

35 Top Tips for



Your Affiliate Program

A brief guide for affiliate managers
for setting up and managing affiliate programs
from top industry writers



Let's Get Started!

So, you took the plunge and have added plans to start up an affiliate program. The next steps may seem pretty simple but the more you dig into it, the more moving parts you discover.

This brief guide collects together some of the most useful tips and strategies from leading affiliate managers and partner marketing practitioners in the performance marketing industry. No guide is ever comprehensive of course and each of the 'top tips' is intended as a start point for further reading and listening – and then experimenting on your own program.

Some of these are basic '101' thoughts which you should know – others are more advanced but each will help you 'move the needle' on the performance of your program and drive more sales.

Chris Tradgett



WHAT'S THE JOB?

Affiliate Management is a relatively new role in the grand scheme of things only really becoming 'a thing' about 20 years ago. There are some very talented people in the industry so make sure you seek them out and hear what they have to share in podcasts, webinars or conference sessions. There's plenty to read as well from some very talented blog writers.

But if you're about to start in the industry or are new to the job, what should you expect to be doing? Well to start with, soak up the knowledge from some of the writers we've included in this article and then put it into practice!

Manage Your Time

One of the leading writers on affiliate program management, Geno Prussakov outlined how he spent his time back in 2014:

- **40%** of time is spent on affiliate recruitment
- **35%** of time – on affiliate **activation, education**, and support of communication channel (both one-on-one and newsletters)
- **10%** of time – on compliance policing and enforcement
- **10%** of time – on competitive intelligence and affiliate program optimization (based on what we learn from the intelligence as well as our own successes)
- **5%** of time – on reports

You can read more about this in [his blog article](#). Acceleration Partners in [a blog](#) that same year distilled that down to just three specific things :

- Program strategy
- Affiliate partner recruiting, activation and development
- Program operations

And broadly the fundamentals haven't changed; this is still a good base structure to use to focus your activity and then divide your working week up. If you're an in-house affiliate manager, then that will all be on your main role; for OPM agency staff or a network AM, that will need to be further divided between your active clients.

Read as Much as You Can

Make sure you're learning all the time from those who've been doing the job. You'll not learn affiliate in University - or if you do it will be out of date! This is a very dynamic industry and practices and techniques are evolving all the time.

There are training courses available with variable content. You can see a selection in [this article](#). There are also plenty of blogs from leading thinkers, OPMs and Affiliate Networks sharing success stories and best practice guides, and there are a growing number of [Podcasts available](#) to listen in to on your run or commute.

It's also worth doing that sanity check as Mihaela suggests [in this article](#). If any of these 10 scenarios apply it's probably best waiting before you start up!

'Join' the Industry

Affiliate is a very social place and you need to be a part of it. Here's a few ideas to get you started:

- Join the affiliate groups on LinkedIn and Facebook
- Follow interesting writers on social media
- Connect via LinkedIn - and join conversations on posts
- Join the [PMA](#)
- Attend conferences and webinars
- Most of all - active communication in all of the above





WORKING WITH A TRACKING PROVIDER

Go Beyond UTM

There are some referral programs that track directly and sometimes as simply as by using UTM codes for each referrer. That requires a deal of trust as there's no way beyond shared csv files of referrals to report on that. TUNE wrote a [handy article on just this](#).

Most referrals, whether it's termed 'affiliate', 'partner', 'influencer' or whatever, work best using a tracking network. These are usually set up with a login for both partners, advertiser and publisher, so both have a means of accessing reporting of clicks, sales and payments. That may be via a more usual affiliate network or a SaaS tracking system.

Choosing a Network

The Affiliate Network has been the usual way of launching an affiliate program. Finding the most appropriate may seem tricky, though a good start point is to see where your competitors are running their activity. That should indicate that there are appropriate publishers that should be easy to recruit. The AM Navigator blog again gives some useful [advice in this article](#).

