and delivering value on client investments.

Quad employs approximately 13,000 people in 14 countries and serves approximately 2,700 clients including industry leading blue-chip companies that serve both businesses and consumers in multiple industry verticals, with a particular focus on commerce, including retail, consumer packaged goods, and direct-to-consumer; financial services; and health. Quad is ranked among the largest agency companies in the U.S. by *Ad Age*, buoyed by its full-service Rise media agency and Betty creative agency. Quad is also one the largest commercial printers in North America, according to *Printing Impressions*.

For more information about Quad, including its commitment to ongoing innovation, culture and sustainable impact, visit quad.com.

1 (888) 782-3226
info@quad.com
Quad.com

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