

Choosing an Attribution Methodology

A Decision Framework for MMM, MTA, and Incrementality

Multi-touch attribution (MTA), marketing mix modeling (MMM), and incrementality testing each answer a different question and assume a different set of conditions. The methodology selected for a decision should match the question being asked, the data available, and the cadence the decision operates on. These twelve questions surface methodology fit as a deliberate choice rather than a default. Where methodologies disagree, the disagreement is itself information — not a problem to be averaged away.

SECTION 1 — WHAT THE METHODOLOGY ANSWERS

1. What question is the methodology being asked to answer — credit assignment for observed conversions, lift estimation against a counterfactual, portfolio-level allocation, or something else?

Yes Partial No

Why it matters: Attribution distributes credit across touchpoints in observed journeys. Incrementality estimates the lift a channel produced against a counterfactual. MMM allocates budget at portfolio level over longer windows. Asking a methodology to answer a question it doesn't address produces a confident wrong answer rather than honest uncertainty.

2. At what level of granularity is the decision being made — campaign, channel, audience, or portfolio?

Yes Partial No

Why it matters: MTA handles channel and campaign granularity using deterministic signals where they exist. Incrementality holdouts work at channel or audience level depending on test design. MMM operates at portfolio level over weeks-to-quarters. Decision granularity should match methodology granularity, not exceed it.

3. What time horizon does the decision operate on — daily optimization, monthly reallocation, quarterly planning, annual budgeting?

Yes Partial No

Why it matters: Real-time optimization needs MTA's signal latency. Quarterly reallocation can run on either MTA or incrementality test cycles. Annual planning benefits from MMM's longer baseline. A slow methodology answers a fast decision with stale numbers; a fast methodology answers a long-horizon decision with noisy ones.

SECTION 2 — ASSUMPTIONS AND WHEN THEY HOLD

4. For each methodology in use, what does it assume about the system being measured, and do those assumptions hold here?

Yes Partial No

Why it matters: MMM assumes channel relationships are stable enough to model over long windows. Incrementality assumes the rest of the mix stays constant during the test, while organic, brand, and cross-channel effects continue running. MTA assumes deterministic signal stitching where consent and identity allow. Each assumption set is reasonable in some contexts and a stretch in others.

5. What's the X-Factor in this measurement — the smallest uncontrolled variable that could plausibly explain the observed result on its own?

Yes Partial No

Why it matters: A measured 5% lift sounds substantive until a 3% organic seasonality, a 2% creative refresh, or a 4% competitor pricing change runs in the same window. A serious result earns evaluation against the smallest plausible alternative explanation before being treated as evidence. The methodology that surfaces its X-Factor risk produces more reliable decisions than the one that hides it.

6. Where do the methodologies in use disagree, and how is that disagreement being read?

Yes Partial No

Why it matters: When attribution reads 3.8x and incrementality reads 1.1x on the same channel, the easy move is to choose one and dismiss the other. The harder move, and the right one, is to investigate the gap. Attribution captures the channel's role in observed journeys; incrementality estimates lift against a counterfactual. The difference between them is information about how the channel actually contributes — disagreement is signal, not error.

SECTION 3 — SIGNAL AND CHAIN OF CUSTODY

7. What data inputs does each methodology require, and where do those inputs come from?

Yes Partial No

Why it matters: MMM ingests spend, exposure, and outcome data across long windows from often-different sources. Incrementality requires control-group construction or geo-paired matching. MTA requires touch-level signal capture with deterministic identity resolution where consent allows. A methodology operating without its required inputs produces output that should be read as illustrative, not decisive.

8. Is the input data and methodology auditable end-to-end — can a CFO or operating partner walk through how a number was produced?

Yes Partial No

Why it matters: Methodology that resists audit produces nervous reading. The path from input data to output number should be documented, replicable, and defensible to a non-specialist. Black-box outputs survive in stable markets and break in disruption. A methodology that hides its work earns less trust than one that shows it.

9. Has anyone documented the assumptions, exclusions, and known limits of each methodology in use?

Yes Partial No

Why it matters: Every methodology has known limits. Confidence intervals are common; assumption documentation is rare. A vendor or in-house team that can articulate what their methodology doesn't see is more reliable than one that presents output without disclosure. 'Show your work' applies to methodology selection as much as to model output.

SECTION 4 — OPERATIONAL FIT AND DECISION INTEGRATION

10. How fast does each methodology produce updated results, and is that fast enough for the decisions being made?

Yes Partial No

Why it matters: MMM typically refreshes monthly or quarterly. Incrementality refreshes per test cycle, often quarterly. MTA refreshes near real-time for deterministic signals, with offline conversions lagging by match window. The decision cadence should drive methodology selection, not the other way around.

11. Who runs the methodology, and is the operational arrangement aligned with the independence and accuracy requirements of the decision?

Yes Partial No

Why it matters: Methodology run by the party that benefits from the answer carries a different reliability profile than methodology run independently. In-house teams know the business. Vendors know the methodology. Independent measurement run outside the financial chain has its own constraints. The arrangement should match what the decision requires; conflict between arrangement and requirement is worth surfacing before the methodology is selected.

12. How is the methodology's output integrated into budget and campaign decisions — who sees it, who has authority to act, what threshold triggers reallocation?

Yes Partial No

Why it matters: Methodology that produces reports but doesn't move budget is expensive paperwork. The integration path defines whether the measurement program pays for itself. A clean methodology with no operational integration produces less value than a rougher one connected to the budget pen.

Methodology Decision Grid

Most enterprise programs run two or three methodologies because no single lens covers every decision. Use the grid below to map decisions to the methodology best positioned to answer them. Where two methodologies disagree, treat the gap as information about how the channel actually contributes — investigate rather than average.

Decision criterion	MMM	MTA	Incrementality	Combined
Offline-channel coverage (TV, radio, OOH)	Strong	Partial via BOS	Per-channel	Strongest
Real-time / daily decision support	Limited	Strong	Limited	Strong
Channel-level granularity	Limited	Strong	Strong	Strongest
Campaign-level granularity	Limited	Strong	Partial	Strong
Counterfactual / lift estimate	Indirect	Indirect	Direct	Strong
Cross-platform deduplication	Portfolio	Touch-level	Limited	Strong
Long-horizon allocation (annual+)	Strong	Limited	Limited	Strong
Audit / defensibility to non-specialists	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strongest

How to read this grid. Strength on a single criterion is a starting point. The right methodology mix for a program depends on which criteria matter most for the decisions actually being made, and whether the data infrastructure to support each methodology is in place. When two methodologies produce different numbers on the same channel, the gap is the most informative artifact of the measurement program — more useful, often, than either number alone.

For a personalized version of this analysis — sized in your own revenue, channels, and current measurement approach — take the 90-second Fit Assessment at c3metrics.com/fit-assessment. Same reference principles applied to your specific program, one page out the other side, ready to share with a CFO or operating partner.