Costs will vary hugely, based on whether you just need simple tracking, or more sophisticated solutions which include attribution modelling or account management so do your research carefully.

Software SaaS Solutions

There have always been a set of non-managed solutions for advertisers who just need the tracking, pioneered by companies such as HasOffers. There are now a fast increasing selection of technologies available from a simple tech on a subscription basis as low as \$29 monthly; to highly featured tracking and reporting systems such as Partnerize and Impact where most will be considerably higher depending on functionality required.

The key difference between these and the networks is there will be no transaction fee or 'override' though the monthly technology fees may well be higher. Again do your research.

Multiple Networks?

Many advertisers have affiliate programs across multiple networks. There may be historical reasons for this – and if you've started working on this kind of program you'll need to unpick these. Kristin Wardwell's [article from JebCommerce](#) give some useful background.

There may also be geographic reasons – which again may be historical. Networks used to operate in one or a few territories though many such as CJ Affiliate, Impact, Partnerize, Awin and more are now fully global.

You'll need to ensure that you have covered all the points in Kristin's article, to avoid double tracking, etc. You'll also need to be convinced that the extra cost of multiple fees is worth it!

Our recent White paper showed that most affiliates work with multiple networks and there are no 'exclusive' publishers you'd be missing out on. [Download your copy here.](#)



SETTING UP AN AFFILIATE PROGRAM

You'll have heard it or read it before that an affiliate program has a lot of moving parts – and there are several levers that you need to pay close attention to so your program can truly perform. Most important is you need to get it right from the start, so seek out advice or hire an OPM even if it's just to advise on set up.

Affiliate is not a 'Channel'

You'd be surprised how many times we hear of affiliates being treated as a 'channel' like programmatic or PPC. The truth is that 'affiliate' is a model - and there are expert affiliates who work most of the channels to drive customers to your website.

Your affiliates should be thought of as an extension of your overall digital strategy, and managed in an integrated way with your own 'channel' activity. Some have said you should think of them as a sales team and often they respond well to that kind of approach. Incentives based on performance are often used to drive the activity that moves your strategy forwards.

How Many Types of Affiliate?

How you categorise affiliates by promotional types is different for almost every writer. Rick Magennis offers up [5 basic types](#):

- Coupon Affiliates
- Incentivized Traffic Affiliates
- Content Affiliates
- PPC Affiliates
- Comparison Shopping Sites

Others take it beyond that and iAffiliateManagement usefully expand this [to list 10 types](#) - and Geno Prussakov has gone as far as 20 types!

Affiliates in Different Verticals

'Affiliate' is an incredibly widely used term and suffers a bit in being so widely applied and with different payment models. Most of us think of website owners who refer their visitors to retailers for a % share of basket value (CPA) - or even app installs (CPI). It also covers some in Lead Generation who will refer for a click or a lead (CPL).

In sectors such as Forex and Gambling, as well as some software, affiliates are likely to earn on referrals via a Revenue Share. This may be from relatively small %age of a software product; for Forex trading and gambling, the rev share may well be on share of revenues generated from referred users (less winnings), so effectively a share of losses.

So that's a huge range of options and most affiliates are aware of all the other formats, so that needs to be borne in mind when establishing your program and commission structure.

Get Your Commissions Right

One of the key levers of an affiliate program is ensuring that your commission is competitive. Before launching, ensure that you check your immediate competitors' programs. You'll see that the biggest players in a vertical will probably not offer top commissions - whereas the challenger brands usually offer more.

Peer2Peer expand on this [in a broader article](#) if you need to know more. Your network should also be able to advise on an appropriate structure.

The biggest brands will usually convert more easily, so can adjust commission to suit. A new entrant to the market will usually need to offer a better deal or commission structure to be noticed and get affiliate engagement.

At the base level, you'll need to factor in your usual website conversion rates - as the affiliate will use this to make decisions about your brand. You'll get their attention if net commission Earnings Per Click (EPC) make it worth their while to promote you. Don't forget to set additional levels for higher achievers; how that is structured will depend on your own business and margins.

Build Product Feeds for Success

Products and deals if you're promoting them should be as easy for affiliates to deal with as possible. If your website has a large product inventory you'll probably be working with a datafeed provider. Most networks provide functionality to help you distribute it to affiliates - and many will make it very simple for affiliates to construct a deeplink to a product - as in [this from Linkconnector](#).

For specialist distribution of your offers FMTC provide an additional resource to make it easier to engage with some of the larger publishers as they explain in this [tech document](#).

Build a Cool Landing Page

Your affiliate program may be on a network but don't forget to build a landing page on your own website to attract potential partners. Too many brands are only visible to affiliates on the network merchant page.

Home / Affiliates

affiliates

become an affiliate – it's quick and easy with huge benefits!

Missguided is a fresh and vibrant online store that aims to stay on top of the latest trends in order to provide our customers with the best that the fashion world has to offer. We have fast established ourselves as a reputable and reliable company that is able to stand toe-to-toe with some of the most well-known online fashion retailers.

how does it work?

Simple! All you need to do is follow the 4 basic steps to get started as a Missguided affiliate:

1. Join the affiliate program on our partner network Awin here. Or if you are already registered with Awin, [click here](#)
2. Set up your affiliate links
3. Drive targeted traffic to the Missguided site
4. Generate sales and get rewarded up to 6% commission per sale!

Some major brands of course will not want to appear to 'cheapen their brand' with the 'affiliate' name and call it partnerships or similar. Most however are keen to engage as much as possible with potential new publishers - especially over recent years with quality content affiliates. Awin has some very useful information on program set up in [their blog article](#).

Announce the Launch!

Don't just set it going and hope affiliates will find it - make a noise and announce a launch.

- * If you've built a list of prospect affiliates send an invitation email
- * Ask your network to announce to any relevant affiliates on network
- * Announce on LinkedIn and Facebook industry groups
- * Send PR articles to publications in your market vertical that your potential partners would read

Remember Affiliates are People

It is easy to forget in the modern affiliate marketing industry that as well as the publicly quoted publishers like Hearst and Honey there are millions of smaller affiliates still, who all have audiences. Every one of them is a person, some lone operators or SMEs so you need to ensure you recognise that.





FINDING NEW AFFILIATE PARTNERS

“Where Can I Find Affiliates?”

One of the commonest questions we get asked. The ‘old school’ method is to search in Google for your own keywords to see who appears - which may include your competitors. Find the affiliate sites among them to help provide them with content that will help them; our own [Chrome extension](#) makes this a breeze.

If your own brand is the best fit for a keyword or even your own brand name, then affiliates will welcome the opportunity to promote you and increase their conversion rates. It will also help to drive your competitors down in search results.

There are also plenty of SEO tools for keyword research and competitor link analysis. We of course would recommend our own Publisher Discovery platform as all the websites are affiliates.

Look for Quality Affiliates

You’ll have heard about advertisers with thousands of affiliates, though that can lead to unneeded complication. All those relationships need to be managed somehow and probably 90% of your volume sales will come from the top 10% of your affiliates anyway.

The tough part is growing your program from that place. Merchants ask us “how do I find affiliates to sell my product?” - and there’s no simple answer. You need partners that attract visitors with high purchase intent so cashback and coupon are the quick and easy route.

For a longer view partnering with more content driven websites can deliver a more sustainable program, with referred sales from a wider range of more relevant websites.

Ensure a Good Brand Fit

Ensure each application to join is fully vetted - make sure they have a site that works and looks a good enough place for your brand to show up! If yours is a premium brand you may well prefer to avoid coupons and cashback. Content websites, bloggers and influencers will give a slower program launch and lower volumes but are likely to give greater brand control.

Also remember if you work with huge numbers of affiliates, that also means you have more data to sift through to catch out any less desirable activity.

Finding Niche Bloggers

Bloggers make great affiliates because they already have a built-in audience that trusts their content. If the right blogger recommends your product with an affiliate link to your website, this trust factor will bring warm leads right to your doorstep.

But don’t just go after any blogger – the key is to find relevant bloggers whose audience is complementary to yours, to recruit them as affiliates. They don’t have to be a complete copy of yours - for a car hire merchant, a flights or rail affiliate could give a useful side audience to reach into.

Remember to ensure their blog has the appropriate 'disclosure' notice as well for transparency. Read more on this in the [full ReferralRock article](#).

Look for the Influencers

Influencers are so much more than the Kardashians and all those sports stars. The difference with influencers is that usually they prefer to work with on a fixed fee basis for promoting an advertiser. During 2020 the huge drop in fixed advertising budgets meant that many of these started looking to affiliate as a means to monetise their content. That has led to opportunities for performance marketers.

Influencers' audiences are usually highly engaged, and provide high quality visitors. Make sure that your program is set up with full attribution functionality to ensure referrals are rewarded at all stages of the funnel. You may also need to factor in a CPA with a fixed fee to gain an influencers' attention.

Partner With Merchants

'Partner Marketing' has been a growing trend for some years now - with some technologies set up specifically to manage them. Most networks have the capability as in reality it's just another form of referral. However, they may require a bespoke integration to ensure your product or service reflects their own brand.

Look to connect with a product that is complementary to your own. One great example is [Hawaiian Airlines with Surfstitch](#).

Read more about brand partnering in the [Partnerize eBook](#).



ENGAGING WITH NEW PARTNERS

Intelligent Email Strategies

If you're emailing affiliates to recruit them - don't just hit send and hope for the best. Some of the most successful affiliate managers use a 3x mail strategy.

Often the third email with a line like "this is the last time I'll hassle you" is the one that converts to an engaged affiliate and gets them promoting your product. Test that for yourself and see or yourself.

Use 'Multiple Points of Contact'

Don't forget that some of the larger affiliates will be receiving many thousands of emails every month so your carefully crafted invitation to partner may have disappeared into a 'read later' queue. So you may need to think outside the box.

Some forward thinking merchants set up a specific Twitter or Instagram account for affiliate activities; Supermetrics uses [@SuperPartners](#) as its affiliate channel for example.



IT'S A RELATIONSHIP!

Affiliates are People!!

As your program matures and business grows, it's worth saying this again - don't forget that your affiliates are people. Whether a solopreneur blogger or a large organisation, they are still people, so build those relationships. There are some handy tips [here from AffiliateWP](#).

More a Publisher Partnership?

I've hinted that your affiliate partners should be considered as much more than a media placement - this isn't programmatic. Affiliates cross all marketing channels and the best programs engage with affiliates in an integrated way, supporting all other messaging toward a common goal.

The best and most fruitful affiliate relationships are true partnerships. As Rakhee Jogia of Rakuten write recently in her [PerformanceIn article](#), "The most effective high-performance affiliate strategies we see come through a true partnership between advertiser and publishers, one based on transparency and alignment of commercial objectives".

From this you can see the difference between a referrer and a true affiliate partnership. Effective partnership-based planning with your

partners ensures that all perform at the optimum level - benefiting both brand and publisher equally.

Communicate, Communicate!

Plan your communications, plan a strategy but don't resort to mass emails all the time. Affiliates work in a wide variety of ways and a general mail about the latest coupons is fine - but don't just send those.

Personalise the message to make sure that it is as relevant as possible to their own website and way of working. You should get to understand what each partner can contribute to your overall digital strategy and communicate to drive that forwards.

Meet Your Affiliates

After the last year actually meeting affiliates may seem a far-fetched idea! Meeting your affiliates is one of the best ways to take your contact from just email and messaging to understanding them and building a relationship.

As the affiliate conferences restart, make sure you're finding out if your affiliates are going to be there and arranging time to meet. If they are really important partners then treat them to a ticket to make sure you meet.





REVIVING A FLAT PROGRAM

Find Out Why it's Struggling?

If your program is a bit flat and not much happening, you need to do an account audit. Understand who your key affiliate publishers are, who your competitors are (are there new entrants?) and whether your program is still attractive to affiliates. Pick up the phone or email and talk to them and find out where you stand in their eyes.

That should usually reveal what the issue is - and how to solve it and getting things back in a sweet spot. If the program is struggling because you lost your affiliate manager and it's just being looked over by one of the marketing team, then hire an affiliate manager or engage an OPM to help it get back on track.

Is Your Program Still Competitive?

It's all about competitor analysis. You need to have your finger on the pulse by speaking to your affiliates – and especially the one's who haven't show up in recent reports.

Check your commissions against your competitors

Justine Grey has published a really useful workbook to help you do just that; [download your copy from her website](#).

Re-energising a Mature Program

Sometimes a mature program will slow down for any of the factors we've covered above. It may be that competitors convert better or deliver a better EPC. If that's not reflected in your general website conversions, then you'll need to look deeper into your program levers.

Rick Magennis covered much of this in a recent podcast. The top tip is again to start with an account audit so you understand what's actually going on and reveal what factors could have changed. You can listen to the whole session in the [Rick Magennis interview](#) on the **Keep Optimising** podcast.



KEEPING IT FRESH

Keep Up with Tech Developments

Your affiliate program is based on technologies. Originally just the tracking was enough. That's developed enormously and now a mature program will probably have multiple commission structures, attribution modelling, a datafeed supplier, fraud protection and more.

New technologies are emerging all the time to further propel the performance marketing industry forward for managing programs. Keep an eye out as well for new types of technology affiliates.

Many very exciting technologies such as [UB.io](#), [Increasingly](#) and [Engolve](#) operate on a performance basis rather than as SaaS.

Keeping Affiliates Engaged

I want to restate that you need to think of your affiliates as an extension of your marketing activities and able to support across most of your channels. In an [iDevaffiliate article](#), Jim Webster argues that if affiliates don't feel involved or included, they won't actively engage in promotions. "It's not as simple as just providing your affiliates with campaigns, content, and links to promote and leaving it up to them".

He adds “Affiliates choose to participate in affiliate programs for a reason”. So you need to ensure that the choice to join your program is rewarded with being included in your plans at all stages - not just as a bolt on activity to an overall marketing strategy.

Share Your Resources

You may have set up a set of banners and deeplink buttons even; if so, great but make sure they are up to date and fresh. If you are investing in other content, such as blog articles or video, make these available to your affiliates.

Some more content based publishers may welcome a specific content or a guest article from one of your team, especially if they are an expert in the field. Share any success stories on product launches or updates; or even successes enjoyed by your other affiliates.

Keep Filling the Bucket

So you’ve built up a relationship with some great affiliates and things are going well. You may notice some drop off of either volume or entire referrals. If you’ve got competitors, then its highly likely that they will be looking at your program and trying to pick off your top affiliates.

It’s like a leaky bucket - so you’ve got to keep topping it up to ensure success. Recruiting is the key in this, so ensure you’re keeping an eye on your competitive set. Use the tools that are out there - there’s plenty of free tools to understand which sites are showing up on what keywords.

We’d of course say that you also need to keep checking your [Publisher Discovery](#) data to understand the changes in your competitors’ affiliate lists. Knowledge is power they say - so you need to make sure you’re keeping up with what’s going on.



Publisher Discovery is the leading affiliate discovery and recruitment platform. The global analysis of over 300 tracking networks shows over 3.5 million affiliate websites, linking to over 600,000 advertiser programs.

The Publisher Discovery platform is available direct through the website or through a number of industry partners either via an integration or as a resource for their users.



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